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# JORDANES AND VIRGIL: A CASE STUDY OF INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE *GETICA**

Over the past few decades, discussions of Jordanes' *Getica*, along with the works of sixth-century historians more generally, have benefited from shifting paradigms in the study of late antiquity. Before these shifts, however, Jordanes had a poor reputation as a historian. In Theodor Mommsen's 1882 critical editions of the *Romana* and *Getica*, he was written off as a mere plagiarist of Cassiodorus' twelve-book *Historia Gothorum*, which, though lost, was still assumed to have been a superior literary and historiographical achievement.[1] Charles Mierow, who produced the only English translation of the *Getica*, noted that Jordanes' history is 'not very carefully made; his style [is] irregular, rambling, uneven, and exhibits to a marked degree the traits of the decadent, crumbling later Latin'. Mierow also speaks of 'an irresistible charm in [Jordanes'] naïve simplicity. He is so credulous, and tells in all sincerity such marvelous tales of the mighty achievements of his people'.[2] Until the 1980s literally all work done on Jordanes took for granted his derivative nature, stylistic decadence and intellectual limitation.[3]

In part, this verdict was owed to the use to which the *Getica* was put. For the past 500 years, the text has been used primarily as a foundational source for reconstructing ancient Germanic history and society. Alongside the *Getica*, other ancient and medieval texts such as Tacitus' *Germania*, the Gothic Bible, Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum* and the Icelandic sagas have been the principal sources for Germanic antiquity. This scholarly agenda – *Germanische Altertumskunde* – saw its beginnings in the fifteenth century as a reaction to those Renaissance humanists who had claimed the Roman past as the direct inheritance of the Italian states. In response, scholars from the Holy Roman Empire and Scandinavia sought to canonize the aforementioned texts for the purposes of establishing a unique antiquity for the modern peoples of northern Europe. Indeed the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* was established in 1819 to produce critical editions of those sources, among them the texts of Jordanes. Though Germany

* I thank the journal's anonymous reviewer for many valuable comments.

[1] T. Mommsen (ed.), *Iordanis Romana et Getica* (= *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi* 5.1) (Berlin, 1882; reprint Munich, 1982), liii. For the most recent critical edition, see F. Giunta and A. Grillone (edd.), *Iordanis. De Origine Actibusque Getarum* (Rome, 1991). English translation by C. Mierow, *The Gothic History of Jordanes* (Princeton, 1915); French translation and commentary by O. Devillers, *Jordanès: Histoire des Goths* (Paris, 2008). Only one fragment of Cassiodorus' Gothic history remains, quoted by its author in a letter: *Variae* 12.20.4, Å.J. Fridh (ed.), *Magni Aurelii Cassiodori* Variarum libri XII (= *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 96) (Turnhout, Belgium, 1973). The *Getica*'s indebtedness to Cassiodorus' Gothic history has been a central concern of scholarship on Jordanes. In a future study, I intend to show that this concern has been overstated and that there is sufficient reason to accept Jordanes' authorial autonomy. The problem of Cassiodorus does not impinge on the objectives of the present study however.

[2] Mierow (n. 1), 1.

[3] See especially A. Momigliano, 'Cassiodorus and the Italian culture of his time', *PBA* 41 (1955), 207–45, here 209, 217–20.

did not yet exist as a political entity, it was none the less increasingly conceived as a cultural unity and nation.[4] By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, German scholarship on barbarian historiography became progressively more concerned with establishing a direct, uninterrupted biological and cultural lineage between modern Germans and the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus and Jordanes. After World War II, Germanist scholarship was reformulated in 1961 by Reinhard Wenskus who removed the issue of race and replaced it with that of tradition.[5] He argued that the early Germanic tribes were not related by kinship but by a shared core of traditions – *Traditionskern* – that can be accessed through the careful study of those same texts that Germanists have always employed. This view is championed today most notably in the influential work of Herwig Wolfram.[6] But like his forebears, Wolfram has taken little interest in Jordanes as a historian and author in his own right. Wolfram has even gone so far as to write Jordanes out completely from discussions of the *Getica* and to replace his name with that of Cassiodorus.[7]

In the past thirty years, however, some studies have reached beyond old agendas to explore more sympathetically the nature of Jordanes' historical project.[8] Two studies by O'Donnell and Goffart, focussing on the *Getica*'s literary qualities, have attempted global thematic interpretations.[9] Indeed Goffart has produced what is still the most extensive literary and historical analysis of Jordanes. One aspect of his study is the presentation of the *Getica* as the love story of the (feminine) Gothic people and the (masculine) Romans. The history itself is a working-out of a relationship fraught with lovers' quarrels, compromise and reconciliation that has an ending befitting a fairy tale: a marriage, a new-born child and 'hopeful promise, under the Lord's favour, to both peoples.'[10] Goffart and O'Donnell have established that we must take seriously Jordanes' political aims and literary strategies, but such ambitious interpretations have not won unanimous acceptance and are based only on select parts of the text. There are still large portions of the *Getica* that have yet to be afforded close analysis. Such efforts may reveal that the *Getica* is more

[4] For further discussion, see I. Wood, 'Barbarians, historians, and the construction of national identities', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1.1 (2008), 61–81, here 69–72.

[5] R. Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne, 1961).

[6] H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, tr. T. Dunlap (Berkeley, 1988); see also '*Origo et religio*: ethnic traditions and literature in early medieval texts', *Early Medieval Europe* 3.1 (1994), 19–38; '*Origo gentis*: the literature of Germanic origins', in B. Murdoch and M. Read (edd.), *Early Germanic Literature and Culture* (New York, 2004), 39–54; *Gotische Studien* (Munich, 2005). For Germanist work influenced by Wenskus pertaining directly to Jordanes, see J. Svennung, *Jordanes und Scandia: Kritisch-Exegetische Studien* (Stockholm, 1967); N. Wagner, *Getica: Untersuchungen zum Leben des Jordanes und zur frühen Geschichte der Goten* (Berlin, 1967); R. Hachmann, *Die Goten und Skandinavien* (Berlin, 1970). For recent critical reviews of the Germanist tradition see, A. Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2002); A. Christensen, *Cassiodorus, Jordanes and the History of the Goths: Studies in a Migration Myth*, tr. H. Flegal (Copenhagen, 2002); M. Coumert, *Origines des peuples: les récits du Haut Moyen Âge occidental (550–850)* (Paris, 2007).

[7] Wolfram in Murdoch and Read (n. 6).

[8] For arguments demonstrating the literary independence of Jordanes from Cassiodorus see B. Croke, 'Cassiodorus and the *Getica* of Jordanes', *CPh* 82 (1987), 117–34.

[9] J. O'Donnell, 'The aims of Jordanes', *Historia* 31 (1982), 223–40 and W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800)* (Princeton, 1988), 20–111.

[10] *Get.* 314.

sophisticated even than its recent exegetes would have it. The present study aims to contribute one such close reading by discussing a heretofore unrecognized case of intertextuality in the *Getica*.[11]

A few preliminary remarks about the text are necessary. The *Getica*, or more fully *De origine actibusque Getarum*, is the only dedicated history of the Goths to survive antiquity.[12] The history is divided into three sections: the first traces the history of the Goths from their origins in Scandinavia, or *Scandza*, and their centuries-long migration to eastern Europe north of the Danube. Their defeat at the hands of the Huns ends the first part of the narrative.[13] It is also here that Jordanes splits the Goths into two: the Visigoths and Ostrogoths. The remaining two parts treat separately the next two hundred years of Visigothic and Ostrogothic history respectively.[14] The invasion of the Huns into Gothic territory not only interrupts the narrative flow of the *Getica* by dividing the history into discrete treatments of the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, but more broadly alters the thematic tones that characterize the first part of the *Getica*. The initial portion of the *Getica* (consisting of roughly half of the entire work) is largely a catalogue of migrations and battles spanning some 1,800 years of history. One notes, however, that despite battle after battle, the Goths never once lose. It is the coming of the Huns that marks their first defeat which, in turn, inaugurates further military losses and hardships when the Goths migrate into the Roman empire. At this point, Jordanes fundamentally changes the tenor of his Gothic history.

The Visigoths flee the Huns across the Danube and into Roman territory, having made an agreement with the Emperor Valens to settle and protect the borders of Moesia provided that they convert to (Arian) Christianity and subject themselves to Roman law.[15] Soon, however, we read: '*Quibus evenit, ut adsolet genti, necdum bene loco fundatis, penuria famis …*' ('as is usual for a people not well rooted in a land, starvation and want were upon them'); and Fritigern, one of the Visigothic leaders, begs the local Roman commanders Lupicinus and Maximus to open a market so that the Gothic refugees may barter for food.[16] Taking advantage of the situation, the Romans begin to sell dog carcasses and the flesh of unclean animals at such exorbitant prices that the Goths have to sell their children into Roman slavery in order to keep from starving. Soon, the Romans invite Fritigern to a feast and, while dining, they treacherously attack the Gothic leader and his followers. Fritigern manages to survive and, upon slaying his Roman assailants, incites the Goths to rebel and seize the surrounding lands. Shortly thereafter, the Goths impose a catastrophic defeat on Valens and the Romans at the Battle of Adrianople in 378.

Now, let us consider more closely a single moment in this account. As Jordanes narrates the exploitation of the Goths, he applies a line from the *Aeneid* to the

[11] A. Gillett, 'The Goths and the bees: a narrative of no return', in J. Burke (ed.), *Byzantine Narrative* (Melbourne, 2006), 149–63, has likewise produced a focussed case study illustrating Jordanes' literary merit in a single instance.

[12] The title is given in Jordanes, *Romana* 4.

[13] *Get*. 1–130.

[14] *Get*. 131–245; 246–314.

[15] *Get.* 131–2. For the primary ancient account of these events, see Amm. Marc. 31, the likely source for Jordanes here, as Mommsen (n. 1), xxxiii, 92 suggests; Giunta and Grillone (n. 1), 57–8; and P. Heather, *Goths and Romans, 332–489* (Oxford, 1991), 35. For modern discussions of these events, see Wolfram (n. 6), 117–31 and Heather (this note), 122–56.

[16] *Get.* 134.

Romans' 'ravenous hunger for gold' (*auri sacra fames*).[17] Mommsen noted this allusion in his 1882 critical edition but made nothing of it. He quotes the Virgil in the footnotes and never again mentions it. Likewise, later scholars failed to pay the quotation any heed. The line from the *Aeneid* was probably understood to be a small flourish by which Jordanes demonstrated that he knew some Virgil. But even on a lexical level, the Virgilian intertext bears directly on Jordanes' narrative. When reading the Latin, the *fames* of the Romans for gold immediately recalls the literal *fames* of the Goths – they are starving. Mierow translates *fames* as 'lust', thereby preventing the English reader from picking up on this nuance. Mierow's poor view of Jordanes perhaps rendered him insensitive to such subtlety. He and other commentators had only to suspend their convictions for just a moment, consult their copy of the *Aeneid*, and allow that Jordanes was a subtle reader of classical texts.

In *Getica* 134, the Huns have just invaded the Gothic homeland, defeated the Goths in battle, and sent them fleeing in search of foreign lands to settle. Put more broadly, a group of people have been driven from their home by an invading enemy and now, as pitiful refugees, seek a new home in another land. This is also the theme of Virgil's epic. At *Aeneid* 3.57, in the passage to which Jordanes alludes, Aeneas has just concluded his account of the fall of Troy at the hands of the Achaeans in *Aeneid* 2 and continues to tell of his search for a new home in foreign lands after having fled Troy. The two narrative contexts are thematically identical; and, on a more specific level, both events are linked by occurring in Thrace – the significance of which I will elaborate presently. One realizes that Jordanes is not simply quoting to add colour, but is rather drawing a significant parallel between his narrative and that of the *Aeneid*, a parallel strengthened, as we have seen, by many specific points of contact. This is, in itself, an unrecognized literary strategy; but there is much more going on.

In the first lines of Book 3, Aeneas has just set off from Troy looking to found a new home for his followers. His first landfall and ultimately failed attempt at foundation is in Thrace. There, Aeneas prepares a sacrifice, but after uprooting some saplings to be burnt upon the altar, the wood begins to bleed and then speak. Aeneas learns that the young trees are inhabited by the soul of the Trojan Polydorus whom Priam had sent to Thrace with gold that was to be entrusted to the Thracian king. The treacherous king, however, betrayed the Trojans by allying himself with Agamemnon and then murdering Polydorus for the Trojan treasure. It is here, in the speech of Polydorus, that Virgil offers the verse later used by Jordanes. The ghost of Polydorus beseeches Aeneas not to settle on such cursed ground. Aeneas then gives a proper burial to his fallen comrade and departs from Thrace.

What is the significance of Thrace? Recall the title of Jordanes' history. The 'Getae' were an ancient Thracian people first mentioned in Herodotus.[18] When the Goths entered the classical world in the mid fourth century, it became a literary commonplace to conflate them with the Getae, and also with Thracians, Moesians, Dacians and, more commonly, Scythians. In the *Getica*, Jordanes has taken to its literal conclusion the practice of associating the Goths with the Getae by actually fusing their histories together, thereby giving the Goths a meaningful and established role in classical history. Jordanes, therefore, makes the Gothic

[17] *Get.* 134 and *Aeneid* 3.57.
[18] Hdt. 4.93.

name synonymous with the Thracian one. Moreover, Virgil himself seemingly gives credence to Jordanes' project by likewise presenting the Thracians and the Getae interchangeably:

> Terra procul vastis colitur Mavortia campis
> (Thraces arant) acri quondam regnata Lycurgo …
> Multa movens animo nymphas venerabar agrestis
> Gradivumque patrem, Geticis qui praesidet arvis,
> rite secundarent visus omenque levarent.[19]

It now becomes clear that Jordanes has employed the quotation from Virgil not only to associate the narratives of the two works, but to announce a more discreet textual relation by drawing from a portion of the *Aeneid* that specifically pertains to Thracians and Getae – i.e. Goths, in his terms. This is careful literary craft. But the analysis can be pushed further still. The sacrifice that Aeneas offers to secure blessings for his intended new home is in vain. In this, one is reminded that the Goths had to sacrifice their children by selling them into slavery so that both they and their children might at least have some hope for a future. Also, the Thracian king's betrayal of Polydorus in Virgil vividly recalls Lupicinus' treachery toward Fritigern in Jordanes – only now the villains are Romans and their victims 'Getae'. Finally, 'fate', as it were, permits neither Trojans nor Goths to settle in their new homes, but instead pushes them continuously onward until both, in their own ways, conquer Italy. Jordanes looks forward not only to Alaric's sack of Rome in 410 but also to the Ostrogothic rule of Italy, beginning in 489 and persisting to his own time. Therefore, the political context in which the *Getica* was written becomes all the more interesting, as the text was completed (probably in 551) during Justinian's reconquest of Italy from the Ostrogoths.[20]

Jordanes is tying the ancient history of Rome to that of the Goths. And what better way to do this than by connecting the *Aeneid*, Rome's tradition of its great migration, with the refiguring of the Gothic migration in the *Getica*? But one notes that, amidst all this parallelism, the roles of the players have been reversed. In the *Getica*, it is the Goths who come to Roman land (Thrace) and are betrayed by the Romans; whereas in the *Aeneid* it is the Trojans (namely, the future Romans) who come to Thracian (Gothic) land and learn of Thracian treachery toward a Trojan. Jordanes' intentions in this reversal are more difficult to discern. One cannot but raise an eyebrow at the context in which the Virgilian quotation arises. As Jordanes relates the Romans' foul treatment of and treachery toward the Goths, he quotes a portion of the Aeneid where 'Goths' betray 'Romans'. Is this a case of epic rivalry (Jordanes vs Virgil)? Or of national rivalry (Goths vs Romans) expressed in literature? A closer reading of the entire text would be required before these questions can be answered with more confidence. Perhaps it is no longer as clear as many recent commentators have assumed that the *Getica* presents an unambiguously pro-Roman and pro-Justinianic view of history.

A number of conclusions can be drawn. The *Getica* conventionally has been deployed within Medievalist and especially Germanist frameworks as a source for early Germanic traditions, but five centuries of scholarship in this mode have

[19] *Aeneid* 3.13–14, 34–6. See also N. Horsfall, *Virgil, Aeneid 3: A Commentary* (Leiden, 2006).

[20] See B. Croke, 'Jordanes and the immediate past', *Historia* 54 (2005), 473–94, for his own, Heather's and Goffart's arguments for the date of the *Getica*.

led to a certain inertia in the development of critical approaches to the text. The foregoing analysis of Jordanes' use of Virgil demonstrates that a text such as the *Getica* cannot remain the preserve of the discipline that has claimed it for so long. Studies of Jordanes need to make the methodological transitions that have long since characterized the work of classical scholars on, among others, Herodotus, Livy and Tacitus – that is, appreciation of literary merit and authorial intent in a given text independent of or in addition to the historicity of its contents.[21] It becomes clear that underscoring Jordanes' classical literary milieu is not merely a matter of rescuing a minor author from an unflattering critical judgement, but rather of repositioning a key text within academic paradigms. In short, the *Getica* must now be read as subtle literature and not only mined as a source for national history.

Furthermore, proof of Jordanes' literary craft entails that narrative texts that were previously despised need now to be read with closer attention to a range of literary strategies. We should not dismiss allusions and quotations from classical literature as vain rhetorical flourishes or mere affectation. The present reading of Jordanes shows that, when classical allusions are encountered, we must carefully consult the texts being alluded to in order to see if they establish thematic or ideological resonances. Put more simply, classical allusions often have direct bearing on the themes and subject matter being discussed in a given work, and to ignore these is to disregard what often turn out to be the most meaningful elements of a writer's work.[22]

Conversely, questions about Jordanes' contemporary audience emerge. Jordanes' text is perhaps not characteristic of the Latin literature produced in sixth-century Byzantium. The *Getica* is not a bureaucratic or legal work, neither is it theological; and it deviates from classicizing ethnographic history both in the amount of fantasy that it purveys and in its non-Roman focus. As a result of its aberrant genre, and because Jordanes has long been the tacit 'property' of Medievalists and Germanists, the *Getica* has slipped through the cracks in modern classical scholarship on sixth-century literature. Jordanes and his work are rarely discussed in close relation to his literary contemporaries. And yet Procopius, exactly like Jordanes, was an imperial bureaucrat writing from Constantinople about Justinian's Gothic wars in the 550s and employed similar literary strategies in his histories. These similarities are too striking to be ignored for long.[23] So for whom, then, was Jordanes writing? It is probably impossible to ascertain the specific identities of Jordanes' readers. There have yet to be found any explicit attestations of Jordanes or his work in contemporary or subsequent writings. Nevertheless,

[21] See G. Miles, *Livy: Reconstructing Early Rome* (Ithaca, NY, 1995) and A.J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London, Sydney and Portland, OR, 1988).

[22] See A. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2004), especially 38, and G. Kelly, *Ammianus Marcellinus: The Allusive Historian* (Cambridge, 2008), especially chs 1 and 4 for discussions of these issues.

[23] See Goffart (n. 9), 20–111, especially 94–6 for a discussion of possible links between Jordanes and Procopius. P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge, 1997), 304–5 briefly discusses possible parallels between the *Getica* and the lost *Isaurica* of Capito. B. Croke, *Count Marcellinus and his Chronicle* (Oxford, 2001), ch. 7, 216–36 comments on possible, but ultimately unlikely, textual and political connections between Jordanes and Marcellinus Comes' continuator. Credit is due to these scholars for contextualizing Jordanes, but there is still much room for discussion of Jordanes' politics and literary milieu. For discussion of Latin literature in sixth-century Constantinople, see Croke (this note), especially 86–8.

we must construe Jordanes' close engagement with Virgil not as self-amusement, but as an additional register of narrative and an interpretative signpost intended for an erudite readership, or at least one educated enough to spot a verse from the *Aeneid* and be able to associate its narrative surroundings with those of the *Getica*. Therefore, by working back from the knowledge required to identify and parse Jordanes' Virgilian allusion, we can identify the literary sophistication of his readership.[24] But this is not to restrict Jordanes' audience to the literary circles of Constantinople. A text may be engaged at any number of levels by any variety of readers. In this paper I have tried to find the readers to whom Jordanes intended to grant full access to his text. Jordanes' audience has ever been a conundrum in the secondary literature. This may very well help to open up the debate about his readership.

A third conclusion regards Jordanes' themes, ideology and objectives. With this partial rehabilitation, we know now that Jordanes invites his reader to consider more than what is on the surface of his text – and the relationship between Goths and Romans in the mid sixth century stands at the heart of his concerns. Through allusion to Virgil, Jordanes has appropriated Roman traditions to recast the Gothic past. The *Getica* becomes a textual validation of the entry of the Goths into Roman history. This is but one instance of Jordanes' broader intention to draw the Goths out of the northern hinterland and into the fold of Mediterranean antiquity. It is clear that Jordanes' historical gaze is not one that looks only to the past but, more importantly, one that is deeply rooted in and highly conscious of the present. In other words, Jordanes means to account for the state of the Goths in the mid sixth century as an incorporated people of the Roman empire by articulating the greater Gothic past as likewise related to a Roman past. But this is not to say that Jordanes aims to subordinate Gothic history to Roman history. On the contrary, he means to present the histories of both peoples as parallel. In the past, Jordanes' project has been variously identified as one or more of the following: the slavish copy of Cassiodorus, Roman panegyric or a mouthpiece for Justinianic ideology.[25] The above discussion hopefully will broaden analytical parameters. The *Getica* may be more subtle than we have otherwise thought.[26]

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[24] See Kaldellis (n. 22), 115–17 for a similar discussion of Procopius' readership.

[25] For Cassiodorus, see Heather (n. 15), 55; for Roman panegyric see Goffart (n. 9), 20–111; for Justinianic ideology see Amory (n. 23), 303.

[26] I owe a debt of gratitude to Anthony Kaldellis for his generously given advice and support in this project. I would repay him with time if I could.