The Origins Goths: Migration, Diffusion and Gothic Banality

In a previous post, I spent some time discussing the fall of the Roman Empire. Although, it is inevitable to mention the Goths in such a discussion, the complexity of the issue is such that even the most superficial discussion would be distracting. To avoid that problem, and serve as a reference to myself, and possibly others, this post offers a very brief discussion of the facts I was able to gather them.

The post is part of a 2-part series on the Goths. The first part, contained in this post, is a discussion of the origin of the Goths. There are two main theories about the origins of the Goths: the migration theory and the diffusion theory. The main difference between the two is about how the process of social, economic and political development and increased complexity takes place. Migration theory suggests new stages require new peoples’ whereas diffusion theory suggests that internal dynamics and proximity to and interaction with more developed neighbours is sufficient for this progress to take place. After considering the two hypothesis is some (limited) detail, the post argues that diffusion theory seems more likely than migration, particularly in relation to the three confederations of peoples that marked the fall of the Roman Empire of the West. However, some effort is made to avoid purist views so that even though diffusion theory is preferred to migration, the conclusion of this post is that, more likely than not, the dynamics of diffusion took place over a background of continuous migration flows and miscegenation that culminated in the ethnogenesis of the people we came to know as the Goths. While it is possible that the dominant class narrated its own origins back to Scandinavia, what we know as the Goths most certainly also included peoples of Iranian descent (e.g.: Scythians), Dacian descendants of the survivors of Trajan’s conquests as well as other Germanic peoples (e.g.: Heruli).

The second part of the discussion of the history of the Goths is an upcoming discussion in 12 parts describing the history of the Goths since the beginning of their interactions with the Roman Empire until their demise at the hands of the muslim invasions of the Iberian peninsula 400 years later..

Migration Theory: Scandinavian origins of the Goths?

Migration theory suggests that the Goths originated from present-day Scandinavia, probably Sweden. The main historical source for the origin of the Goths seems to be Jordanes’ 6th century account “The Origin and Deeds of the Goths”, which held sway over this discussion until the 1970s. During the 20th century, the theory took dark tones due to its association with the Aryanism proposed by Gustaf Kossinna, which was consistent with Nazi ideology.

As far as I’ve been able to tell, there are several possible accounts of the Goths’ migration from Scandinavia, which may or may not be supported by a contentious interpretation of archaeological evidence.

1) Fascinatingly, Jordanes’ account of the migration of the group from Scandza (Scandinavia) to Gothiscandza (the Vistula Basin) under the leadership of Berig, and from there to Oium (or Aujum), possibly on the Dnieper.
under the leadership of Filimer.

This path seems to match a journey from Götaland (which probably only included the areas of Västergötland and Östergötland), areas of the Wielbark and the Chernyakhov cultures. The idea that the Goths belonged to the Wielbark culture is also supported by the description of the “Gotones” in Tacitus’s Germania (336), living in the Vistula region during the first century. It is interesting to note that Germania (p.334) also mentions a Lygian tribe he calls the Gothini. Aside from the fact that they are said to use a Gallic language, Kulikowski (2007:55, footnote 14) appears to me to rightly argue that the only reason one would have to identify the Goths with the Gotones rather than the Gothini is the fact that their location beyond the Lygian tribes is a better match to Jordanes’ description of the Goths’ migration path as passing through the Vistula Basin. In effect the argument is good because it confirms what we already believe, which is a bad case of circular reasoning and confirmation bias. Clearly, there is some potential for archaeology to support Jordanes narrative, but as both Kortland (2000) and Guy Halsall argue this interpretation of the two cultures as evidence of a Gothic migration path is not beyond critique.

2) Another interesting source appears to be the Gutasaga (full English translation here), an oral Scandinavian saga that was recorded in the Codex Holm stored by the Royal Library at Stockholm from the 1350s. The document describes how

“over a long time, the people (...) multiplied so much that the land couldn't support them all. So they selected every third person by lot to leave, with the right to keep and take away with them everything they owned except for their land.”

Those selected appear to have been less than enthusiastic and according to the account had to be kicked out by force. The migration proceeded from Gotland to Torsburgen, on to Fårö, then to Dagö (modern day Hiiumaa in Estonia, then referred to as Estland) and then “up the river Dvina (...) so far that they came to the land of the Greeks”.

However, given the date of the document’s “publication” and the northern route the description may be better suited to the journeys supposedly taken during the Viking Age by Rurik, Sineus and Truvor and then by the Varangians. In effect it is impossible to say whether the Gutasaga is referring to a 1st-5th century migration with the later 9th-10th century migration that among other things led to the creation of the Kievan Rus. “Over a long time” is not a particularly accurate keeping of time... Given that the Kievan Rus did end up existing, I would argue in favour of the 9th-10th century hypothesis.

3) Another interesting contribution to this discussion comes from Kortland (2000). He disagrees with Scandinavian origin thesis, but maintains a migration hypothesis, although with an origin in South Germany, on account of closer linguistic similarity between Gothic and the Oberdeutsche (Upper German) dialect of lower Germany and Austria identified by Mańczak (1984 and 1986). This would suggest some linguistic proximity between the Goths and the Alemanni, who ultimately settled the south of present-day Germany and endowed it with that dialect. My understanding is that the comparison is between words found in the Gothic bible (translated from Greek by the Ulfilas in the 4th century) and modern Swedish, which may suffer from a range of problems. First, there is an issue with the appropriateness of comparing Gothic with Swedish, as the origin of the Goths could have been either Gotaland or Gotland, in which case they could have mixed with the local population of Gotland and adopted or borrowed from their language at the time, Old Gutnish a dialect of Old Norse. Indeed
Hofmann and Wessen (1951, 1968 or 1970) both defend the view that the closest language to Old Gutnish is Gothic. A complete analysis should also consider how modern Swedish has evolved and how it differs from the language(s) that would have been spoken in the region in the 4th and 5th. It should also consider the different uu8Gothic bible. This would probably include Dacian, Scythian and Latin that would have been native to the region prior to the arrival of the Goths in the 3rd century as well as some Greek, in my very amateurish opinion.

4) Kortland (2000) also points out the perceived irrationality of the Goths’ landing at the Vistula and going East. Instead, Kortland (2000) suggests that a group of Scandinavian origin would more logically have moved South along the Amber Road towards the Moravian gates, which would allow them to get to Rome much faster. In my opinion, this comment is interesting for the problems it poses and the questions it allows one to address. I have four problems with this argument:

- First, underlying the assumption is the idea that a direct, straight line route is always the best. Overlooking geography and climate, which in this case probably would not have played a particularly relevant role, existing settlements from competing tribes would have created obstacles for this path. If there was any movement of peoples from the Vistula estuary starting at some point in the first between the 1st and the 2nd centuries AD, would plausibly have clashed with the Marcommani that faced Marcus Aurelius between 168-180.

- Second, the argument presumes a single and linear path of migration rather than a multitude of stochastic paths with variable rates of success. It is important to remember that Rome faced three groups in the so-called Marcommanic wars: the Marcommani, the Quadi and the Sarmatians. The Marcomanni (literally “the men at the border” of the Roman Empire) were a confederation (probably the first such cooperative arrangement between barbarians beyond the Rhine/Danube border) of different and Germanic peoples of relatively undetermined origin. While it is completely irrelevant and pointless to argue it (you can’t prove or disprove it either way), it is not impossible that some of the peoples that made the Marcomanni did follow the route along the Amber Road. However, if such people existed they became the Marcomanni while those who did not follow this route became other peoples, such that some of them coalesced to become the Goths.

- Third, assuming that it would have indeed been a good policy, the argument may be criticised on its assumption that a good policy will always be followed, like the comment I made previously regarding Kulikowski (2007)’s argument supported by Drazen (2002:pp.403-455). For a number of reasons, necessity does not imply reform.

- The final issue concerns the underlying assumption that much of the migration discussion seems to make that the migrant populations had planned destination, full information and free mobility. Removing this, for a panoply of different reasons, although I’d probably focus on imperfect information and adversaries/distances, somewhat undermines Kortland (2000)’s criticism and the Amber Road alternative migration path.

The map below describes (poorly) the 4 different migratory paths mentioned above: 1) Jordanes’ Scandza to Ukraine exodus that left (the Wielbark and) the Cherniakov culture (purple arrows); 2) the Gutasaga exodus from Gotland to the Ukraine through the Dvina River (the black arrows); 3) The Amber Road Deviation from Jordanes path (light purple arrow) and; 4) the Alemmanic linguistic hypothesis (bright red arrow).

The map shows an approximate distribution of the tribes/peoples/confederacies north of the Roman Empire by the middle of the third century. It is important to recognise that the homogeneity of peoples implied in by the map is extremely misleading. All Scythians were not displaced by the Goths upon their arrival in the beginning of the third century, while many may have migrated beyond the Dnieper, many others may have remained behind. The distinctions are also difficult to apply as some of the terms were often used interchangeably by Roman
commentators. Indeed, ‘Eunapius, Claudius Cladianus and Olympiodorus usually mean “Goths” when they write “Scythians”.

To recap, migration theory argues that the changes from the Oksywie and the Przeworsk cultures to the Wielbark culture is best explained by some form of migration akin to the Gothic one described by Jordanes. The theory further argues that the migration would have continued eastwards to the shores of the black sea, leading to the emergence of the Chernyakhov cultures in the early 4th century. However, the greatest reason for Wielbark-Chernyakhov connection derives from a “negative characteristic” (i.e., the absence of weapons in burials), which is less convincing proof than a positive one, according to Kulikowski. Clearly migration is not the only possible explanation.

Another Hypothesis: Life Beyond the Roman Frontiers and the Economics of Diffusion Theory

Diffusion theory, as described by Kulikowski (2007:65,67), argues that the Goths, much like the Franks and the Alemanni were a confederacy of different barbarian peoples who lived by the border of the Roman Empire and did not exist until the 4th century. It rejects the central hypothesis of migration theory that changes in material culture require changes in the people that occupy that space. The Goths would have been a mix of local barbarians (“local Pontic, Carpic and Dacian cultures”) who organised themselves around the second century as a result of the successful Roman invasion and occupation of Dacia by Trajan between 102 and 106. The logic is that as Roman society expanded, those people immediately beyond its borders became more sophisticated due to trade and the diffusion of new ideas, production techniques and crafts from and raids into Roman territory. In this case, diffusion and improved production methods were the result of continued exposure to, and interaction with, the Roman Empire.

From my limited reading, I find a lot of merit in diffusion theory. Migration theory seems to consider material culture as static, isolated and sterilised from outside or inside influences. It presumes a world much to orderly and constant for what we know of reality. Peter Heather (2005:87, 450-459) adds to Kulikowsky's description above. He argues that the early Roman period appears to have coincided with the shift from extensive to intensive
agricultural practices among Germanic peoples, with crop-rotation, which allowed the population to grow. The change seems to have occurred closer to the frontier than further away.

Diffusion theory, has a particular appeal to me due to my background as an economist. The economic benefits of geographical proximity can be understood through the insights backward and forward linkages of new economic geography, which motivate suppliers and consumers to be near each other. In this case there’s a clear logic for traders from beyond the frontiers of Rome to settle as close to it as possible.

Proximity and trade with Rome may have also had a monetary effect. Perhaps I misinterpreted the research, but my understanding is that Bursche (2002), Bursche (2006) and Blanchard (1999, 2005) seem to imply the almost absence of coinage beyond Rome’s northern borders, until the end of the Antonine period (late second century). Thus Rome would have been the barbarians main (although as the case of the Trinovantes suggests, not the only) source of money, be it through trade, pillage, extortion, theft or tribute payments. Proximity to Rome would suggest better access to the means of measuring and storing value and transacting goods and services.

The productivity improvements described by both Heather and Kulikovsky are also consistent with increased inequality and improved collective action. As Erdal, Whiten, Boehm and Knauft (1994) argue, nomadic cultures are egalitarian, whereas Testar (1987) and Johnson and Earle (1987) point out that agricultural societies tend to be more unequal. This is consistent with some of the evidence reviewed in Freebairn (1995) and Wheeler (2006). Bowles, Smith and Mulder (2010) also support this view. In my opinion, their reference to the inequality present in “groups occupying especially rich fishing and hunting sites” as the only other occurrence of such inequality beyond farming communities, suggests that (agriculture that produces) surplus in any form has a tendency to create inequality through the concept of property, formal or otherwise. The wider discussion of the relationship between economic growth and inequality is less clear. If agricultural productivity behaves in a manner consistent with other forms of technology, this is consistent with trade theories that suggest that trade increases inequality, such as Egger and Kreickemeier (2009). The recent case studies of inequality and growth in Ethiopia [Stifel (2014)] and Burkina Faso [Grimm, Claude and Nikiema (2014)] are also consistent with this. Mancur Olson’s 1965 theory of collective action wraps up the appeal of diffusion theory by suggesting that inequality results in better collective action as the state gets captured by a few agents better capable of decisive action[see also Bardhan, Ghatak and Karaivanov (2002)]. Bloix (2010) builds a model consistent with some of these insights and obtains results showing monarchies to be more unequal than republics/aristocracies.

Conclusion: Migration and Diffusion

I think pure migration theory can be dismissed on logical grounds, even if others have argued it much more sophisticatedly than this. This is not to say that migration did not occur at all, of course. To claim as much would commit a similar sin in another realm, for it would require us to consider that there was no conflict between the people’s beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, that they were neither in motion or flux. It more or less implies that life was an idyllic heaven, a utopia among good savages, which seems completely unrealistic. Clearly, we don’t need a migration to have occurred for the Goths to emerge, but that does not mean it did not happen. It also does not mean it did happen. Thus pure diffusion theory can also be dismissed, on account of the fact that we know that there were movements of peoples beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire. Jordanes tale of the origin of the Goths may be entirely imaginary, but it is not to say that some peoples did not come south into the Chernyakhov culture, in present-day Ukraine.
Based on the discussions by Tacitus's *Germania*, mentioned earlier, I would not be surprised that some migration did actually happen. A Scandinavian group (the Gothones?) could have started off as rather homogenous when it left present-day Sweden only to become more heterogeneous as it encountered and mixed with other peoples along the way. Meanwhile, and after Trajan's conquests, the Goths' arrival could have simply put them in a position to lead and replace existing Scythian and Dacian leadership networks with their own, much in the same way that the population of Iberia was not wholly replaced by the Visigoths or the Suevi, only their leadership was. At the very least, the toponimic similarities between the Gothic people and the Gothic-named places of present-day Sweden (Göta älv, Götländ and Gotthaland) do appear to suggest a Scandinavia origin that is annoyingly difficult to dismiss. However, persistent ethnic homogeneity or even dominance over a period as long as the one suggested by migration theory appears to me to be absurd.

We can't know for sure. More importantly, once we reject pure migration theory, the origin of the Goths does not really matter. Whether they came from Scandinavia or were a confederation like the Franks and the Alamanni, their experience would not provide us with a more complete understanding of the social dynamics of the peoples at the margins of the Roman Empire. Assuming that those are the two alternatives, then the origins of the Goths, interesting though they may be for their own sake, tell us nothing new about social or group dynamics. If they migrated, then they would not be alone in doing so. We have their later experience to consider from 250 onwards, with actual migrations from present-day Romania, Bulgaria and the Ukraine across the Roman Empire to ultimately end up in the Iberian peninsula. The Viking Migrations (be they Swedish or Norwegian) 400 years later also clearly show that migration is possible. Otherwise, we know that longer migrations are possible, be it through our knowledge of the experiences of the Iranian Alans, whose well attested migrations also led them to the Western edge of Europe. Similarly, the Franks and the Alemanni also provide clear evidence of the viability of confederation-building. The Goths add nothing to these two alternatives but their own unique experience, which we can't be certain of other than that it will have included migration and/or confederacy with other peoples, which we know are possible from other, more certain, experiences.

Clearly, there is an undeniable connection between the Goths of Alaric and the Goths of Gotland and Gotland. The process of ethnogenesis is complicated and it is likely that what ended up as the Goths that defeated Decius in 251 and the victorious Tervingi and the Greutungi (West and East of the Dniester River) at Adrianople in 376, may have had some connection to those who left the traces we call the Cherniakhov culture of the 4th century or the Wielbank culture of the 3rd century. In their midst there may have been peoples of Scandinavian descent and it is also not unlikely that some of the leadership may have kept many of those traits that were brought by those ancestors. However, without this ascendency some other "Goths" would have still emerged. We could have ended up calling them Scythians or Dacians instead of Goths, but the origins considered here are probably irrelevant to the history of the Roman Empire. It is unlikely that there was anything more remarkable about the Goths than about the Franks, the Alamanni, the Alans, the Vandals or the Suevi. Interestingly, the banality of the Goths may be the most interesting conclusion of this whole conversation.
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