

VISIGOTHIC SOCIETY OF THE 4TH CENTURY IN THE LIGHT
OF THE PASSION OF SAINT SABA THE GOTH*

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I

Towards the end of the first half of the 3rd century AD ancient sources begin to offer more and more information about the Goths and other Germanic tribes in the vicinity of the Black Sea. Those Germans came under little known circumstances from the southern coast of the Baltic¹ and in the Black Sea region they found themselves in a completely foreign ethnical and cultural environment, dominated by Sarmatian and Thracian peoples, as well as by the Hellenised and Romanised population of the Pontic cities. That necessarily exerted a deep influence on the newcomers, which is however a problem in itself and cannot be investigated here in detail². To the east of the Dniester lay the lands of the

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¹ The earliest history of the Goths, especially as regards their homelands and the circumstances of their migration from the Baltic to the Black Sea, has again been receiving much research in the last twenty years or so. Several contributions have played a special part in the discussion. Those are: C. WEIBULL, *Die Auswanderung der Goten aus Schweden*, Göteborg 1958; J. KMIECIŃSKI, *Zagadnienie tzw. kultury gocko-gepidzkiej na Pomorzu Wschodnim w okresie wczesnorzymskim*, Łódź 1962; J. SVENNUNG, *Jordanes und Scandia*, Stockholm 1967 (Acta Societatis Litterarum Humaniorum Regiae Upsaliensis XLIV 1967, fasc. 2A); G. LABUDA, *O wędrówce Gotów i Gepidów ze Skandynawii nad Morze Czarne*, in: *Liber Iosepho Kostrzewski octogenario a veneratoribus dicatus*, Wrocław 1968, pp. 213–236; N. WAGNER, *Getica*, Berlin 1967; R. HACHMANN, *Die Goten und Skandinavien*, Berlin 1970. For more information on the whole controversy see the article I wrote in connection with HACHMANN'S monograph: J. STRZELCZYK, *Nowa hipoteza o pochodzeniu Gotów*, *Studia Historica Slavo-Germanica* VII 1978, pp. 3–41. Cf. also IDEM, *O Gotach na ziemiach polskich*, *Zapiski Historyczne* XLIV 1979, fasc. 3, pp. 157–168 (in connection with J. CZARNECKI, *The Goths in Ancient Poland. A Study of the Historical Geography of the Oder-Vistula Region during the First Two Centuries of Our Era*, Miami 1975).

² Cf. G. VERNADSKY, *Der sarmatische Hintergrund der germanischen Völkerwanderung*, *Saeculum* II 1951, pp. 340–392, and various works by F. ALTHEIM, in particular his *Geschichte der Hunnen*, vol. I, Berlin 1959.

Ostrogoths, who are called Greuthungs by some authors; to the west of that river and all the way to the lower Danube lived the Visigoths, or Thervings. When emperor Aurelian (270–275) took the decision to evacuate Dacia, which had then been a Roman province for approximately a century and a half, the area fell into the unlimited power of the Visigoths and their related Germanic tribes the Taifals and the Gepids. However, one must not forget that alongside the Germans there were still natives in Dacia, both Romanised Dacians and, in places Roman conquest had not reached, the so-called free Dacians and people of Sarmatian origin.

Under Ermanaric, later shrouded in legend, the Ostrogoths created a vast political organisation resembling oriental despotic states by its nature and encompassing, at least in a loose tributary form, a number of Sarmatian, Germanic and even Slavic (East Slavic), Finnish and Baltic (Aistian) peoples. Meanwhile, in the period preceding the Hunnic invasion the Visigoths did not achieve anything similar, and their political system congealed at the tribal level. During the whole Dacian period they had no monarchy comparable to that of Ermanaric. Their land, which they themselves called “Gutthiuda”, meaning both the people of the (Visi-)Goths and the areas they inhabited, was divided into a number of small tribes (called *phylai* in Greek sources and maybe *kuni* by the Goths themselves), which only united sometimes depending on the changing political circumstances. The tribes were led by chieftains, variously referred to in Greek and Roman sources as *archontes*, *exarchoi* or *duces*. Besides the chieftain the sources mention “the mighty”, or the tribal aristocracy: *koryphaioi*, *phylarchoi*, *hegoumenoi*, *optimatoi*, *megistanes*, or *phylon hegemones*. The greatest and most dignified of the aristocratic clans was the house of the Balti which would later give rise to the dynasty of Visigothic kings (beginning with Alaric I, 395–410). But the beginnings of that clan are quite obscure; considering the lack of any positive evidence, it is difficult to say whether the important Visigothic personalities of the 4th century were already its members³.

In the 4th century the Visigothic political system had one peculiarity, the office of a “judge” (*iudex* in Latin sources, *dikastes* in Greek ones). We do not know the Gothic word for the office, but we do know it had precedence over the authority of the many chieftains and meant a leader of the confederated Gothic tribes.

Themistius, an author, rhetor, philosopher and politician of the Eastern Empire has in one of his *Orations* an interesting detail from the negotiations of the summer of 369 on the Danube (which was the border) between emperor Valens and the Gothic leader Athanaric. His account is reliable, because he was most likely an eye-witness to the negotiations. The Romans tried to address Athanaric as

³ R. WENSKUS, *Balthen*, in: *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, vol. II 1, Berlin–New York ²1980, pp. 13 f. The claim that a few Visigothic chieftains mentioned in 4th century sources were Balts was especially developed by H. WOLFRAM, *Gotische Studien. I. Das Richtertum Athanarichs*, *MIÖG* LXXXIII 1975, pp. 1–32.

basileus, but he supposedly replied that he would prefer the title of “judge” (*dikastes*), since it contains and assumes the concept of “wisdom” (*sophia*), whereas a king’s title only reflects power (*dynamis*)⁴.

The episode is not quite obvious and so it has invited many attempts at interpretation. Some scholars have been inclined to see in Athanaric’s words an expression of the modesty (if only tactical) of a barbarian ruler feeling respect in the face of the sacred or magical title of the Christian emperor. However, that interpretation does not seem correct, especially as in 369 the situation would not encourage the Goth to be either overly docile or modest. Actually Valens, who, as is known from other sources, did not know Greek, may have addressed Athanaric with the Latin word *rex* (king), not realising that among the Visigoths *reges* were minor dukes or tribal chieftains, and Athanaric as the confederate leader was not going to consider himself their equal. He was above them, although he was also one of them, having come from their ranks. Also later, when most of the Visigoths left him and he lost his office of judge, with only a small group of his tribesmen on his side (they were probably his fellow clan members), he became equal in position to the other *reges*⁵.

In either case both the Latin *rex* that Valens used and Themistius’ Greek translation *basileus* (the emperor’s own title) prove that in the eyes of the Romans Athanaric’s “judgeship” did not differ significantly from kingship. And yet at a closer look one can clearly see the differences between Athanaric and the later Alaric, to say nothing of Ermanaric the Ostrogoth. Differences show both in the way they took and held their respective dignities, and in the extent of their power. One probably became a judge through being appointed by the aristocrats. Many researchers suspect that in the 4th century (and maybe even in the 5th) the Visigoths had a popular assembly of all the free tribesmen; still, one must note that the sources do not support that conjecture. Popular assemblies at the level of a village, on the other hand, are confirmed by sources, including the source we shall in a moment investigate. However, in the second half of the 4th century village assemblies no longer played a major part, being undoubtedly a relic of the past.

And so it was in the hands of tribal aristocracy, of those optimates, *megistanes* or hegemon, as the ancient sources term them, that real power lay. In those turbulent times, when strong and effective authority was needed, it was they who appointed a “judge” from among themselves. Even the very name of the office, so resembling of the position of Israelite judges in the Old Testament, indicates

⁴ *Oratio X. Themistii Orationes quae supersunt*, ed. G. DOWNEY, vol. I, Leipzig 1965. For the problems of that author’s ideology and political ethics, cf. L.J. DALY, *The Mandarin and the Barbarian: The Response of Themistius to the Gothic Challenge*, *Historia* XXI 1972, pp. 351–379.

⁵ The most detailed account of Athanaric’s political and legal situation is to be found in WOLFRAM, *op. cit.* (n. 3). Cf. IDEM, *Athanaric the Visigoth – Monarchy or Judgeship. A Study in Comparative History*, *Journal of Medieval History* I 1975, pp. 259–278. Cf. also the works of E.A. THOMPSON, D. CLAUDE and A.R. KORSUNSKIJ cited below.

certain judicial functions; unfortunately that side of the Visigothic leadership did not interest the authors of our sources. It is less likely that the judge had any priestly or otherwise sacral duties. During the anti-Christian campaign, Athanaric had a wooden statue of a deity set on a cart and carried all around the country so that all could worship it⁶. This is, let us note, the only unquestionable evidence for pan-tribal cult among the Visigoths; however, Athanaric's role in this case is reduced to the organisational and repressive factor, and it is hard to see actual sacral functions here. The essence of "judgeship" had to be its military function: leading the troops in battle and co-ordinating the life of the tribe in times of peace. The authority behind the title was in no way despotic or dictatorial; in the decisive year 378, Athanaric's rival and opponent Fritigern could not even always get the Visigoths to accept his will.

There is much to suggest that the office of a judge was of limited duration. Athanaric's fate cannot in any way confirm that, since the reason why most of the tribe abandoned him was because he could not counter the Hunnic invasion, but no sources mention Fritigern in connection with war of 380, even though there is circumstantial evidence that he was still alive at that time. Apparently the Visigoths refrained from appointing judges after the victory at Adrianople.

Sources often, though as a rule incidentally, refer to Gothic "dukes", that is, chieftains of the smaller tribes. It seems that at least in some cases we can suspect that authority at this level was hereditary within families, houses or clans. One ancient author, Eunapius, stated clearly that Gothic chieftains were appointed "due to their dignity and descent"⁷. In *The Passion of Saint Saba* one such dukeling (given the Greek epithet *basiliskos*) by the name of Atharid travelled the country with his retinue, forcing Christians to forsake their faith or killing them. Information has been preserved of a Gothic "queen" called Gaatha, who collected the remains of twenty-six Christian martyrs burnt alive during the persecutions and transported them to Rome, leaving her son Arimir in power (perhaps only for the duration of her absence)⁸.

II

Compared to other Germanic tribes of the Migration Period, the Visigoths are privileged in the sense that many sources referring to them remain. And no

⁶ Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* VI 37, 13.

⁷ Eunapius fr. 60.

⁸ The episode has been preserved in Greek menologia and correctly edited and published by H. ACHELIS, *Der älteste deutsche Kalender*, ZNTW I 1900, pp. 308–335, at pp. 318 f. It is discussed in more or less detail in various contributions on the Visigothic society and Christianity in the 4th century, and in particular in the works of H. DELEHAYE, J. MANSION, K.D. SCHMIDT, E.A. THOMPSON, and D. CLAUDE cited below.

wonder, since they were the Empire's direct neighbours, separated from it only by the Danube, and they often crossed weapons with the Romans in imperial territory. The Ostrogoths, located much farther away from the Empire's border, left an incomparably weaker impression in ancient sources, even though there can be little doubt that their objective historical role during the period when they were an independent political entity, and before the Hunnic invasion, was considerably greater than that of the decentralised Visigoths. Compared to the other Germanic tribes, the Goths (meaning both branches of the tribe this time) were also lucky in that already in the first half of the 6th century they found their own historian in the person of great Cassiodorus himself, author of the tribe's history in twelve books⁹. Cassiodorus carefully "codified" their native tribal tradition for the greater glory of the Amali house ruling in Italy, combining it in the oddest ways with the "scholarly" tradition, and so to speak merging Gothic history with the history of the world. Neither the Vandals, nor the Burgundians, nor the Heruli, nor the Gepids produced a similar work, therefore obviously their history is only known from the accounts of "external" authors, and so much less thoroughly than the history of the Goths.

Of course that does not mean that the degree to which the latter is known satisfies a scholar's expectations. It was only of interest to ancient authors, not in itself, but inasmuch as it intertwined and dovetailed with that of the Roman state. Thus they were rather diligent in taking note of Gothic raids into Roman territory, and the names of barbarian chieftains and Roman emperors who defeated Gothic invaders or else were defeated by them; they also noted, with the exaggeration usual in such cases, how many fell dead or were captured. Owing to their accounts, supplemented with epigraphic information (especially from the provinces directly afflicted by the wars) and with coins, we are familiar with the "external" political history of the Goths, even if, as we suppose, there are in our knowledge some serious gaps. Still, what was their daily life like? What major occupations gave them sustenance? What were the material conditions in which they lived? What did they believe? How did they think? What were their relationships with the "natives", that is, the Dacian and Daco-Roman populations? "Traditional" historical sources offer no answers to those questions, or they only offer fragmentary and incidental ones, for the authors of our sources, including among them also Cassiodorus/Jordanes, were simply not interested in such matters. True, Rome had known authors such as Caesar and Tacitus, who inspected

⁹ Only preserved in the epitome written around 550 by the "Moesogoth" Jordanes (*De origine actibusque Getarum vel Getica*). Of recent literature on Jordanes, *Getica* and its relationship to Cassiodorus' lost work, I shall only cite: E. ZWOLSKI's paper *Uwagi o Jordanesie historyku Gotów*, *Studia Źródłoznawcze* XIII 1968, pp. 137–145; the Russian edition of *Getica* by E.C. SKARŽINSKOJ (*Jordan. O proischozhenii i dejanijach Getov*, Moskva 1960), with an extensive introduction and commentary; and the monographs by N. WAGNER (ch. I) and R. HACHMANN cited in n. 1 (ch. II, where among other things the author attempts to determine Jordanes' part in the preserved text).

the Germans in more depth and detail than their contemporaries; but when those two giants still lived and wrote, the Goths were as yet too insignificant and too distant from the Roman world to attract attention for longer than a moment. Later, when they came quite close, minds of Caesar's and Tacitus' calibre were no more, with the one exception of Ammianus Marcellinus...

At this point it would be fitting to offer the reader an extensive report on the research possibilities and achievements of related disciplines, which have considerably, and especially in recent times, broadened our knowledge of the "internal" history of the Goths and other tribes of the Migration Period. I mean particularly archaeology, which grants us insight into the material culture of the population of Dacia of those times, and among other boons lets us grasp the characteristics of cultural diversity of its several regions; combined with data obtained from literary sources, that helps us determine the tribes' territories and the dynamics of settlement. It also allows us, though so far to a rather modest extent, to learn of some symptoms of spiritual and social culture of the makers of the exquisite Sîntana de Mureş archaeological culture, the "Visigothic" equivalent and extension of the Chernyakhov culture of southern Ukraine. Actually, according to an increasingly widespread belief, both those archaeological cultures were multi-ethnic, meaning that they cannot be simply assigned to a single people, for example the Goths, but there is hardly any doubt that they reflect the "Gothic" period in the history of northern and western Black Sea region and are the product of peoples that were under the political and organisational hegemony of the Goths¹⁰. Another, and very promising way to the Gothic past is opened by linguistic research. And again it is the Visigoths who were lucky, as it is among them and for them that bishop Wulfila (Ulfilas) worked in the 4th century, making the first Germanic translation of the Bible, which is even partly preserved. Analysing the text of Wulfila's translation, researchers came to many conclusions as to the society the translation was for. Thus research of this type often sheds new light on the degree of Visigothic social development in the 4th century¹¹. I am not going to offer a detailed presen-

¹⁰ Literature on the Chernyakhov-Sîntana de Mureş archaeological culture is rich. I will cite only a few more recent examples pertaining directly to the Visigothic area: B. MITREA, *Die Goten an der unteren Donau – einige Probleme im III.–IV. Jahrhundert*, in: *Studia Gotica*, Stockholm 1972, pp. 81–94; I. IONIȚA, *Probleme der Sîntana de Mureş-Černjachovkultur auf dem Gebiete Rumâniens*, *ibid.*, pp. 95–104; G. DIACONU, *On the Socio-Economic Relations between Natives and Goths in Dacia*, in: *Relations between the Autochthonous Populations and the Migratory Populations on the Territory of Romania*, ed. M. CONSTANTINESCU, Ș. PASCU, P. DIACONU, București 1975, p. 67–75; I. IONIȚA, *The Social-Economic Structure of Society during the Goths' Migration in the Carpatho-Danubian Area*, *ibid.*, pp. 77–89; E.A. RIKMAN, *Etničeskaja istorija naselenija podnestrov'ja i privilegajuščego podunav'ja v pervykh vekach našej ery*, Moskva 1975.

¹¹ One can learn something of the possibilities, but also of the dangers, of such research from the discussion surrounding the conclusions of P. SCARDIGLI's book *Lingua e storia dei Goti*, Firenze 1964, especially after it was translated into German (*Die Goten. Sprache und Kultur*, München 1973). Cf. especially ch. VI, "Wulfila and the Spiritual Emancipation of the Gothic Language".

tation of the results of archaeological and linguistic research within the frames of our interest here, as that would require much more space than we have at our disposal. Instead, I would like to bring to the reader's attention a text almost unknown to Polish literature until now, which provides us with the most valuable information, relating as it does to the situation of common people, or free Gothic villagers and to an extent offering insight into their motivations, or in short: into the mentality of a common Visigoth of the 4th century.

III

By that I intend a short hagiographic text, anonymous as is usual with that genre, written in Greek in the eighth decade of the 4th century and entitled in manuscripts *The Passion of Saint Saba the Goth*. Its correct edition, based on two manuscripts (one Venetian from the 9th or 10th century, the other Roman from 912) was published in 1912 by Hippolyte DELEHAYE¹². It is only then that the text was noticed and appreciated in scholarship; since then it has acquired

From among the reviews especially critical of SCARDIGLI's undertaking, let me cite those by N. WAGNER, *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* LXXXII 1974, fasc. 2, pp. 65–69; H. BIRKHAN, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* XCVI 1974, fasc. 3, pp. 339–350; and E. STUTZ, *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* X 1975, pp. 184–191. Naturally criticising certain opinions is not the same as criticising the method itself; since texts of the Gothic language are extant, one finds semantic-linguistic arguments in many works on Gothic history.

¹² H. DELEHAYE, *Saints de Thrace et de Mésie*, AB XXXI 1912, pp. 161–300, with edition of *Passio S. Sabae Gothi* on pp. 215–221; description of the manuscripts, Venetian (*Marcianus gr.* 359; menologium for March and April; ff. 190–193^v) and Vatican (*Vat. gr.* 1660; menologium for April; ff. 205^v–211^v) on p. 224; on pp. 274–291 his dissertation *Martyrs de l'église de Gothie*. The text was first edited and published in *Acta Sanctorum*, April, II, pp. 966–968. A Latin translation based on the Venetian manuscript was published by Luigi LIPOMANO (*Vitae Sanctorum patrum*, vol. VII, Romae 1559, ff. 72–73^v). The Greek text was also published in: R. KNOPF, *Ausgewählte Märtyrerakten*, ed. G. KRÜGER, Tübingen 1929, pp. 119–124. Italian translation in: S. COLOMBO, *Atti dei Martiri. I^a serie: testi greci e latini tradotti con introduzione e note*, Torino 1928, pp. 292–300. Excerpts of value also in: K.D. SCHMIDT, *Die Bekehrung der Ostgermanen zum Christentum (Der ostgermanische Arianismus)*, Göttingen 1939, in nn. on pp. 220–222. E. FOLLIERI, *Saba Goto e Saba Stratelata*, AB LXXX 1962, pp. 249–307, investigated the mutual relationship and grounding in sources of the hagiographies of Saba the Goth and another Saba (or Sabbas), called Stratelates (= military commander), and demonstrated that the latter was fictional (the passion of Saba Stratelates, published on pp. 286–289 by FOLLIERI on the basis of a unique manuscript 254 from the monastery of St. John the Theologian on Patmos, partly made use of the passion of Saba the Goth). The value of her work is increased by the rich source material used, including calendars, descriptions of martyrdom, synaxaria, and hymns. Printed by FOLLIERI on pp. 280 ff., they greatly expand our knowledge of the extent of Saint Saba's cult. On p. 255, nn. 7 and 8, she lists the bibliographical data of the two above-mentioned manuscripts containing the passion of Saba the Goth. Especially noteworthy are the references to an Old Georgian version of *The Passion* (p. 252, n. 3), as well as an Old Church Slavonic one (p. 255, n. 8). The source in question is manuscript 198 of the Moscow Theological Academy, an early 16th century menologium for April. Petre Ș. NĂȘTUREL (cited in n. 13 below, p. 181, n. 17) refers to another Old Church Slavonic version of the text in a 15th century manuscript menologium of the Putna Monastery.

a considerable literature, either dedicated to it or investigating it in a broader context¹³. In the most general terms it could be said that its significance lies in offering additional valuable information regarding firstly the Christianisation of the Visigoths, and secondly, and that aspect will be particularly important for us here, the tribe's social history in the 4th century.

Saba (or Sabbas) was an indigenous Goth, and a zealous (today we would say, fanatical) Christian from a child. He was poor, but a free man. His faith was uncompromising. One day the Gothic aristocrats (*megistanes*) turned against the Christians and forced them to eat sacrificial meat offered to pagan gods. And this is the place in the text where we encounter the first detail immensely interesting from the sociological point of view. The village where Saba lived was inhabited by both pagans and Christians, the latter being a minority. As we can see, the bi-denominational community lived in peace, if the pagan villagers, apparently concerned for their Christian neighbours, decided to resort to this "pious deceit":

it occurred to some of the pagans in the village in which Saba lived to make the Christians who belonged to them eat publicly before the persecutors meat that had not been sacrificed in place of that which had, hoping thereby to preserve the innocence of their own people and at the same time to deceive the persecutors (3, 1)¹⁴.

The trick would have probably worked and we can suppose that most of the Christians would have opportunistically kept their beliefs secret in that way. However,

learning this, the blessed Saba not only himself refused to touch the forbidden meat but advanced into the midst of the gathering and bore witness, saying to everyone, "If anyone eats of that meat, this man cannot be a Christian", and he prevented them all from falling into the Devil's snare (3, 2).

¹³ J. MANSION, *Les origines du christianisme chez les Gots*, AB XXXIII 1914, pp. 5–30; J. ZEILLER, *Les origines chrétiennes dans les provinces danubiennes de l'Empire Romain*, Paris 1918 (Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome CXII); H. BOEHMER-ROMUNDT, *Ein neues Werk der Wulfila*, Neue Jahrb. VI 1903, pp. 272–288; SCHMIDT, *op. cit.* (n. 12); E.A. THOMPSON, *The Passio S. Sabae and Early Visigothic Society*, Historia IV 1955, pp. 331–338, reprinted as ch. III ("The Passion of St. Saba and Village Life") of THOMPSON'S book *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila*, Oxford 1966 (pp. 64–77). THOMPSON'S works are fundamental. A.R. KORSUNSKIJ, *O social'nom stroe vestgotov v IV v.*, VDI 1965, fasc. 3 (93), pp. 54–74; P.Ş. NĂSTUREL, *Les Actes de Saint Sabas le Goth (BHG³, 1607)*. *Histoire et archeologie*, RESE VII 1969, fasc. 1, pp. 175–185; Å. FRIDH, *Die Bekehrung der Westgoten zum Christentum*, in: *Studia Gotica*, Stockholm 1972, pp. 130–143; the works of Romanian archaeologists listed in n. 10; H. WOLFRAM, *Gotische Studien, II. Die terwingische Stammesverfassung und das Bibelgotische*, MIÖG LXXXIII 1975, pp. 289–324, and LXXXIV 1976, pp. 239–261, especially pp. 322–324 and 239 ff.; D. CLAUDE, *Adel, Kirche und Königtum im Westgotenreich*, Sigmaringen 1971, pp. 11 ff.

¹⁴ [Quotes from *The Passion* in the translation by P. HEATHER and John MATTHEWS (*The Goths in the Fourth Century*, Liverpool 1991).]

The pagan villagers who had initiated the trick saw only one solution: to banish Saba the “troublemaker” from the village. They apparently reasoned that otherwise the other Christians, encouraged or shamed by his example, would risk persecution. After a time, when the dangerous “interest” of the Gothic *megistanes* in Christian matters abated, Saba was allowed to return to the village.

But another trial of character awaited him. On that occasion the pagan villagers were even inclined to swear a false oath that there were no Christians in the village. “But Saba, again speaking out, came forward in the midst of their council and said, ‘Let no man swear on my account, for I am a Christian’” (3, 4).

Since Saba said so in the presence of the authorities, his pagan fellow villagers, acting in good faith, could do nothing except swear that he was the only one. Thus the anger of “the leader of the outrage” was all directed at the saint. He called Saba before him, and then

asked those who brought him forward whether he had anything among his possessions. When they replied, “Nothing except the clothes he wears”, the lawless one set him at nought and said, “Such a man can neither help nor harm us”, and with these words ordered him to be thrown outside (3, 5).

For the third time Christians were persecuted in Gothia shortly before Easter of 372. This time the extent and strength of the persecution were much greater. Saba went to another village to spend Easter Day with a priest called Gutthikas. We do not know his reasons. Maybe he would not celebrate in his village among his small-spirited co-religionists who had publicly repudiated their Christianity? While on his way, he had a vision: a mysterious stranger bid him turn back and seek presbyter Sansalas. In this way our source provides us with the names of two otherwise unknown Gothic priests and, perhaps even more importantly, reveals how dispersed the Christian minority in Gothia was. That Sansalas had fled persecution to the Roman Empire, but he wanted to spend Easter in his home country, so he returned. The two of them celebrated the holidays together. But

then on the third night after the festival, there came at the behest of the impious ones Atharidus, the son of Rothesteus of royal rank, with a gang of lawless bandits. He fell on the village, where he found the presbyter asleep in his house and had him tied up. Saba also he seized naked from his couch and likewise threw into bonds (4, 5).

We shall omit here the long description of the tortures inflicted on Saba by his persecutors, reported in detail by his hagiographer. They got nowhere with him of course; the saint bravely, and even recklessly reproached them with their crimes. From our perspective there is more interest in the little, marginal details which shed light on the feelings of solidarity among the poorer population of the Visigothic society, regardless of differences of creed. Namely when the weary torturers fell asleep, “a woman came up and set him [*scil.* Saba] free; she was a woman working at night to prepare food for the people in the house” (5, 3). She probably took

a risk by doing so, but we do not hear of the duke's men trying to take revenge on her for aiding a prisoner. Let us add that it is not known whether she was pagan or Christian. "Set free, Saba remained in the same place without fear, and joined the woman at her work" (*ibid.*), so that on the next day the torture continued.

Since it failed to yield the expected results, Atharid ordered Saba drowned. And again we find a curious detail: it would appear that presbyter Sansalas, though also captured and presumably tortured, was not to be put to death, even though as clergyman he was more of a threat to the pagans than Saba, a private layman. Responsibility was probably divided between them in that and no other way, not because of Saba's uncompromising and arrogant attitude, but because Sansalas was most likely not a Goth by birth, if we are to judge from his name. Scholars believe he could have come from Asia Minor, the same as the Gothic bishop Wulfila's parents¹⁵. That would seem to mean that in the eyes of his judges Sansalas' "crime" was lesser than Saba's, although technically the only charge was in each case professing the Christian religion. It was therefore decided that as a Goth who accepted Christianity, Saba offended the Gothic deities, and by doing so he could bring a disaster on his people. In other words, he became a traitor deserving of death, one who had himself stepped outside the sacred circle of his clan.

Yet before Saba could accede to martyrdom, he would once again have the occasion to demonstrate how wholeheartedly he desired it. Now the soldiers leading him to the place of his execution hesitated for a while. They

said to one another, "Come now, let us set free this fool. How will Atharidus ever find out?" But the blessed Saba said to them, "Why do you waste time talking nonsense and not do what you were told to? For I see what you cannot see: over there on the other side, standing in glory, the saints who have come to receive me" (7, 4).

Only then, on the 12th of April 372, at the age of 38, did the pure Saba die drowned in the Musaeus¹⁶ without granting his executioners the chance to avoid committing a crime they were apparently disinclined to commit out of simple human feelings.

The last chapter of the brief work on the saint's martyrdom summarised above reports what befell Saba's earthly remains after his death. His killers left the body unburied, but for five days neither dogs nor wild animals touched it. Later his fellow believers took care of it and the governor of the Roman province Scythia Minor, Iunius Soranus, carried it off to the Empire. Eventually it was sent to Cappadocia, a land that had its own connection to the beginnings of Gothic

¹⁵ Cf. R. LOEWE, *Gotische Namen in hagiographischen Texten, Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* XLVII 1923, pp. 407–433, at p. 431.

¹⁶ That is the river Buzău, a right tributary of the Seret. Outside of *The Passion* the name is unattested in literature. Cf. M. FLUSS, *Museus, RE* XVI 1 (1933), col. 822.

Christianity. In terms of form, *The Passion of Saint Saba*, that jewel of early Christian hagiography¹⁷, is a letter, a message to the Cappadocian Christians, who were apparently keen on learning some details from the life of their new saint and martyr.

For us the importance of the text lies not so much in its hagiographical layer, but rather in it being the first source allowing any insight into the life of the Germanic countryside, depicting a rural community of simple commoners, still free but already practically unable to influence the fate of their tribe in any degree.

Possibly the characteristic of Saba's rural Gothic community that the reader finds most striking is its peacefulness, a sharp contrast to what we know of the Goths' undaunted bellicosity, mentioned in ancient sources dozens of times. Only a few years after Saba's death a decisive war with the Romans would break out again, but, like a modern reporter's snapshot, the anonymous hagiographer's account captures a state of peace and stillness. One is reminded of Jordanes' "little Goths" (*Getica* 267), a group of Gothic emigrants in Roman territory in Moesia, who for two hundred years and well into the 6th century lived peaceful, pastoral, thoroughly "un-Gothic" lives there in the vicinity of Nicopolis. Those were an emigrant group; but here the similarly "un-Gothic" and peaceful way of life of Saint Saba's rural community, in the very heart of independent Gothia, makes one pause and think. Here the peaceful quality does not follow from those particular villagers being any different, but from the text's different social perspective, very rare for its times and all the more valuable to the historian for it.

The whole work discussed above, and especially its third chapter, constitutes, to borrow a phrase from the English historian E.A. THOMPSON, "a vivid representation of a clan society in action"¹⁸. There is nothing in the source of the village being managed by any single person, any chief or elder. Affairs are managed by the assembly, most likely made up of all the adult men. Saba, who is poor and as a Christian certainly in the minority, can present his views to the assembly unhindered and it does not seem that that body had any power to make members of the community submit to the majority view.

Then suddenly anti-Christian orders reach the village. They have been issued by "the Gothic mighty", called *megistanes* by the source. The role of executors and overseers, but not lawgivers, falls to people such as Atharid, who can be identified with chieftains of Gothic "small tribes" or districts, while the *megistanes* are probably members of the supreme council of Gothia, or the Visigothic Confederacy. It is characteristic that our source does not mention the "judge", or leader of the Gothic confederacy; in 372 the office was held by Athanaric. We know from other sources that Athanaric was actually the major instigator of the persecutions – or at any rate part of the later tradition is of that

¹⁷ DELEHAYE, *op. cit.* (n. 12), p. 291.

¹⁸ THOMPSON, *The Passio...* (n. 13), p. 332; IDEM, *The Visigoths...* (n. 13), p. 67.

opinion¹⁹. (The notion that Athanaric and Atharid were in fact the same person has been abandoned in more recent scholarship, and correctly, I am inclined to think.) However, distinguishing between levels of responsibility for the persecutions was not among the intentions of the author of *The Passion*, focused as he was on the circumstances directly relating to Saint Saba.

The countryside is tolerant. It seems that the fact that Saba and some other villagers professed Christianity did not trouble the others. E.A. THOMPSON believes that the saint was exiled from the village, because he refused to take part in the ritual feast, which offended pagan deities and excluded the refuser from the community. That does not seem right, for in that case, why would he be soon allowed to come back? Why were the elders of the village willing to perjure themselves for the sake of the Christians? Neither does the source, contrary to what THOMPSON claims, allow the conclusion that in the end the village abandoned Saba to his fate without trying to help him any further. Even if we ignore the fact that Atharid's retainers used brute force and were undoubtedly well armed, Saba's final capture and death occurred far away from his home village, so we do not know if his compatriots even knew what was happening to him. There is even the question of whether the persecutors did not make a point of waiting until the recalcitrant Christian was away from the friendly community to do away with him. No! The villagers' response betrays, on the one hand, the signs of rural solidarity among peaceful and probably in most cases indigent farmers, and on the other, resentment towards the aristocrats, perceived as armed strangers. And then there is one more thing it betrays: helplessness, the feeling of not being able to oppose the will of the tribe's leaders. That is the origin of cunctatory tactics, very common in rural areas and not devoid of pragmatic sense; the attitude of procrastinating and buying time or, to call a spade a spade, of sabotaging orders unpleasant to the community. "Democracy within the village but nothing that could be called democracy in the relations between the village and the central authority"; "a community in which fanaticism was confined to the powerful, and humanity to the humble"; such, as THOMPSON²⁰ aptly observes, were the fundamental characteristics of the Visigothic society that we can now investigate in somewhat more depth than is usually possible when studying that era, thanks to *The Passion of Saint Saba*.

IV

In order to understand the ideological and political background of the events of 372, one must briefly look into the early history of Christianity in the land of the Goths and into the events of previous years on the Danube front.

¹⁹ Among others, Socrates Scholasticus, Epiphanius and Isidore of Seville.

²⁰ THOMPSON, *The Visigoths...* (n. 13), pp. 74 and 77.

In the 70's of the 3rd century, when the Goths were entering Dacia in the wake of the withdrawing legions of emperor Aurelian, it was a pagan country; both the so-called autochthonous Dacians, and the Daco-Roman population which remained there after the evacuation, especially in the south, were still mostly pagan. Various religious cults were represented in Roman Dacia, but our source material conspicuously lacks any confirmed information regarding Christian cult²¹. Only in the 4th century do we find any clearer symptoms of Christianity penetrating into Dacia, evidenced by artefacts such as tombstones, sepulchral terracotta lamps, gems engraved with Christian imagery (e.g. the motif of the Good Shepherd) and inscribed with the letters XP (= Christ); let us note, however, following THOMPSON²², that all those findings come from areas of intensive Roman settlement. None such objects, on the other hand, have been discovered in Wallachia, Moldavia, Besarabia or the region between the Danube and the Tisa, which the Romans never reached. This means that Christian influence was limited to Romanised borderland and initially did not extend to the Visigoths themselves, or to other barbarian tribes. That territorial limitation of archaeologically perceptible traces of Christian penetration into 4th century Gothia is a good reason to be slightly more sceptical than has been the rule about the role played in that process by Christian captives from the Empire held by the Goths, although actual source material does exist confirming that captives were active in it. In particular, the early Gothic Christians (as well as the Armenian ones) had especially close connections to the Cappadocian Church, which was then one of the strongest intellectual and ecclesiastical centres. That was reflected in such facts, among others, as the Cappadocian Church trying to obtain Saint Saba's relics and description of his martyrdom (*The Passion* and mentions in Saint Basil's letters), the Cappadocian descent of Wulfila's parents, or the names of certain early Christians in Gothia pointing to Asia Minor.

In his treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*, written between 319 and 321, Saint Athanasius listed the Goths among those barbarian peoples that had been reached by the words of the Gospel²³. Naturally we do not know whether the

²¹ A short summary of the results of archaeological research on the very beginnings of Christianity in Dacia may be found in THOMPSON, *The Visigoths...* (n. 13), pp. 78 ff. (with references to earlier works of Romanian archaeologists). A new treatment of the question seems to be an urgent desideratum of scholarship. From among the more recent publications, cf. I.H. CÎMPEANU, *Das Grabfeld aus dem 4. Jh. u.Z. von Pălatca (Kr. Cluj)*, Dacia (n.s.) XX 1976, pp. 23–36 (a stamp with the sign of the cross); E. LOZOVAN, *Dacia Sacra*, History of Religions VII 1968, pp. 209–243. As for the question of the interpretation of burials within the Chernyakhov culture with a view to determine the beliefs of its inhabitants, cf. E.A. SYMONOVIČ, *O kultovych predstavlenijach naselenija jugo-zapadnych oblastej SSSR v pozdneantičnyj period*, Sovetskaja Archeologija 1978, fasc. 2, pp. 105–116, as well as RIKMAN's book cited in n. 10 above.

²² THOMPSON, *The Visigoths...* (n. 13), p. 79.

²³ *Oratio de incarnatione Verbi*, I 51, PG XXV, Paris 1857, col. 188.

Alexandrian bishop meant the Visigoths, or perhaps the Crimean Goths. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 there was a certain Theophilus, a bishop from Gothia; in his case scholarship seems rather to come to the conclusion that he was active in the Gothia on the Danube, although the Crimean possibility cannot be wholly discounted either²⁴. The Arian historian Philostorgius (368–433) did state that the first Visigothic bishop was Wulfila²⁵, but he could have meant the first bishop of the Arian church.

One characteristic feature of Gothic Christianity is its diversity. There were within the Christian diaspora in Gothia at least three currents: Catholic, Arian and Audian. The latter was never more than an episode, although its founder, Audius, a Syrian by birth, exiled by Constantius II to Scythia Minor, supposedly converted many Visigoths to his form of the creed, and even founded monasteries and congregations²⁶. In 341 at the synod in Antioch Wulfila was appointed the bishop for the Visigoths; it is impossible to determine unambiguously whether his jurisdiction included Christians of non-Gothic origin living in Gothia. He remained at that post for seven years. In 348 the first persecutions of Christians took place among the Goths, supposedly inspired by an unnamed *inreligiosus et sacrilegus iudex*²⁷. It seems doubtful if he could be already at that date Athanaric, who would become the “judge” later on²⁸. During that wave of persecutions three other saints were martyred by drowning, Inna, Rimma and Pinna, but before they died, they managed to convert many barbarians. Seven years after their deaths a certain otherwise unknown bishop by name of Godda collected their earthly remains, personally transferred them to some (unnamed) place in Gothia, and buried there. Later he again carried them to the port of Haliscus (unidentified). Since the date of their passion was not known, the Church celebrated the date of the ultimate transfer of their bodies²⁹. THOMPSON’s argument, according to which the martyrdom of Saints Inna, Rimma and Pinna took place in the winter of

²⁴ The issue was thoroughly analysed in A.A. VASILIEV, *The Goths in the Crimea*, Cambridge, Mass. 1936, pp. 11 ff., but the author avoided expressing a final opinion of his own.

²⁵ His *Church History*, a continuation of the work of Eusebius of Caesarea, has only been preserved in epitome in Photius. Critical edition: J. BIDEZ, Berlin 1913. Book II, ch. 5.

²⁶ The most complete account of Audianism among the Goths is to be found in SCHMIDT, *op. cit.* (n. 12), pp. 228–230.

²⁷ So in the fundamental source for Wulfila’s life and work, a treatise by Auxentius, an Arian bishop of Dorostorum (modern Silistra) and Wulfila’s disciple, preserved in the form of an extensive gloss on the margin of a manuscript in Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, *Cod. Lat.* 8907, ff. 304–308. Best edition in: *Die gotische Bibel*, ed. W. STREITBERG, part I, Darmstadt 1960, pp. XIV–XIX.

²⁸ Cf. the arguments in the works of WOLFRAM and THOMPSON.

²⁹ The text of the relevant *Passion* has been preserved in fragments in a menologium for June, a manuscript of BN in Paris catalogued as *gr. 1488*, 11th century hand, ff. 157 f. Edition: DELEHAYE, *op. cit.* (n. 12), pp. 215 f. Cf. E.A. THOMPSON, *Der gotische Bischof Goddas*, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* LXXXVI 1955–1956, fasc. 4, pp. 275–278, reprinted as appendix 3 in IDEM, *The Visigoths...*, pp. 161–165.

347/348, and the transfer of their remains in 354, seems probable. It is impossible to say for certain whether Godda was a Catholic or an Arian bishop, but the former seems more likely in that Wulfila, as noted above, was considered the first Arian bishop in the land of the Goths. If, however, a separate bishopric was created for Catholics in Gothia as early as that, we may consider that an indirect indication that even in the first half of the 4th century their numbers had to be quite high. The later fate of that presumed only Visigothic bishopric until the time Liuvigild reigned in Spain (568–586)³⁰ are completely unknown to us.

The role Wulfila himself had to play in Visigothic Christianisation has in recent scholarship a more realistic form than in most older literature, which uncritically saw him as the “apostle of the Goths”³¹. Actually Wulfila did not have any considerable influence on the Christianisation of the greater part of the tribe. Personally affected by persecutions in 348 (as implied by Auxentius’ term *confessor*³²) with a group of fellow Christians he left Gothia for the Empire. Given a warm welcome by emperor Constantius II, the refugees settled at the feet of Mount Haemus near Nicopolis in the province of Moesia Inferior, so giving rise to the *Goti minores* whose existence is still attested in Jordanes two centuries later³³. It is probably there that Wulfila worked on his immortal translation and so lay the foundations for Gothic literature³⁴.

The problem of whether the “little Goths” and Wulfila in any way affected their compatriots in the independent Gothia proper, and what role they had to play in the growth of Christianity there, is among the more difficult in the early Gothic history and it does not seem that unambiguous conclusions are possible in this respect, as sources are few and extremely unreliable³⁵. According to Socrates Scholasticus Wulfila undertook missionary work among the Goths to the north

³⁰ THOMPSON, *The Visigoths...* (n. 13), p. 165.

³¹ Cf. the literature listed in n. 11, and P. SCARDIGLI’S work cited in n. 13. Also P. SCARDIGLI, *La conversione dei Goti al cristianesimo*, in: *La conversione al cristianesimo nell’Europa dell’alto medioevo*, Spoleto 1967 (Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’alto medioevo XIV), pp. 47–86, where on pp. 49–57 there is an useful list of almost all sources pertaining to the Christianisation of the Goths. For Wulfila’s personality cf. A. LIPPOLD, *Ulfila*, *RE IX A*, 1 (1961), coll. 512–531. An interesting perspective can be found in K. SCHÄFERDIEK, *Der germanische Arianismus. Erwägungen zum geschichtlichen Verständnis*, in: *Miscellanea Historiae Ecclesiasticae III, Colloque de Cambridge 1968*, Louvain 1970, pp. 71–83; M. SIMONETTI, *Arianesimo latino*, *StudMed* (s. III) VIII 1967, fasc. 2, pp. 663–744; H. KUHN, *Die gotische Mission. Gedanken zur germanischen Bekehrungsgeschichte*, *Saeculum XXVII* 1976, pp. 50–65 (with no scholarly apparatus).

³² Cf. n. 27.

³³ *Getica* 267.

³⁴ A. A. LEONT’EV, *K probleme autorstva „vul’filianskogo” perevoda*, in: *Problemy sravnitel’noj filologii. Sbornik statej k 70-letiju... V.M. Žirmunskogo*, Moskva–Leningrad 1964, pp. 271–276, questioned Wulfila’s part in the Gothic translation of the Bible, but his attempt has not been recognised by wider scholarship.

³⁵ Cf. LIPPOLD, *op. cit.* (n. 31), col. 519.

of the Danube after the tribal chieftain Fritigern, out of gratitude for the aid he received from emperor Valens in the civil war against Athanaric, leaned towards the Arian faith, confessed by the emperor³⁶, and asked to have religious teachers sent to Gothia who could speak Gothic³⁷.

Either way, the penetration of Christianity into the Gothic realm went on, although, and it needs to be clearly stated, their Christianisation never acquired impressive proportions in the period before the Huns invaded, and most of the tribe moved into the territory of the Empire under Fritigern. A radical change only came in the eighth decade of the 4th century, when the civil war between Athanaric and Fritigern made the latter enter into an open alliance with the Romans, and actively support Christianity.

Athanaric, the leader (*iudex*) of the confederacy of Visigothic tribes (according to the tempting if somewhat risky claim put forward by WOLFRAM³⁸, himself a Balt and a descendant and heir of Ariaric and Aoric, both enemies of Constantine the Great), was without any doubt an outstanding personality. He was conservative in aiming for political and cultural independence from the Romans. If we discount incidents, peace with Rome lasted from 332 until 367, when emperor Valens started a preventive war in Gothic territory, which would continue for three years. Athanaric proved a seasoned tactician; the war went on with varying success until in 369 Valens and Athanaric met aboard a ship anchored in the middle of the Danube (as Athanaric had supposedly once sworn that he would never set foot in the Roman Empire³⁹). The treatise they agreed to took off the Visigoths the status of *foederati* they had formally held until then. Soon after, Athanaric was opposed by Fritigern's faction, described by László VÁRADY, with clear exaggeration, as "a democratic 'people's party', aiming in its foreign policy at even closer relations with the Romans, Romanisation and accordingly pro-Arian on the ideological plane"⁴⁰. VÁRADY would like to see Athanaric's policy as not so much anti-Christian in general as anti-Arian. That might indeed explain why Athanaric, after Fritigern's faction defeated him, was welcomed with honours in 381 in Constantinople by the *Catholic* Theodosius I⁴¹, when earlier, in the face of the Hunnic onslaught, when the *Arian* Valens was emperor, Athanaric did not seek asylum in the Empire⁴².

³⁶ *Hist. Eccl.* IV 33.

³⁷ Orosius VII 33, 19; Jordanes, *Get.* 131.

³⁸ Cf. n. 3.

³⁹ Amm. XXVII 5, 9. WOLFRAM, *op. cit.* (n. 3), has a convincing interpretation of Athanaric's oath.

⁴⁰ L. VÁRADY, *Das letzte Jahrhundert Pannoniens (376–476)*, Budapest 1969, p. 27.

⁴¹ That event, noted in several contemporary sources, has recently been discussed by H. WOLFRAM, *op. cit.* (n. 3).

⁴² VÁRADY, *loc. cit.* (n. 40).

All dies [*scil.* the honours offered Athanaric] tat Theodosius nicht allein, um die Sympathien der Gothen zu gewinnen, sonder auch, weil er Athanarichs Antiarianismus zu schätzen wusste. Aufgrund einer identischen gesellschaftlichen "Parteinahme" begegneten sich auf diese Art der glaubenseifrige orthodoxe Christ und der antiarianische Heide auf einer gemeinsamen Plattform.

Unfortunately, as is often the case, the Hungarian scholar's construct finds no confirmation in the facts, because Athanaric in his "state" acted with equal ruthlessness against Arians and Catholics, and additionally, seeing how the Arians' own tradition has largely been lost, we mostly have at our disposal testimonies of persecutions aimed at Catholics.

The Passion of Saint Saba discussed here is the primary source on the persecution of Christians in Gothia between the years 369 and 372, but there are a few others. In a preserved fragment of a Gothic Arian calendar⁴³ under the 29th of October the following commemoration is listed:

gaminthi marytre thize bi Werekam papan jah Batwin bilaif.
aikklesjons fullaizos ana Gutthiudai gabrannidai.

According to R. LOEWE, the translation should run:

Es blieb das Andenken an die Märtyrer, die sich um die Priester Wereka und Batwins geschart hatten. In einer vollen Kirche wurden sie im Gotenlande verbrannt⁴⁴.

Luckily the testimony of the Gothic calendar is confirmed and greatly expanded by a Greek synaxarium⁴⁵, where under the 26th of March there is, as is suspected, a fragment of an otherwise lost *Passion* of twenty-six martyrs listed by name, led by the presbyters Bathouses and Ouercas, burnt down by pagans under the emperors Valentinian, Valens and Gratian. The source even gives the name of the Gothic chieftain who burnt the church; he was called Winguric. The remains of the victims were then collected by a "queen (*basilissa*) of the Gothic people" by name of Gaatha, a Catholic Christian. She left her "kingdom" to her son Arimerius (or Arimir) and travelled to the Empire accompanied by her daughter Dulcilla (which is a Latin name) and a group of believers (of whom one, Vella,

⁴³ Preserved together with fragments of a Gothic translation of the Bible in a Milan palimpsest (*Ambrosianus A*, Sign. S. 36 parte superiore). In DELEHAYE'S opinion the hand of the calendar indicates the 6th century. Edited several times, including by DELEHAYE (cf. n. 12), p. 276 (with commentary).

⁴⁴ R. LOEWE, *Der gotische Kalender*, Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur LIX 1922, pp. 245–290, at pp. 248 f.

⁴⁵ *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*. Edited and published by H. ACHELIS, *op. cit.* (n. 8), and by H. DELEHAYE, *op. cit.* (n. 12), p. 279. The text of the Gothic calendar and the Greek passion fragment also in SCHMIDT, *op. cit.* (n. 12), pp. 224 f., nn. 4 f. It is often emphasised that the calendar was certainly Arian, and the synaxarium, Catholic, and if two sources so different as to content and ideology complement each other about the martyrs, that implies their reliability.

is mentioned by name). Gaatha returned to her country, while Dulcilla took the relics to Cyzicus. Vella, who went back with Gaatha, was stoned by the Goths, whereas Dulcilla died later of natural causes⁴⁶. It is probably around the same time that Saint Nicetas (Catholic and Goth) fell victim to persecution, even though the “description” of his martyrdom is exceptionally misleading and almost devoid of any historical content⁴⁷. Isidore of Seville reports that at Adrianople in 378 the Goths encountered some fellow tribesmen “previously exiled from their homeland because of their faith” and tried to convince them to fight the Romans together. When they were refused, they killed some, while others ran off into the mountains and other inaccessible places, where they persevered not only in their Catholicism, but also in their loyalty towards the Romans⁴⁸.

Germain MORIN was inclined to connect to the wave of persecutions during Athanaric’s rule also the death of the three martyrs called Hildaevora (or Hilda and Evora), Uihila (or Iuhila), and Theogenes, only known from an anonymous homily dedicated to them and preserved in three manuscripts: from the Vatican Library (*Lat.* 3836, f. 172^v–174^v), from Monte Cassino and from Florence⁴⁹. Unfortunately, the text gives us almost nothing on which to base the time and location of that event. The only possible clue is the sentence: “Gloriosa etenim devotio martyrum nec adversantium minacia pertimescit, nec avarica rabie perturbatur”. The reading *avarica* is to be found in the Monte Cassino manuscript, while the Vatican simply reads *barbarica*. Even if, following MORIN, we keep *avarica* as *lectio difficilior*, we will not be much closer to discovering the origins of the sermon. Even if the Theogenes from the text could be identified with the man of the same name, who according to menologia and synaxaria was burnt alive, just as those three martyrs were; and even if in a Neapolitan calendar under the 4th of October there was the celebration of *P(assio) s(ancti) Theogenis*, the chance that they were Goths contemporary with Athanaric does not seem any greater than that they were among the many Catholics persecuted in the Vandal state.

Still, even if we give up on that source as most unreliable, we must observe that the anti-Christian campaign launched and briskly conducted by Athanaric had an unusual range for its times. Let us hasten to add that the events rang an echo throughout contemporary Christian literature; they came up in Ambrosius

⁴⁶ Cf. THOMPSON, *The Visigoths...* (n. 13), appendix 2: *Gaatha*, pp. 159 f.

⁴⁷ *Passio S. Nicetae* was published by DELEHAYE, *op. cit.* (n. 12), pp. 209–215. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 281 ff. His work received an appendix in the form of *Note de M.D. Serruys sur la chronologie de la Passion de S. Nicetas* (pp. 292–294).

⁴⁸ *Hist. Goth.* 10 (PL LXXXIII 1061).

⁴⁹ G. MORIN, *Un groupe inconnu de martyrs goths dans un sermon anonyme d'origine barbare*, HJ LII 1932, pp. 178–184.

(*Exp. ev. Luc.* II 37)⁵⁰, Augustine (*De civ. Dei* XVIII 52)⁵¹, and Jerome (*Chron.* ad a. 373)⁵².

In the light of the above discussion Athanaric's intentions look clear enough. The number of followers and supporters of Christianity among the Goths was continually on the increase. It included, not only poor people such as St. Saba, but also, as demonstrated by "queen" Gaatha's example, members of the Visigothic higher classes. Just as it did somewhat earlier in the Roman Empire, and for instance a few centuries later in Slavic lands, the new religion stood in opposition to the existing Visigothic social order. Even without Christianity, that order was in the 4th century very shaky: the society was at about the same stage of development as that of the Franks towards the end of the 5th century, that is, clan structures were losing ever more importance, and monarchy and the "normal" process of the forming of a class society were looming in the distance. (That development was then arrested by the Hunnic invasion, the tribe crossing into Roman territory, permanent war with the Romans and further migrations to Gaul and Spain, reinforcing the clan factor to a degree, and later on resulting in a monarchy based on rules different from those that applied in Dacia, or in the *Heerkönigtum*.) Internal factors combined with the external threat that was Rome and with growing anti-Roman sentiments caused by the course of the war of the years 369 to 372. The ruling circles in Gothia began to see Christians, regardless of orientation, not merely as an "anti-social" element, standing so to speak outside the tribal and cultic community, but also as a Roman agency. While certainly not all Christians in Gothia were automatically agents or even sympathisers of Roman authority (after all, a mere few years later most of the tribe converted and that did not turn them into friends of Rome), in the case of many of them suspicions of Roman sympathies were hardly exaggerated. Finally it is possible that the aristocratic oligarchy represented by Athanaric, unconsciously following patterns of behaviour so well tested in another place and time, wanted to artificially lay the blame on the alienated Christians. We could also add that resentment and even hatred towards the Romans and the Roman emperor are also listed as reasons behind the persecutions in Gothia under Athanaric by contemporary authors (Epiphanius) as well as slightly later ones (Socrates). Saba and the other Gothic martyrs were scapegoats: "the *megistanes*, when they persecuted the Christians, were punishing others for bringing about a situation which they themselves had involuntarily created"⁵³.

⁵⁰ *PL* XV 1565.

⁵¹ Although the persecutor king remains nameless.

⁵² Ed. R. HELM, Berlin ²1956 (*Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte*, vol. XLVII).

⁵³ THOMPSON, *The Visigoths...* (n. 13), pp. 101 f.

Regardless of who the author of *The Passion* was, and he was more likely Greek and not a Goth, the work seems very close to the events it recounts, not just in time or space⁵⁴, but also in its ideas. It represents the current, so difficult to capture for a historian, of ideological opposition to the pagan thought that was dominant in 4th century Dacia, as well as to the new social order which was then gradually getting the upper hand in the Visigothic society, pushing the masses of Gothic free population into insignificance (and presumably in part into economic degradation).

⁵⁴ In the debate over the authorship of *The Passion* special roles fall to presbyter Sansalas, Saba's companion in misery, who apparently lived through the persecution wave of 369–372 and remained closely connected to the Roman Church; and to the governor of Scythia Minor, Iunius Soranus. Letters 155, 164 and 165 of Saint Basil the Great are of particular use in attempts to find the answer. For the most comprehensive analysis of the question, see J. MANSION, *op. cit.* (n. 13), and especially pp. 12 ff. Cf. already DELEHAYE, *op. cit.* (n. 12), pp. 288 ff.