The Conversion of the Visigoths to Christianity

By Zeev Rubin, Tel Aviv

A few years ago E. A. Thompson proposed a redating of the conversion of the Visigoths to Christianity – not in the early seventies of the 4th century, but between 382 and 395, after they had already crossed the Danube[1]. In order to establish his dating Thompson had to reject the testimony of Socrates (followed and modified by Sozomen)[2] and Orosius[3]. The truthfulness of two other pieces of evidence was not denied, but their relevance was too hastily (so it seems) set aside – an explicit fragment of Eunapius[4], maintaining that Germanic tribes which crossed the *limes* under Theodosius had adopted Christianity, at least ostensibly, before their admission into the Empire, and a fragmentary Gothic Calendar, which seems to support Socrates' story[5]. On the other hand Thompson had to insist on the validity of some hitherto insufficiently heeded clues he believed to be furnished by St. Ambrose.

Thompson's dating has recently come under attack[6]. The bearing of St. Ambrose upon the question has been convincingly disproved[7], and the value

1 E. A. Thompson, *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila* (Oxford 1966) 78–93, is a slightly revised version of E. A. Thompson, *The Date of the Conversion of the Visigoths,* J. Eccl. Hist. 7 (1956) 1–11.

2 Thompson, *Ulfila* 87–89.

3 Ibid. 86–87.

4 Ibid. 90, n. 3.

5 Ibid. 157–158.

6 Knut Schäferdiek, *Zeit und Umstände des Westgotischen Übergangs zum Christentum,* Historia 28 (1979) 90–97.

7 Ibid. 94–95: Schäferdiek translates Ambrose's *De Fide* 16, 139–140 (CSEL LXXVIII), and shows quite convincingly that the *sacrilegae voces,* interpreted by Thompson as belonging to pagan Goths, are actually those of Roman Arians. This interpretation renders quite unnecessary the attempt of F. Jostes, *Das Todesjahr des Ulfilas und der Übertritt der Goten zum Arianismus,* Beiträge zur Geschichte d. dtsch. Sprache u. Lit. 22 (1897) 174, to explain away this passage as an instance of Ambrose's *Romanitas* overshadowing his orthodoxy. The idea that the Visigoths are the scourge of God, chastizing the Romans for having distorted the nature of the Trinity, is to be found also in two speeches made by Gregory of Nazianzus. In *Or.* 22, 2 (PG XXV 1133) held in 379, he insists that the punishment has been incurred διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν κακίαν καὶ τὴν ἐπικρατοῦσαν κατὰ τῆς τριάδος ἀσέβειαν. In *Or.* 33 (PG XXXVI 215) held in 380, he even insinuates that the Goths themselves are Arians (οὓς ἡ τρίας λυομένη συνέστησεν apparently signifying that the dissolution of the Trinity has united the Goths). There is very little to add to Schäferdiek's interpretation of the other passages adduced by Thompson, Amb., *Ep.* 10, 9 (PL XVI 913).

of Eunapius' testimony has been emphatically re-asserted[8]. The feeling however persists that a lot more could have been said and ought to be said about this problem. The question is not merely one of dating. All our understanding of the process is involved. If the conversion of the Visigoths took place under a Nicene-Orthodox Emperor, within the confines of the Roman Empire, complex and unconvincing explanations ought to be provided for their acceptance of the Arian creed. Such explanations must be based on our knowledge of subsequent events. It is true that Arianism contributed a good deal to the cohesion of the barbarian realms established in the Western parts of the Empire during the 5th century, but this could have hardly been foreseen by the most far-sighted barbarian leader at the end of the 4th century[9]. Furthermore these explanations involve the insistence on some modern views about the conversion of other Germanic nations (such as the Burgundians and the Suebi), which must be regarded as obsolete[10].

In order to establish the correct date of the conversion it is not enough to show that St. Ambrose does not provide a criterion. Those pieces of evidence that do provide it must be redeemed much more convincingly than has so far been done. This paper undertakes to demonstrate the following points:

1. The social background to the conversion can be reconstructed on the basis of a document whose overriding significance has been emphasised by Thompson himself – the Passio Sancti Sabae[11]. A few documents closely related to

8 Schäferdiek, ibid. 95–96, whose interpretation of Eunapius, Frg. 55 (Müller, FHG IV 38–39) is satisfactory, though his dating of the events to which this fragment refers seems to be faulty: not 376 as he argues (ibid. 95), but sometime between 381 and 383 (see the remarks of Müller ad loc.). It is the fact that the Goths pass themselves off as Christians *upon* their crossing of the Danube that makes this fragment significant. For some further remarks see pp. 49. 51 below.

9 See Thompson, *Ulfila* 103–110, esp. 109f. That his explanation of the Visigoths' conversion to Arianism is not entirely satisfactory in view of his own dating was pointed out already by one of his reviewers; see S. L. Greenslade, J. Eccl. Hist. 19 (1968) 235f. See also Jacques Fontaine, Latomus 36 (1967) 226–228, and R. Browning, Cl. Rev. 17 (1967) 354–356, who are not entirely pleased with Thompson's treatment of Visigothic Arianism, but do not connect this with the question of the dating.

10 See E. A. Thompson, *Christianity and the Northern Barbarians* in: Arnaldo Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the fourth Century* (Oxford 1963) 56–78, and esp. 71–72, rejecting Socrates, *HE* 7, 30 (ed. R. Hussey II 801–802) and, more seriously, Oros. 7, 32, 13, concerning a conversion of the Burgundians to Catholicism prior to their adoption of the Arian creed. Elsewhere I intend to show that there is no sufficient ground for rejecting these valuable pieces of evidence. See also most recently E. A. Thompson, *The Conversion of the Spanish Suevi to Catholicism* in: Edward James (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: New Approaches* (Oxford 1980) 78–79, where a not entirely satisfactory treatment of Hydatius, *Chron. Min.* 2, 25 (137) is strongly influenced by the underlying notion that the Roman authorities took no interest in the barbarians' faith. This subject too calls for a separate discussion. See also pp. 50ff. below for some additional remarks.

11 Published by G. Delehaye, *Saints de Thrace et de Mésie,* Analecta Bollandiana 31 (1912) 216–221, and see Thompson, *Ulfila* 64ff. Though the significance of this document has been

the Passio help to complete the picture. The background thus reconstructed sheds a clear light on the evidence of Socrates.

2. There is nothing implicitly implausible in the testimony of Socrates himself.
3. The testimony of Ammianus does not contradict that of Socrates. On the contrary if properly analysed it can be used to corroborate Socrates' version. The combined evidence of both is further consolidated by Eunapius.
4. The testimony of Orosius (which is entirely independent from that of Socrates) has been rejected on insufficient grounds.
5. A correct analysis of the Gothic calendar shows its relevance to the question of the dating of the conversion. It points to a date before 378, and to a place across the Roman frontier.

When the relevance of St. Ambrose has been rejected, a strong case can be made for the more traditional dating – the early seventies of the 4th century.

1. The Passio Sancti Sabae – a reconsideration

The social scenery presented by the Passio Sancti Sabae has been admirably surveyed by Thompson[12]. It is only occasionally that a shift of stress will lead to the modification of one of his conclusions, but it ought to be admitted that such modifications only add power to the spirit of his own outline of Visigothic society. Such a shift of stress is therefore all the more necessary.

To start with we encounter a village-community which undergoes three waves of persecution.

During the first outbreak this community shows its willingness to save all its Christians by staging a mock sacrificial meal, which involves, of course not only the cheating of the persecuting authorities, but also the cheating of its own deities[13]. It is not the moral aspect of this misdeed that looks amazing – we ought not to confuse religion and morality, especially not on such primitive levels of awe of the supernatural. It is rather the surprising boldness of these villagers that looks so remarkable. Are they not afraid lest the *numina* or gods they have so improperly insulted would vent their wrath on the whole community and exact a horrible vengeance?[14] During the second wave they go even

recognized (see e.g. J. Mansion, *Les origines du Christianisme chez les Goths,* Analecta Bollandiana 33, 1914, 6–7. 12–20; cf. H. E. Giesecke, *Die Ostgermanen und der Arianismus,* Leipzig 1939, 64–67) no one seems to have attempted an analysis of its social implications comparable to that of Thompson.

12 E. A. Thompson, *The Passio S. Sabae and Early Visigothic Society,* Historia 4 (1955) 331–338, slightly modified in *Ulfila* 64–77. The *Passio* will hereinafter be referred to by page and line numbers in Delehaye's edition (see n. 11 above).

13 *Passio* 217, 26–32.

14 According to Thompson, *Ulfila* 68, "Saba ... had offended against the gods of the community by refusing to share their meal; and offence against the gods was offence against the community itself". But does not the community itself offend against its gods by treating some of its

further than that[15]. They are willing to commit perjury by swearing that there are no Christians in the village. Saba's obstinacy foils them only partly, for it is only he who proclaims his Christianity openly, whereas the other Christians in the village find protection by their neighbours' oath[16]. When the villagers decide to banish Saba from the village, it is evidently not because they are indignant at his sacrilegious conduct, but because they are reluctant to incur the disfavour of the *megistanes*. Otherwise, why do they allow him to return when the first tide of the persecutions is over?[17] Why do they allow him to return a second time, after he had been evicted by a representative of the same *megistanes*?[18] In the third outbreak Saba is released from custody in the dead night by an old woman right under the nose of the warriors of Atharid, another representative of the *megistanes*[19]. Even the old women of the village seem to have little respect for the gods of their community or zeal for the persecution initiated in their name.

The same attitude is felt in the conduct of Atharid's warriors, whose business it is to make Saba recant or to put him to death[20]. They do not seem to be elated by the task imposed upon them and they carry it out with very little enthusiasm. There is a strong impression throughout that they would have set Saba free had he not been so persistent in courting martyrdom[21]. They certainly do release his friend Sansala[22], and the explanation, that as a Sarmatian he is not part of the community, and hence his obstinacy does not constitute an offence to the gods[23], does not avail. Towards the end of the Passio they almost decide to allow Saba *himself* to escape: the saint actually entreats them to observe their duty and put him to death[24].

members to unconsecrated meat in a sacrificial meal? I find it hard to agree with Giesecke, op. cit. 65, that by means of such a sham the villagers could have considered themselves as having shown "ihre Ehrfurcht vor dem Glauben der Gemeinschaft".

15 *Passio* 218, 3–6.

16 That such Christians were still living in the village is made plain by ibid. 9: οἱ κόμητες τοὺς ἰδίους ἀποκρύπτοντες. Giesecke's interpretation cannot be accepted, for if the purpose of the oath was to remove the impure from the sacrifice, as he suggests loc. cit., it was certainly not achieved through the villagers' false oath.

17 *Passio* 218, 2.

18 During the third outbreak of the persecution Saba is back at the village, ibid. 16ff.

19 *Passio* 219, 23–25.

20 *Passio* 219, 30–221, 9.

21 They do not react at all when Sansala boldly refuses to eat the consecrated meat sent by Atharid (219, 30–220, 1), and Saba is tortured by a warrior described as εἷς τῶν παίδων Ἀθαρίδου (220, 6) only when he inveighs against Atharid personally.

22 *Passio* 220, 17–23: There is a somewhat comic moment when Saba's Christian benevolence goes a little too far: he actually intercedes with the soldiers on Sansala's behalf so that he too may be given the crown of martyrdom, but is unceremoniously silenced and told to mind his own business.

23 Thompson, *Ulfila* 69–70.

24 *Passio* 220, 31–221, 1: their words leave little room for doubt as to the lack of their enthusiasm.

If we climb higher up the social ladder we can immediately point out that Atharid does not seem to be terribly interested in the persecution. The '*archon* of lawlessness' who appears in the village during the second outbreak, is not too keen on the task entrusted to him either[25]. When this *anomos archon*[26] learns that the only professed Christian in the village is a pauper who possesses nothing but the coat on his skin he declines to take any further measures, beyond turning him, for the second time, out of the village[27]. Therein he shows no deeper religious sentiment than the village council which was content to drive him out for the first time.

This seems to be the only case in which Thompson has been totally misguided in his interpretation of this document. "Even then", he says "the saint might well have been spared if the village councillors could have shown to the persecutor that Saba was a man of some property"[28]. This is not however what the passage suggests. The purpose of the persecution was to bring about a suspect's recantation of his Christianity (or his proclamation of his adherence to his

Δεῦτε τὸν ἀθῶον τοῦτον ἀπολύσωμεν πόθεν γὰρ γνώσεται τοῦτο Ἀθάριδος; Obviously they expect little supervision over their proceedings by their chieftain – a fact which ought to alert us immediately to the degree of his own interest in the persecution.

25 *Passio* 218, 2–15.

26 This anonymous envoy of the *megistanes* is twice referred to simply as ὁ διώκτης i.e. the persecutor (ibid. 5, 8), once as ὁ ἄρχων τῆς ἀνομίας (ibid. 10–11), and once simply as ἄνομος, the lawless (ibid. 14). Thompson justly feels that ἀνομία and ἄνομος in this context require some explanation: the *archon*, who lets Saba off so easily, and (according to Thompson's wrong interpretation) would have excused him entirely had he been richer, is "no respecter of tribal custom" (*Ulfila* 72). Yet both the author and his hero have little respect for tribal custom themselves, and the story is too naive and straightforward to allow for an ironic reference to the *archon's* insubordination to his own laws. Elsewhere in the *Passio* Atharid's warriors are described as ἄνομοι λῃσταί (219, 3), or ὑπηρέται τῆς ἀνομίας (220, 17) – "lawless thieves" and "servants of lawlessness" respectively – but Atharid himself is represented as ἐκ τοῦ τάγματος τῶν ἀσεβῶν, i.e. a representative of the impious (219, 2), or simply as ἀσεβής, i.e. impious (220, 3). Ἀσεβής and ἀσέβεια are certainly terms which are much more in line with what the author has in mind also in the case of the unnamed *archon*. An attractive explanation for the use of ἄνομος and ἀνομία is that a Gothic informant used the words *unsibjis* and *unsibja* respectively in the special sense they were given by Ulfila in his translation of the Bible, namely the sense of ἀσεβής and ἀσέβεια (see his translation of I *Tim.* 1, 9, where *unsibjaim* for ἀσεβέσι is corrected by a gloss in the Ambrosianus A with the more natural *afgudaim*, and cf. *Skeireins* IV where *gatarhjan jah gasakan þo afgudon haifst Sabailliaus jah Markailliaus* would most conveniently be rendered by "condemn and disprove the impious strife of Sabellianus and Marcellianus"). That the literal sense of *unsibjis* and *unsibja* is ἄνομος and ἀνομία respectively is amply proved by Ulfila's translation of *Matth.* 7, 23 and *Marc.* 15, 28. The author therefore seems to have translated his informant literally and used ἄνομος where the informant used *unsibjis*, and ἀσεβής where he used *afguþs* (see also P. Scardigli, *Lingua e storia dei Goti*, Florence 1964, 146–155). If Saba was indeed Catholic as is usually believed (cf. n. 56 below), we may have here a surprising hint of the extent of the popularity of Ulfila's Bible even among Catholics.

27 *Passio* 218, 10–15.

28 *Ulfila* 69.

paternal rites), and *death* was to be the punishment of the recalcitrant[29]. Saba shows that he knows this simple truth when he reminds Atharid's soldiers of their duty[30]. By expelling him from the village, rather than inflicting upon him the death punishment, the *archon* betrays first of all his lack of enthusiasm for the entire operation[31]. But what he says is even more significant: οὔτε ὠφελῆσαι οὔτε βλάψαι δύναται ὁ τοιοῦτος[32]. A richer man would have had to be put to death under the same circumstances, because his Christianity was a menacing phenomenon. A pauper like Saba could be expelled without further ado.

This tends to invalidate, at least to a certain degree, another point which is strongly insisted upon by Thompson – namely the low social rank of the Visigothic converts[33]. There is indeed strong evidence suggesting that most Christians in Gothia were of the humble classes. But it is precisely the *archon's* conduct that suggests the existence of at least a few converts of a higher social standing. That we know more about the low-class converts, those who bore the Gothic 'Kosenamen'[34], may stem no less from the more active role they played both in missionary activity and in martyrdom, than from their significantly greater numbers.

When we turn away from the Passio Sancti Sabae to other sources we discover more positive references to high ranking Germanic Christians. The Visigothic 'queen' Gaatha (and her son Arimerius) seems to have belonged to the same group of *optimates* as the persecutor Winguric, from whose domain she managed to rescue the remains of twenty-six martyrs he had burned. Both Gaatha and Winguric were in all likelihood the peers of the *archon* and Atharid, whom we have encountered in the Passio Sancti Sabae[35].

29 Thompson, ibid., is aware of this fact: hence his remark "But even so Saba was not lynched". The truly baffling fact ought to be not that he was not "lynched", since the villagers seem to have gone out of their way to save his life, but that he was not "executed" by the *archon*. The observation of Giesecke, op. cit. 66 "Diesmal hat man ihn wieder glimpflich behandelt" is much better in keeping with what happened.

30 *Passio* 220, 34–35: τί ματαιολογεῖτε καὶ οὐ ποιεῖτε τὸ προστεταγμένον ὑμῖν;

31 Thompson is therefore right in describing him as "no respecter of tribal custom", though he is wrong in thinking that the author of the *Passio* found this fact "significant and disturbing" (cf. n. 26 above).

32 *Passio* 218, 14–15.

33 Thompson, *Ulfila* 77.

34 R. Löwe, *Gotische Namen in hagiographischen Texten,* Beiträge zur Gesch. d. dtsch. Sprache u. Lit. 47 (1923) 407–433; cf. Thompson, ibid.

35 For the text of the *Acta* of Wereka and Batwin, see H. Achelis, *Der älteste deutsche Kalender,* Zeitschr. f. d. neutest. Wiss. 1 (1900) 318–320 = Delehaye, op. cit. 279. The persecutor Winguric is mentioned without any title, but in another version, in the *Menologium of Basil* (PG CXII 368), he is introduced as ἄρχων τῶν Γότθων. The method of burning a church on its congregation is ascribed by Sozomen, *HE* 6, 37 (GCS L) to Athanaric's envoys, and it would be only natural to regard Winguric as one of them. Gaatha is introduced as ἡ βασίλισσα τοῦ ἔθνους τῶν Γότθων who leaves her βασιλεία to her son (Achelis, ibid. 319; Delehaye, ibid.), but in the *Menologium of Basil* (PG, ibid.) she is represented as ἡ σύμβιος τοῦ ἑτέρου ἄρχον-

If this is true, it follows that the *megistanes* were much less unanimous in their attitude towards the persecutions than may otherwise be assumed. On the one hand some sympathizers of Rome, or even open converts like Gaatha, could be found. On the other hand, there were die-hard conservatives like Winguric, or the anonymous *archon* who had tortured Inna, Rima, and Pinna, perhaps in an earlier wave of persecution[36]. Between those two extremes, there were people like the *anomos archon* of the Passio Sancti Sabae, whose attitude towards the persecution appears to have been quite lukewarm.

The intensity and the severity of a persecution would vary from place to place according to the attitude of the *megistan* in charge. Converts (if any) would do their best to protect their Christian followers. If the pressure of their fellow *megistanes* waxed strong, they could either stall for time by concealing their own Christianity, and help their professed Christian followers to cross the border, or attempt to cross the border themselves. The latter course does not appear to have been always open. Gaatha, it seems, was constrained to wander away from her tribe, before her son, Arimerius, who apparently belonged to the confederation of Athanaric, and stood in awe of his senior peer, Winguric, declared himself openly a Christian[37]. Yet when he did, Athanaric was no longer alive, his confederation had disintegrated, and Arimerius himself, so it seems, was looking for a place in the Roman Empire[38]. Such an optimate if he

τος τοῦ ἔθνους τῶν Γότθων. From this it would seem likely that her husband had been Winguric's peer, that she herself, as his widow, was not strong enough to withstand his anti-Christian policy. From the word ἕτερος it would be wrong to deduce two Visigothic groups only. Greek authors seem to have quite hazy conceptions about Visigothic subdivisions and about the titles of their leaders. The anonymous *archon* and Atharid, who, like his father, was a βασιλίσκος (*Passio* 219, 3), are in all likelihood other members of the group to which Winguric and Gaatha seem to have belonged. They all seem to recognize the authority of the persecuting *megistanes*, and for Gaatha together with her son the only way of professing openly their Christianity is to enter Roman service across the border (cf. n. 38 below).

36 Delehaye, op. cit. 215–216. The events described belong in all likelihood to the persecution of c. 348; see Thompson, *Ulfila* 162. The approximate date of this wave is yielded by Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech.* 10, 197 (PG XXXIII 688), cf. Giesecke, op. cit. 62–63; see also p. 44 and n. 57 below.

37 See n. 35 above. The very fact that a persecution takes place in spite of this apparent disagreement may be explained by the fact that the body of the *megistanes* has decided upon it (*Passio* 215, 26–27). That these *megistanes* were headed by the notorious Athanaric will be made likely in the sequel (pp. 43ff. below).

38 Gaatha's wanderings are described in the *Acta* of Wereka and Batwin (n. 35 above) as follows: εἶτα (i.e. having brought the relics of Wereka and Batwin to Roman soil) μηνύει τῷ υἱῷ αὐτῆς Ἀριμηρίῳ καὶ ἦλθεν ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ συναπῆλθεν αὐτῷ καταλιποῦσα τὴν Δουλκίλλαν εἰς Κύζικον. This does not make it quite clear if Gaatha and Arimerius remained within the Empire or not, after they had left Dulcilla at Cyzicus. Wella, who was stoned to death in Gothia having returned there "together with Gaatha", may well have found this end during Gaatha's voyage back to bring Arimerius. At any rate, her second voyage into the empire took place after Gratianus' murder in 383 (ἐπὶ τῆς βασιλείας Οὐαλεντινιανοῦ καὶ Θεοδοσίου). Athanaric himself had crossed the frontier in January 381, and died shortly afterwards. The

did manage to secede from the group of persecuting *megistanes* might find it advisable not to cross the border, but join a rival confederation of leaders, who were holding their own in their homeland with the aid of Rome. What is true of such leaders, as Gaatha, be they open or veiled Christians, is obviously true of those pro-Roman *optimates* who may have opposed the persecution without having taken the crucial step of being baptized as Christians.

At the other extreme, in the domain of a religious fanatic like Winguric, the persecution would probably hit Christians of every social rank. The twenty-three martyrs whom he burned in their church, together with their leaders, the presbyters Wereka and Batwin[39], do not seem to have belonged to the very top of Visigothic society. They were not however spared, as was Saba by the *anomos archon.* The *laicus* Wella, on the other hand, may have been of a somewhat less humble social standing[40].

The *archontes* of the middle line seem to have confined their efforts to converts of the warrior class only. People like Saba were of no consequence. They could be banished if they insisted upon drawing too much attention to themselves, and when the tide of persecution was over, they might return, if they so wished.

Though the existence of such a division within the Visigothic aristocracy must be regarded as highly hypothetical in view of the paucity of our evidence, it does seem to be the hypothesis which accounts best for all the details that can be extracted from the Passio Sancti Sabae. It will be further corroborated if other sources are properly analysed.

2. The Version of Socrates

A division among the Visigoths is in fact mentioned by two ecclesiastical historians, Socrates[41] and Sozomen[42]. These two historians refer to a rift between the pagan camp of the persecutor Athanaric and the Christian camp of the chieftain Fritigern.

The main clue that leads Thompson to indict this piece of information as etiological fiction is its ostensibly implausible chronology. Socrates dates it before the crossing of the Danube, and at that time there had yet been no split in

very fact that this proud chieftain consented to set his foot on Roman ground (cf. Amm. 27, 5, 9) should have been enough to betoken the utter decline of his power, had we not been informed that he was *proximorum factione ... expulsus* (ibid. 10). See also A. Lippold, *Theodosius der Grosse und seine Zeit* (Stuttgart 1968) 25–26. See further nn. 46–50 below.

39 See nn. 35–36 above.

40 Otherwise it is not easy to understand the prominent role which he played beside Gaatha in recovering the relics of Wereka, Batwin, and their congregation, though he was a mere *laicus.*

41 Socrates, *HE* 4, 33–34 (ed. R. Hussey, II 559–562).

42 Sozomen, *HE* 6, 37 (ed. J. Bidez, GCS L 294–297).

the Visigothic nation, or else Ammianus would have informed us about it. Until as late as the Hunnic invasion in 376 the Visigoths were led by a sole ruler, the *iudex* Athanaric. The error, Thompson maintains, was spotted out by Sozomen, who attempted to correct it, by transferring the whole episode of Fritigern's conversion to a later date, after his crossing of the Danube, in 376. But there he ran into unexpected difficulties, because he had to postdate the persecution of Athanaric, which raged between 369–372[43].

Thompson's strictures against Sozomen seem to be perfectly justified, though there is no positive evidence that he got involved in a chain of falsehoods in a futile attempt to correct Socrates. For all we know his distorted version may be due to a mere careless transmission of Socrates' story[44]. Yet this latter story ought not to be rejected out of hand merely because it has been mishandled by Sozomen. It remains to be shown that, if the *argumentum ex silentio* based upon Ammianus[45] is disregarded for the moment, there is nothing intrinsically implausible about the version of Socrates himself.

It starts with an account of the rift between Athanaric and Fritigern. No information is given about the circumstances, but it could have arisen from Athanaric's defeat at the hand of Valens in 369, which will have dealt a tremendous blow to his prestige[46]. If any of Athanaric's followers did happen to desert him, they probably soon learned that he was still powerful enough to cope with this challenge to his leadership. Fritigern, we are told, was defeated and had to turn to Valens for support[47].

If Thompson's own analysis of Germanic society is to be followed here, there will be no cogent reason for relegating this detail from the realm of history into the realm of fictitious etiology. Germanic chieftains had been wont to seek Roman intervention on their behalf against their adversaries for a very long time. Rome was not slow in fomenting such internal strife[48]. Its economic support of friendly chieftains, coupled with a ban against the use of its markets by its enemies, will have had the effect of thinning down the following of the latter

43 *Ulfila* 87–88.

44 For a different possibility see Schäferdiek, op. cit. 91–93, who regards Sozomen's version as a deliberate combination of the account of Socrates and that of Theodoret, *HE* 4, 37 (ed. L. Parmentier, GCS XLIV 273f.). This is however not convincing, since Sozomen does not regard Ulfila as a Nicaean Orthodox, but states expressly that in the synod of Constantinople, after an initial proclamation for Orthodoxy, he joined the homoean camp βιασθεὶς ὑπὸ τῆς χρείας ἢ καὶ ἀληθῶς νομίσας ἄμεινον οὕτω περὶ θεοῦ φρονεῖν. He furthermore asserts that Ulfila's faith was one of the reasons of the Goths' conversion to Arianism. His story therefore does not seem to have any point of contact with that of Theodoret, according to whom Ulfila was still Orthodox when the Goths were crossing the Danube, and was then approached by Eudoxius, who prevailed upon him to adopt Arianism.

45 On which see pp. 45ff. below.

46 On this defeat and its consequences, see Thompson, *Ulfila* 18–20.

47 Socrates, ibid. 33 (Hussey II 559–560).

48 Thompson, *The Early Germans* (Oxford 1965) 72–108.

and increasing the following of the former[49]. It will however have been a lengthy process, and it is conceivable that a Roman historian will not have taken notice of it, until its consequences became really significant for observers beyond the frontier[50]. There is only one point where Socrates seems to have slightly adorned his story, and this departure from the pure truth is explicable rather as a typical *vaticinium post eventum* than as a deliberate fabrication. Fritigern will have been by no means the only challenger of Athanaric's supremacy. Though they did not secede openly, Gaatha and Arimerius indicate that there were others who at least wanted to secede. Only subsequent events seem to have led the historian to single him out from among his comrades who had deserted Athanaric.

Now, we are told Valens used the occasion in order to promulgate Christianity among the Visigoths, and employed for the purpose the good offices of Ulfila[51]. Unless any explicit denial is forthcoming in any other source, it is hard to see why this piece of information should be discredited. Valens was an ardent Arian, and Ulfila, who is universally agreed to have been alive at the time, presiding over his Christian Gothic community in Moesia, will have been the most obvious person to nominate for this mission. Proficient in Greek, Latin, and Gothic alike, this learned translator of the Bible into Gothic was equally suited for the role of a Roman diplomat and of a missionary among his own people[52].

The last part of Socrates' story is the one most vulnerable to a hypercritical approach. Ulfila did not confine himself to preaching among Fritigern's men only[53]. This is entirely credible if other chieftains existed who shared his sentiments of hostility towards Athanaric. It is even more probable that both Valens and the pro-Roman Visigothic leaders attempted to exploit Christianity to undermine the fidelity of Athanaric's warriors and those of his followers. Under such circumstances, not only are the persecutions understandable, but so is also the position of some *megistanes,* like the *anomos archon* of the Passio Sancti Sabae, that the obstinacy of poor, non-combatant converts like Saba was

49 See ibid. 52–54, where Roman influence upon the formation of the Germanic *comitatus* is discussed. The section referred to in the preceding note dwells upon some significant changes in the organization of early Germanic society which may be attributed to direct Roman interference.

50 This point will be relevant not only to a historian like Ammianus (pp. 45ff. below), but also an orator like Themistius (cf. *Ulfila* 90).

51 Socrates, ibid. (Hussey II 560).

52 Socrates' version is fully subscribed to by Giesecke, op. cit. 63–64, and with very good reason. The contention of Schäferdiek, ibid. 92–93, that Socrates' words τότε δὲ καὶ mark an editorial transition, and that the entire story is therefore untenable, is cogent only as far as the introduction of one heterogeneous piece of information is concerned: the invention of Gothic script and the translation of the Bible into Gothic.

53 Socrates, ibid. (Hussey II 560–561).

not really their concern[54]. The fact that the persecutors do not distinguish between Arian (Wereka and Batwin and their followers)[55], and Catholic (Saba)[56] need not surprise us. The fine niceties of theology would have been high above the heads of barbarian generals whose adversaries had embraced Christianity for no purer religious motives than they themselves had for persecuting it.

Socrates' testimony can moreover be easily harmonized with that of the Passio Sancti Sabae, which mentions, as stated above, three waves of persecution. The first one, whose date and circumstances are unknown – the one in which Saba was expelled from his village by his own fellow villagers – may have been part of the persecution of 348 – the persecution recorded by Auxentius, in consequence of which Ulfila migrated with his *Gothi minores* into the Empire and settled in Moesia[57]. The second wave seems to be the one ushered in by the defeat of 369[58]. Saba is banished for the second time, this time by the *anomos archon.* Then there is a lull, and Saba returns to the village. For the third time there is an upsurge, and this time, Saba obtains the crown of martyrdom he has

54 See pp. 38f. above.

55 Even if Mansion, op. cit. 25–29, is right in suggesting that Gaatha ended as a follower of Macedonius' semi-Arianism, she must have done so under the pressure of Theodosius' Catholic government, whereas beforehand she had been, in all likelihood, much more explicitly Arian; see R. Löwe, *Der Gotische Kalender,* Zeitschr. f. dtsch. Alt. u. dtsch. Lit. 60 (1922) 265–266.

56 This has been established quite convincingly by M. Pfeilschifter, *Kein neues Werk des Wulfila,* Veröffentlichungen aus d. Kirchenhist. Seminar München, III. Reihe, I (1907) 191ff., refuting H. Boehmer-Romundt, *Ein neues Werk des Wulfila?* Neue Jahrbücher f. d. klass. Altertum 11 (1903) 275ff. See esp. Pfeilschifter's admirable discussion of the relation of the author of the *Passio* to St. Basil (ibid. 205ff.). Pfeilschifter's suggestions are still fundamentally valid, in spite of some minor reservations raised by Delehaye, op. cit. 288–290; see Mansion, op. cit. 12–20.

57 See n. 36 above. For the text of Auxentius see F. Kaufmann, *Aus der Schule des Wulfila,* Texte und Untersuchungen zur Altgermanischen Religionsgeschichte (Strassburg 1889) I 72–76. Auxentius states that following this persecution Ulfila migrated back to Romania, 7 years after his arrival in Gothia, and 33 years before his death, c. 381. This would mean that his arrival in Gothia took place c. 341, and would result in an apparent contradiction with Philostorgius, *HE* 2, 5 (ed. J. Bidez, GCS 17–18), according to whom Ulfila's consecration took place during Constantine's lifetime, whilst Eusebius was still bishop of Nicomedia. Auxentius however refers only to the floruit of Ulfila's episcopal activity from his arrival in Gothia onwards and not to his consecration. Thompson's rejection (*Ulfila* XV, n. 2) of attempts by D. B. Capelle, *La lettre d'Auxence sur Ulfila,* Rev. Bénéd. 34 (1922) 224–233, esp. 226f., and J. Zeiller, *Le premier établissement des Goths chrétiens dans l'empire d'Orient,* Mélanges G. Schlumberger (Paris 1924) I 3–11, to date the consecration itself in 341, in contravention of Philostorgius, might have been stated more resolutely.

58 See n. 46 above. It may be added in passing that the earlier persecution is likewise connected in all likelihood with a war against Rome; see Libanius, *Or.* 59, 89–90, who speaks of a diplomatic accommodation between Constantius and the Visigoths (*skythai*), which, according to E. A. Thompson, *Constantine, Constantius II, and the lower Danube Frontier,* Hermes 84 (1956) 379–380, ought to have followed a Gothic war, ingloriously pursued by Constantius. For the date of this speech, see R. Foerster, in Libanius' Teubner ed., vol. IV 201.

so diligently sought, on April 12, 372[59]. This new outbreak is best conceivable as Athanaric's reaction to missionary activities within his own domain, instigated by Fritigern and his allies[60].

Why then is neither Fritigern nor Athanaric expressly mentioned either in the Passio or in the sources concerning the martyrdom of Wereka and Batwin? The answer seems to be easy enough. All these sources reflect the persecution from the point of view of the rural population of Gothia. The *iudex* Athanaric was a remote and detached authority to those villagers[61]. The local *megistan* or optimate, a man like Winguric or Atharid, was the power to which they would hold themselves accountable. If our interpretation is correct, Fritigern was during the persecutions only one of this group of *megistanes.* He would be mentioned in a hagiography only if he happened to play a vital or an incidental role in the particular region with which this hagiography is concerned – comparable to the one played by Gaatha in the region under Winguric.

3. Ammianus Marcellinus and the disintegration of Athanaric's Confederation

Thompson invokes Ammianus' silence against Socrates' account: "Now the war (sc. that of 367–369) would have been a signal success for the Romans if it had left the Visigoths, so far from federating their tribes, actually engaged in civil war. But Ammianus gives no hint that this was the case."[62]

Thompson would have been, of course, absolutely right, had we had only Socrates' story about a major split between *two* groups, one led by Athanaric and the other led by Fritigern. For such a split there is indeed no indication in Ammianus. If, however, the suggestions made above about the initial desertion of a few splinter groups from Athanaric's camp – one of which only was that of Fritigern – are true, even Ammianus' complete silence could not serve as an effective refutation. Lack of unity seems to have been a much more common phenomenon among the Visigoths than the occasional unifications in view of great military enterprises, and this truth was well known to Ammianus himself[63]. Valens appears to have used a wave of such desertions in the wake of his

59 For the date see *Passio* 221, 6–9.

60 The two last persecutions are probably treated as one by Jerome, *Chron. ad ann. 369* (Euseb., *Chron.* ed. Helm, 245): *Atanaricus rex Gothorum in Christianos persecutione commota, plurimos interfecit et de propriis sedibus in Romanum solum expellit.* Their proximity in time will have made them undistinguishable from each other for a Roman observer. It is however only the third outbreak which is described by the *Passio* 218, 16, as a διωγμὸς μέγας whereas the first is merely a κίνησις (217, 27), and the second a πειρασμός (218, 3).

61 See Thompson, *Ulfila* 45–48, concerning the *iudex* and his position among the Visigoths.

62 Ibid. 88.

63 Amm. 26, 6, 10: Procopius learns from his generals: *gentem Gothorum ... conspirantem in unum ad pervadenda parari collimitia Thraciarum*; cf. ibid. 10, 3: Marcellus hopes to gain the support of the *reges Gothorum* previously approached by Procopius (cf. also 27, 4,1; 5, 1). It is only when the crucial confrontation between Valens and Athanaric is related that the latter is

triumph over Athanaric as a means to further achievements, not only in the political and military, but also in the religious field. The former type of achievements would be recognizable only after a gradual process had significantly whittled away Athanaric's following or when a sudden cataclysm like the appearance of the Huns dramatically enhanced this process. An ecclesiastical historian like Socrates may be excused if he gives prominence to a Christian convert who was later to become the victor of Hadrianopolis[64]. A discriminating historian like Ammianus, more interested in the material, down-to-earth aspects of Valens' policy, may be equally excused, if he does not mention such a split until he reaches the point in his narrative when its impact becomes really felt. Yet at this point he does shed, if properly read, some retrospective light on the development of the quarrel between Athanaric and the challengers of his supremacy from its very beginning.

This point is reached when the arrival of the Huns is narrated. Their encounter with the Gothic world is related in stages, and as the story unfolds, it turns out that the Visigoths had been divided already before their first contact with the Huns.

Let us recapitulate Ammianus' account. First the Huns clashed with the Greuthungi (the Ostrogoths). The old and experienced king of the latter succumbed to his despair in view of this new and sinister enemy and committed suicide. His son Vithimiris died soon afterwards in a battle against the Alani (his allies were ironically some of the same formidable Huns who served him as mercenaries). His minor son Videric was made subject to the supervision of two regents, Altheus and Saphrax. Driven back to the banks of the Dniester, they spelt danger in their arrival to Athanaric, who started a series of large-scale preparations to meet the Hunnic threat. Before he could however complete them, the Huns launched a surprise attack, and chased him as far as the Pruth, where he tried, in vain, to consolidate a second line of defence[65].

What Ammianus has to say further is of the utmost significance. Rumour about those fiendish Huns *reached other Gothic groups* (*fama tamen late serpente per Gothorum reliquas gentes*)[66]. Who were they? The Osthrogoths? When we left them encamped beyond the Dniester they were not in a position where they needed *rumor* to learn about the Huns. Any of Athanaric's Visigoths? They too had already felt the lash of the Hunnic scourge on their flesh. In fact, as far as the Pruth, every piece of territory seemed to be infested with these unwelcome newcomers. It is only beyond the Pruth that people had to depend on rumour

introduced as *ea tempestate iudicem potentissimum* (ibid. 5, 6). From this it would be hardly possible to deduce that Ammianus must have regarded signs of disintegration in the Visigothic precarious unity as especially noteworthy.

64 See p. 43 above.

65 Amm. 31, 3, 1–8.

66 Ibid. 8.

for information about them, and it is hard to see what else these *reliquae Gothorum gentes* sitting there could have been *unless Visigoths not acknowledging the suzerainty of Athanaric.*

Now, Ammianus says, the greater part of the people *had deserted* Athanaric because they had been worn out by want and hunger. *Deseruerat*[67] is the verb used by Ammianus, who obviously wants us to understand that this had happened *before* the events he has just related. This part of the Gothic people had been seeking for some time (the use of the iterative *quaeritabat* should be noted) a country on a nonbarbarian territory (*remotum ab omni notitia barbarorum,* seems to be a phrase carefully chosen to show that initially it was not a question of fleeing from the Huns, but a desire to separate themselves from the Barbarian lands)[68]. After long deliberations (*diu deliberans* is again an indication that all this had been taking place for some time), they decided for Thrace, because of two main considerations[69]. The first one, the fertility of the country, should be related to causes that had been relevant even before the arrival of the Huns. It is only the second one which is directly connected with the Huns: *et amplitudine fluentorum Histri distinguitur ab arvis patentibus iam peregrini fulminibus Martis*[70]. The word *iam* should be balanced against the pluperfect of *deseruerat* and the iterative connotations of *quaeritabat* and *diuque deliberans* to indicate that we are here concerned with the introduction of a new element into the picture. The final sentence seems to bear out this interpretation completely. *Hoc quoque idem residui velut mente cogitavere communi*[71]. Who were those *residui*? Since the reference can by no means be to Athanaric's group, it follows that it must be to a certain group among those who had deserted him – a group which had hitherto been opposed to the idea of settlement on Roman soil (*velut mente communi* is not quite *mente communi*). It would appear that this group had been influential enough to prevent a petition to Valens until the coming of the Huns, and it was their arrival which turned the balance of the scale.

That those who had deserted Athanaric comprised more than one such group, led by more than one leader, emerges with the greatest clarity from the

67 Ibid. For the causes of this hunger cf. 27, 5, 7: *Quod commerciis vetitis ultima necessariorum inopia barbari stringebantur.* The two *emporia* merely granted them by the terms of the agreement of 369 are conceived by Themistius, *Or.* 10, 135D as a warning and a means of exerting pressure: ἅμα μὲν σημεῖον τοῦ πάντα ἐπιτάττοντα τοῖς βαρβάροις τὰς σπονδὰς ποιεῖσθαι, ἅμα δὲ πρόνοια τοῦ κακουργοῦντας ἧττον λανθάνειν, ἀποκεκλεισμένης αὐτοῖς εἰς τὰ χωρία τῆς ἐπιμιξίας ... ὥστε ἀφῄρητο αὐτῶν τὴν ῥᾳστώνην τῆς ἀπιστίας. Just as Ammianus does not mention them (nor indeed any other terms of the peace treaty) he may have passed in silence over their withdrawal from Athanaric in order to accommodate the supporters of Fritigern.

68 Amm. 31, 3, 8.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

sequel. In the ensuing negotiations with Valens the dominant figure is Alavivus, whereas Fritigern is not mentioned at all at the beginning[72]. Then, when account of the first reception of Visigothic leaders by the Emperor is given, we learn that *primus cum Alavivo suscipitur Fritigernus*[73]. Again Ammianus' wording is suggestive. Fritigern is the subject of the sentence. He is the first Gothic chieftain to be accepted by Valens. *Cum Alavivo* in this context seems to imply that Alavivus only accompanies his folksman. This may well reflect Valens' attitude to the two leaders. Afterwards it is Fritigern who takes the lead in all the Visigothic operations within the confines of Rome[74]. Clearly imperial favour, backed up with the appropriate financial resources, could help a Germanic leader to consolidate his position within his own camp[75].

If this is true, the description of Socrates, far from being discredited by its juxtaposition with that of Ammianus, is further confirmed by it. It is hard to point out a better motive that would impel Valens to prefer Fritigern than the fact that the latter had been the first Visigothic chieftain to undertake a campaign of mass conversion to Arianism amongst his tribesmen with direct imperial sponsorship.

From the combined evidence of Socrates, Ammianus, the Passio Sancti Sabae and the Synaxary of Wereka, Batwin and the twenty-six martyrs, a highly complex picture emerges of the political conditions in the Visigothic nation on the eve of the battle of Hadrianopolis. It may be recapitulated as follows:

a) *A pagan confederation* led by Athanaric, progressively weakened by a political and economic war of attrition waged against it by Valens, but trying to hold its own by means of persecution. In this confederation the following subdivisions may be pointed out: 1. Conservative, fanatically anti-Roman leaders, like Athanaric himself and Winguric. 2. Anti-Roman leaders who stay with Athanaric, but are not too keen on the persecution (the *anomos archon,* Atharid?). 3. Veiled pro-Roman leaders, prevented by their neighbours from joining the pro-Roman confederation (see below), who refrain to the best of their ability from participating in the persecutions (Arimerius), and do not object to the conversion of some of their prominent followers (Gaatha, who most probably embraced Christianity owing to missionary activity initiated in Fritigern's camp)[76].

b) *A pro-Roman confederation* consisting of several groups, with no crystalized supreme leadership. In c. 375–6 Alavivus' prestige seems to be in the ascendant. It is subdivided as follows: 1. Pagan chieftains, seeking admission

72 Ibid. 4, 1.

73 Ibid. 8.

74 Ibid. 5, 5, where both Alavivus and Fritigern are invited to a banquet by Lupicinus, but cf. ibid. 7, where Fritigern takes the lead, whereas Alavivus fades out from the scene completely.

75 See nn. 48–49, and 67 above.

76 For her Arianism cf. n. 55 above.

into Roman territory as pagans, led by Alavivus[77]. 2. Christian (Arian) chieftains, led by Fritigern. 3. Pagan chieftains who prefer to enjoy Roman support beyond the *limes* to a settlement on Roman soil which is liable to endanger their independence. Only the arrival of the Huns decides them in favour of crossing the frontier.

Another contention of Thompson, based on Ammianus, ought to be disposed of. On the eve of the battle of Hadrianopolis Fritigern sent to Valens a mission consisting of a *Christiani ritus presbyter ... cum aliis humilibus* in a last attempt to procure for his followers the desired domicile in Thrace under favourable conditions[78]. Thompson's interpretation of this passage is that this envoy was chosen because as a Christian he would carry more weight with the Emperor, in spite of his humble social standing[79]. Implicitly we are led to the conclusion that, if this was the Christian establishment among the Visigoths, their leaders could not have embraced Christianity yet.

Another passage in Ammianus, in which a Gothic envoy appears before the walls of Hadrianopolis accompanied by a Christian who reads aloud a letter before its defenders, may intensify the impression that Christians were only a fringe minority among the Visigoths[80].

It is however striking that the presbyter mentioned in the former passage is described as Fritigern's *conscius arcanorum et fidus*[81]. The message he delivers is even more striking: it insists upon Fritigern's desire to be the Emperor's *amicus* and *socius*; it proclaims his wish *popularium saevitiam mollire,* and *ad condiciones rei Romanae profuturas allicere.* He cannot achieve this purpose if the constant presence of Roman troops keeps irritating his followers and arousing their suspicion[82]. Prima facie at least it would appear such a message, delivered by a Christian priest, refers under the heading of *ad condiciones rei Romanae profuturas allicere* also to the intensification of the Christian faith among the Visigoths. Yet Ammianus refuses to take this seriously. For him Fritigern is *astu et ludificandi varietate nimium sollers*[83]. The tone here is clearly reminiscent of a passage of Eunapius, who likewise declines to be misled by false pretence on the Barbarians' part. Eunapius, however, is much more explicit: the false pretence in the case he discusses is a sham conversion of a group of Barbarians crossing the Danube[84].

77 Two of these chieftains were *Sueridus et Colias (Gothorum optimates) ... longe ante suscepti* (Amm. 31, 6, 1). They may have been admitted as early as 370.

78 Amm. 31, 12, 8.

79 *Ulfila* 75, cf. 157.

80 Amm. 30, 15, 5–6.

81 Ibid. 12, 9. 82 Ibid. 83 Ibid.

84 Eunapius, Frg. 55 (Müller, FHG IV 38–39), and see pp. 34f. with n. 8 above. As well noted by Schäferdiek, what these Goths crossing the Danube said of themselves is much more historically significant than the fraud imputed to them by the Pagan Eunapius.

The gullibility of Roman Emperors who were ready to treat barbarians with undeserved consideration just because they passed themselves off as Christians seems to have been a favoured theme in intellectual pagan circles. Ammianus may not be as explicit as Eunapius, but this is one of the points he appears to be insinuating. Valens could have saved both himself and the Empire a good deal of trouble, had he realised how untrustworthy such messages were before the Goths had ever crossed the Danube, and not now, when it was almost too late.

Since he appears to be reluctant on purpose to treat the Visigoths as true Christians, there is hardly any wonder that in the second passage mentioned above he refers only to the person who can deliver a message in Greek as a Christian[85]. All the rest are merely disguised Pagans, using the religious zeal of the Roman Emperor as a means of deceiving him.

As for the humble status of the priest and his companions, it must be remembered that Ammianus is only vaguely alluding to an inchoate Christian organization immediately after Fritigern's conversion. As Thompson himself points out, the *humiles* had been the basis of Christian organization before the crossing of the Danube. It remains to be guessed how the conversion of a Fritigern would affect the status of such people in the eyes of their own folksmen. Since the priest he sent to Valens clearly enjoyed his chief's favour, it may be conjectured that it caused a steep rise in their social standing, not entirely welcome to all. An outside observer like Ammianus may be excused for treating them according to their origin, as *humiles.*

4. The Account of Orosius

Since Ammianus does not disprove the version of Socrates, and St. Ambrose can hardly be used as a yardstick for the chronology of the conversion[86], it now remains to be shown that Socrates' account is corroborated by very powerful indications in other sources.

Orosius' testimony is entirely in line with that of Socrates, although the detail about the rift between Fritigern and Athanaric is absent from his version. Since no plausible claim can be made of a direct connection between them, it would appear that a true occurrence underlies both. His concise story deserves to be quoted in full[87]: *Gothi antea* (sc. before the battle of Hadrianopolis) *per legatos supplices poposcerunt, ut illis episcopi, a quibus regulam Christianae fidei*

85 See n. 80 above. 86 See n. 7 above.

87 Orosius 7, 33, 19. The testimony of Jordanes, *Getica* 25, 131 (MGH AA, V) derives from Orosius and is supplemented by items from Ammianus. Cassiodorus, *Historia Tripertita* 8, 13 (PL LXIX) goes back to his sources, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret. Isidore, *Historia Gothorum,* aera ccccxv–ccccxvi (MGH AA, XI pp. 270–271) cf. *Chron.* §§ 349–350 (ibid. 468–469), is based both on Orosius and on Cassiodorus.

discerent, mitterentur. Valens imperator exitiabili pravitate doctores Arriani dogmatis misit. Gothi primae fidei rudimento quod accepere tenuerunt. itaque iusto iudicio Dei ipsi eum vivum incenderunt, qui propter eum etiam mortui vitio erroris arsuri sunt.

The fact that Orosius' story is wanting in circumstantial detail does not impugn it as a false story. To dismiss it as a "naive attempt to account for the Arianism of the Visigoths"[88], would mean to employ again an argument which has been used to reject Socrates' account. But is it really necessary? Why do we have to assume that two different people, writing in two different parts of the Empire, lighted quite independently of each other upon the same device, to adduce a dubious etiology for a fact that seems to have been taken for granted by everybody else? The coincidence looks too remarkable to be credible.

Yet another possible objection to Orosius' story ought to be forestalled – more powerful, because it does not ascribe to him similar motives to those of Socrates. His story has a moral: the operation of divine justice is made manifest in Valens' death at the hands of those on whom he has inflicted eternal death by converting them to the wrong creed. Could not the story have been invented just for the purpose of advancing this moral? After all the raw material was there. When Orosius was writing the Visigoths were unquestionably Arian. Was it not an obvious and tempting procedure to connect it with Valens' notorious Arianism?

Of course, this is a possibility which may be upheld if Valens' responsibility for the conversion of the Visigoths is to be denied at all costs. Yet in order to insist that divine justice was wrought on Valens through his death at the hands of Arian barbarians, it was not automatically necessary to contend that he himself was the one who had converted them. All that was necessary was to insist on the crude and unsophisticated Arianism of the barbarians on the one hand, and on the cultivated and deliberate Arianism of the Emperor on the other[89]. The story about the Arian mission initiated by Valens has its point only if by the beginning of the fifth century it had become a well known fact that devout Emperors did attempt to convert to their own creed barbarians who had appealed to them for aid or for permission to cross the border.

This is precisely what the fragment of Eunapius, so easily brushed aside by Thompson, imports about the policy of Theodosius. It shows that sometime between 381 and 383, barbarians crossing the Danube were expected by the government to convert to Christianity. It is immaterial for our purposes if Eunapius' allegation that their conversion was a sham is to be taken seriously or not[90].

88 Thompson, *Ulfila* 86–87.

89 Thus e.g. Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei* 5, 5–11 (MGH AA Ia, 56–57). See also Socrates, ibid. 34, 9 (Hussey II 561).

90 See nn. 8 and 84 above.

Yet, if this fact alone is demonstrable on the basis of Orosius' account, it is sufficient to make a strong case for the acceptance of Socrates' story, since it has been shown to be otherwise credible and intrinsically consistent. The practice, if it existed, had to start sometime, and there is no reason why we should not ascribe it to Valens. Opportunity was there – a Visigothic faction applying for his support. Means were there – the settlement of the *Gothi Minores* in Moesia under the spiritual guidance of Ulfila, with a clergy versed in the Gothic tongue, prepared to do the job. And a further indication that the practice was in existence is forthcoming.

5. *The Christianity of Fritigern and the Visigothic Calendar*

The most powerful and impressive confirmation of Socrates' story would have been forthcoming in a fragment of a Gothic Calendar[91], had not its reading been made a subject of an unnecessary debate. An entry for October 23 refers to what seems to be an anniversary commemorating the death of many Gothic martyrs as well as the *archon* Fritigern (note that it is Fritigern himself, who is commemorated, not his martyrdom). The actual reading is as follows: *þize ana Gutþiudai mangize marytre* (sic) *jah Friþareikeikeis.* This has been translated by M. Heyne as: "(Gedenktag) der vielen Märtyrer für das Gotenvolk und des Friedrich"[92] (Friedrich being interpreted as a scribe's error for Fritigern).

Subsequently Löwe[93] has accounted with the highest degree of probability for the manner in which the error crept in. He has started from the strong likelihood of an underlying Greek version of the Calendar, where Fritigern's name will have occurred together with the title *archon.* The original Greek version will have read according to Löwe as follows: τῶν ἐν Γοτθίᾳ μαρτύρων πολλῶν καὶ τοῦ Φριτιγέρνου ἄρχοντος[94]. The Gothic for *archon* being *reiks*[95], the original Gothic translation is restored as *þize ana Gutþiudai managize martyre jah Friþigairnis reikis.* Since 'Fritigern' was not a common name, it was quite natural for a careless scribe to be influenced by the word *reiks* and substitute *Friþareiks* for *Friþagairns* (the repetition of the syllable *kei* is a clear indication of the procedure).

91 For the text see Stamm-Heyne, *Ulfilas oder die uns erhaltenen Denkmäler der gotischen Sprache,* in: Bibliothek der ältesten deutschen Literatur I (Paderborn 1913) 276; cf. W. Streitberg, *Die gotische Bibel*[6] (Heidelberg 1971) 472.

92 Quoted from Achelis, op. cit. (n. 35 above) 308–309.

93 Op. cit. (n. 55 above) 258–262.

94 This reconstruction is not actually given by Löwe, but is based upon his suggestions. Löwe prefers ἐν Γοτθίᾳ as the original behind *ana Gutþiudai* to ὑπὲρ τοῦ τῶν Γότθων ἔθνους which should have been sought according to Heyne and Achelis (cf. n. 92 above). See also Mansion, op. cit. 22.

95 See Ulfila's translation of *Matth.* 9, 18, 23; *Jo.* 12, 31; 16, 11, etc. For other references see the glossary in Streitberg, op. cit.

This explanation has the merit of effectively precluding the objections raised against the identification of *Friþareiks* as Fritigern. To start with it makes the error not only paleographically probable, but also historically understandable[96]. Then, it does not involve the arbitrary suggestion that Fritigern was a martyr, but it likewise does not necessitate (nor does it stem from) an equally arbitrary rejection of an entirely trustworthy tradition about Fritigern's Christianity[97]. Finally, it does not compel us to conjure up a Friedrich, who was important enough to be singled out from his fellow martyrs on the Calendar, but not important enough to be mentioned by any other extant source[98].

The reading on which Fritigern's identification on the Calendar is based is therefore not "astonishing and conjectural", and not without reason has it been "almost universally admitted"[99]. So long as it has not been convincingly refuted by an expert Germanic linguist, it would be advisable for the historian to accept it as one additional, highly significant piece of evidence concerning the role played by Fritigern in the conversion of his folksmen.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of the correct chronology of an event is an especially rewarding undertaking when the knowledge of an accurate date allows a deeper insight into the nature of a process.

In the present study an attempt has been made to restore the traditional dating of the conversion of the Visigoth's to Christianity – namely c. 372–376. It has been suggested that, although this dating is contested by E. A. Thompson on insufficient grounds, it tallies better with Thompson's own admirable characterization of Visigothic society in the second half of the 4th century. This society seems to have undergone a serious crisis in consequence of its contact with the superior civilization of the Roman world. Among the lower classes, the disintegration of the ancestral tribal religious institutions brought about a significant number of conversions, whereas those who did not adopt Christianity were too indifferent to be intolerant. Among the upper classes, religious attitudes seem to have been dictated mainly by political motives. Good relations with the Roman Empire entailed toleration towards converts to Christianity; hostility towards Rome might cause occasional measures of religious coercion.

96 Thompson, *Ulfila* 157, suggests without giving any detailed reason, that is "palaeographically improbable".

97 Thus already Achelis, op. cit. 331: "Und wenn Fritigern kein Märtyrer war, so konnte er am Ende als der erste christliche Gotenfürst in den Kalender kommen. Der Wortlaut selbst scheint hierzu zu überreden, da er zwischen den Märtyrern und dem Fritigern zu unterscheiden scheint."

98 Thompson, ibid.

99 Thompson, ibid.

In this setting the time was ripe for a mass conversion under the auspices of a leader, or leaders, who decided to adopt Christianity in order to gain Roman support against their opponents, or admission into the confines of the Empire. Commoners and *optimates* alike would follow the lead of their Kings, their *iudices,* or their more powerful *archontes*. Furthermore the conversion would be to the creed of the particular Emperor who had encouraged this measure. Socrates' story of how the Visigoths were converted into Arianism at Valens' instigation therefore makes perfect sense. Furthermore, far from being refuted by some of the sources adduced by Thompson, it seems to be corroborated by them.

The conversion of the Visigoths to Arianism had far-reaching consequences especially because immediately after Valens' death Theodosius finally opted for Catholicism. The Visigothic enclave within the Empire found itself separated from its environment by a barrier of religious creed. In the long run this barrier helped it to retain its special identity and its internal cohesion, whereas both adherence to paganism and conversion to Catholicism would have ended in complete assimilation[100]. This lesson was very soon learned by the leaders of other barbarian nations who sought settlement in Roman territories. Even those nations which, like the Burgundians and the Suebi, toyed with ancestral paganism or with Catholicism for a short period after their admission into Roman soil, were subsequently converted to Arianism, and generations were to pass before they followed the example of the Franks, and reconverted to Catholicism[101].

The conversion of the Franks directly to Catholicism therefore requires a special explanation which cannot be given without a detailed study. It may, however, be suggested as a basis for further analysis that this conversion took place at a time when there was no longer a Catholic Roman Emperor in the west, and hence no central political power towards which assimilated Barbarians could gravitate to the detriment of their traditional leadership. Under such circumstances the removal of religious barriers between a barbarian nation and its Gallo-Roman environment could only add to the power of its leader against its Arian opponents.

100 The basic weakness of the ancestral tribal paganism is borne out by the analysis of the *Passio S. Sabae,* pp. 36ff. above, see also p. 35 and n. 9 above.

101 As noted above (n. 10) the conversion of the Burgundians and the Suebi calls for a special treatment which I intend to undertake elsewhere.