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VISIGOTHS AND ROMANS AFTER 410

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*“et post finem annorum foederabuntur
filiaque regis austri veniet ad regem aquilonis facere amicitiam”*
Daniel 11: 6

Abstract: In 410, the Roman Empire was shaken to its core after Rome was sacked by the Visigoths. The Barbarian attacks and the emergence of the usurpers created a severe crisis in the Western Roman Empire. The study of contemporary authors reveals that the crisis engendered a change in attitudes. For the Empire to be reconstructed, the traditional Roman, anti-barbarian attitude had to be changed, and living together and cooperating with the Goths was now a must. The change in attitude can be detected in Orosius’ work, a formerly anti-barbarian author who places Athaulf’s speech at Narbonne in the centre. The marriage of the Visigoth king with Galla Placidia (414), the Romanization of the Goths, their imperial service, and their new relationship with Romans as described in the speech is all a solid basis for a reestablishment of Goth-Roman relations and the creation of a new federal agreement, which actually took place in 418.

Keywords: Goths, Romans, 410-418, Orosius, Olympiodorus, Rutilius Namatianus, Galla Placidia, Athaulf, speech at Narbonne, *foedus*.

In August 410 the Visigoths sacked Rome. This single event shook the Roman Empire and crushed the belief that the city was invincible and eternal. Immediate reaction was not far behind in letters by Hieronymus or homilies by Augustine.¹ Both church fathers influenced greatly Orosius, a priest from Hispania who met them in 413/414, in Bethlehem and Hippo, respectively. Orosius also mentions that he started his work on the history of the world from its creation to 416, following the advice of Augustine’s.²

In the present study, I primarily focus on Book 7 by Orosius, with special attention to the last chapters documenting events between 410 and 416. These sections are valuable not only from the point of view of the development of Roman-Gothic relationships, but also because they display the independent

¹ Hieron. *Ezech.* III 79-80; *Ep.* 127. Augustine addresses African believers five times between September 410 and the end of 412.

² *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII.*

opinion of the author on problems of his time. I am also going to use other contemporary authors: the poetic travel story by Rutilius Namatianus who was of Gallic origin³ and some extracts by Olympiodorus who can be considered to be the most reliable source of the period among Greek authors.⁴ Finally, I also study the inscriptions of contorniate medals issued in the same period.⁵

In his Book 7, Orosius first sets out to catalogue empires. Four great empires exist for him: Babylonia, Macedonia, Carthage and Rome.⁶ He describes briefly some events in Ancient Rome starting with the death of Augustus. In Chapter 40 he introduces year 410 when Goths, led by Alaric, sacked Rome. He mentions that the daughter of Theodosius and half-sister of Emperor Honorius, Galla Placidia was kidnapped and taken away by the Goths.⁷ He concludes the chapter with a remark about the future, referring to Athaulf, heir to Alaric who married Placidia in 414 in Gaul: *quasi eam diuino iudicio uelut speciale pignus obsidem Roma tradiderit, ita iuncta potentissimo barbari regis coniugio multo reipublicae commodo fuit.*⁸ This remark is especially interesting as it contradicts the anti-barbaric attitude amply manifested by and characteristic of Orosius, documented by several researchers.⁹

Chapters 41 and 42 paint a detailed picture of the state of the Empire. The two major upheavals in the period were the migration of Barbaric peoples (Huns, Germans and Alans) and, in connection with this, the appearance of the *usurpators*. In the Western territories of the empire, it caused a major problem that on the last day of December 406 Vandals, Alans, Suebi and Burgundians crossed the frontier on the Rhine. They had been ravaging Gaul for two years, and, from 409, Hispanic provinces, too. The other threat was posed by the Visigoths who had been residing within the Empire since 376. The battle of 378 at Hadrianopolis, and the sacking of Rome in 410 constituted two blows to the Empire that were interpreted by the contemporaries as the end of an era.

³ A Roman dignitary of high rank. He travelled from Rome to Gaul in 417 where his native land and his estate were being destroyed by Goths. Addressing his friend Venerius Rufus, he documented this journey under the title *De reditu suo*. There are only fragments left of this book.

⁴ Blockley 1981, 27-47.

⁵ Minted in the 4th-5th centuries, contorniate medals were similar to *sestertii* in size and were named after their characteristic edge. Approximately a hundred medals survive till today. See also Alföldi 1942-1943.

⁶ Orosius detaches himself from the list of empires determined by the predecessors. Roman authors Aemilius Sura and Pompeius Trogus (Justinus) mention the following empires Assyria, Media, Persia, Macedonia and Rome. See also: Alonso Núñez 1993, 197-213. More recently on Orosius: Havas 2011, 320-325.

⁷ On Placidia see: Jones, Martindale 1980 (PLRE II.) 888-889; Sirago 1996.

⁸ Oros. VII 40, 2. On Athaulf see: Jones, Martindale 1980 (PLRE II.) 176-178.

⁹ See also: Lippold 1952; Schöndorf 1951; Diesner 1963, 89-102; Goetz 1980a, 356-376; Goetz 1980b.

Orosius reports on the *usurpatores* in the Western Roman Empire in detail:¹⁰ Constantinus moved with Roman troops from Britannia, he spread his influence until the Alps and the Pyrenees (407-411), and promoted his sons to *Caesars* in Gaul.¹¹ Constantinus' commander, Gerontius became independent in Hispania and made his son, Maximus emperor (409).¹² With support from Burgundians and Alans, in 412 Iovinus acted as emperor in Gaul and in the following year he elevated his brother, Sebastianus to become co-emperor.¹³ Heraclianus rebelled in Africa and in 413 he requested the title *augustus*¹⁴ while the usurper Priscus Attalus was supported by the Visigoths in Gaul (414).¹⁵

During this time, the legitimate Western Roman Emperor was Honorius whose name is mentioned by Orosius. At the same time Orosius saw that only Constantius, *magister militum* from the middle of August 410, was capable of dealing with these serious problems.¹⁶ Orosius was glad to report that finally a real Roman (and not a Barbarian) was to command the Roman army: *sensit tunc demum respublica et quam utilitatem in Romano tandem duce receperit et quam eatenus perniciem per longa tempora barbaris comitibus subiecta toleravit*.¹⁷ He was also hopeful that the commander was to control the crisis. Constantius used to be a simple soldier and from 415 became a *patricius*, one of the highest dignities in late Roman society. He also held the consulship in 414 and then in 417. As a politician he was a follower of Theodosius and Stilicho: he employed Barbarians in the highest military ranks too (Ulphilas and Gaiso, both Goths were *magistri equitum*).¹⁸ He had a predilection to place Barbarians in the first line in battles and he consistently sent Barbarians against Barbarians.

Athaulf, the Visigoth king was the other who helped defeat the usurpers and the Barbarians besides Constantius.¹⁹ In the last chapter of Book 7 by Orosius (43), Athaulf plays a central role, having been depicted surprisingly positively: *is, ut saepe auditum atque ultimo exitu eius probatum est, satis studiose sectator pacis militare fideliter Honorio imperatori ac pro defendenda Romana republica impendere vires Gothorum praeoptavit*.²⁰ The most important sections of the chapter include Athaulf's ascension to power (1), his marriage with

¹⁰ Oros. VII 42, 4-10: "Catalogus tyrannorum"

¹¹ See also: Heather 1998, 507-515, 513.

¹² See: Scharf 1992, 374-384.

¹³ Demandt 2007, 148.

¹⁴ Demandt 2007, 148.

¹⁵ See: O'Flynn 1983, 63.

¹⁶ O'Flynn 1983, 63-73; Lippold 1952, 30.

¹⁷ Oros. VII 42, 2.

¹⁸ O'Flynn 1983, 64.

¹⁹ More recently on Athaulf: Faber 2010, 157-169.

²⁰ Oros. VII 43, 3.

Galla Placidia (2), his speech at Narbonne (Narbona) (3), the political background of his assassination (4) and his succession (5).

1. Jordanes also mentions the death of Alaric and the ascension of Athaulf to power.²¹ After the sacking of Rome, Alaric headed South towards Sicily with the Visigoth army with further aims to go to Africa but because of a storm, the plan failed. Alaric died of an illness and his brother-in-law, Athaulf became his successor. We don't know too much of the following period when the Goths resided in Italy but an inscription in Nola and an act on tax-cuts allude to war-time destruction.²² Athaulf reached an agreement with Honorius stating that the Goths running out of food could march into Gaul in 412.²³

2. Orosius mentions in his work several times the marriage between Athaulf and Galla Placidia and he evaluates it positively. A detailed account of the event itself is given by Olympiodorus (fr. 24)²⁴: the ceremony took place in Narbonne in the beginning of January 414 following Roman rites. Athaulf was clad in a toga, a Roman garment and the singing of the nuptial hymn was started by Attalus. As the *caput* summarizes it: "The wedding was accepted by both the Romans and the Barbarians and they both rejoiced about it."²⁵ The marriage can be interpreted as a sign of political rapprochement on Athaulf's side.²⁶

3. Orosius gives ample details on Athaulf's speech in Narbonne while disclosing that he himself was residing in Bethlehem at the time and met there a certain man arriving from Athaulf's court in Narbonne who gave the account on the Gothic king's speech. Orosius emphasizes the fact that he himself heard this account, too.²⁷ The following questions can be raised in connection with the speech: Was it actually delivered? Was it actually delivered this way? How much does reflect Orosius' description of the speech his own opinion? Why does Orosius think it is important to record the speech in detail? Who is the extract intended for? What is Orosius' goal with it?

²¹ Oros. VII 43, 2. Iord. *Get.* 30, 158.

²² Cod. Theod. IX 28, 7. See: Günther, Korsunskij 1988, 50.

²³ Wolfram 1990, 168-171; Heather 1998, 513.

²⁴ Blockley 1983, 186-188.

²⁵ Blockley 1983, 188.

²⁶ Until the 6th century, the age of Leogivild it was otherwise forbidden for Romans and Goths to marry. Claude 1970, 70.

²⁷ Oros. VII 43, 4.: *nam ego quoque ipse uirum quendam Narbonensem inlustris sub Theodosio militiae, etiam religiosum prudentemque et grauem, apud Bethleem oppidum Palaestinae beatissimo Hieronymo presbytero referentem audiui, se familiarissimum Athaulfo apud Narbonam fuisse ac de eo saepe sub testificatione didicisse, quod ille, cum esset animo uiribus ingenioque nimius, referre solitus esset.*

In his monograph published in 1987 in Rome, Antonio Marchetta considers Orosius to be a short-sighted and anti-barbaric author as opposed to Athaulf who, according to Marchetta, offers the perspective of a new Roman world and he views the Goth king even as “the founder of the Middle Ages.”²⁸ He also claims that Orosius had no connection to the speech; he simply recorded what he had heard. I myself have to disagree with this opinion. In my view Orosius had a well-defined objective with giving such a central location to the detailed account of Athaulf’s speech in the final chapter of his book.

The traditional picture painted of Barbarians by the Romans can be clearly seen in the Gothic king’s speech: “because of their wild barbarism, the Goths were completely unable to obey the law [...] without which a state is not a state at all” (VII 43, 6).²⁹ The Roman perspective should not be surprising in Athaulf’s speech as the Gothic king was at this time associating himself with the close-knit circles of Roman dignitaries, official bodies and members of the imperial family. Orosius emphasizes that Athaulf’s wife, Galla Placidia was “a woman of keen intellect” and was exceptionally virtuous who convinced her husband with advice and arguments to use his political caution for the sake of the state (VII 43, 7).³⁰ The appearance of Roman *topoi* about Barbarians in the king’s speech can thus be understood.

It is also possible to presume that Galla Placidia persuaded her husband to give up his plans to control the Empire, positioning himself as the restorer and the protector of the Roman Empire legitimizing at the same time his power and preparing the way for their son to ascend to power. Galla Placidia was a member of the imperial family so her son could aspire to the throne with the support of the Gothic king.³¹ Another argument supporting this opinion is that their son received the name Theodosius after his maternal grandfather (fr. 26),³² while Honorius, the Western Emperor had no offspring.

Orosius makes several anti-barbaric comments in his work: he condemns military commanders with Germanic ancestry, especially Stilicho who was of half-vandal origin,³³ and he honestly delighted in Emperor Theodosius’ victory

²⁸ Marchetta 1987, 366-367.

²⁹ Oros. VII 43, 6.: *at ubi multa experientia probauisset neque Gothos ullo modo parere legibus posse propter effrenatam barbariem neque reipublicae interdici leges oportere, sine quibus respublica non est respublica,...*

³⁰ Oros. VII 43, 7.: *ob hoc abstinere a bello, ob hoc inhiare paci nitebatur, praecipue Placidiae uxoris suae, feminae sane ingenio acerrimae et religione satis probae, ad omnia bonarum ordinationum opera persuasus et consilio temperatus.*

³¹ Cf. Thompson 1963, 112-115; Demandt 2007, 148; Wolfram 1990, 170.

³² Blockley 1983, 188. Athaulf didn’t follow the tradition according to which Western Gothic princes received Germanic names until the end of the 7th century. Cf. Claude 1970, 22.

³³ See: Várady 1968, 413-432. On Orosius’ anti-vandalism see: Székely 2002, 7-16.

by the Frigidus over Arbogast and Eugenius, where through the death of 10,000 Gothic federates he also settled “nicely” the problem of Barbarians.³⁴ But after 410 in the West, a catastrophic situation arose and the reinvention of the relationship with Germans, and especially Visigoths had become imminent.

Orosius is in an uncomfortable situation. He has to fight his own deep-rooted prejudices against Barbarians, his own bad experiences and he has to change his point of view. The speech at Narbonne plays a special role in Orosius’ work because in it the Barbaric leader admits that he has changed: once he aimed at the occupation and destruction of the Roman Empire, he aimed to be the *augustus*, substituting Rome, he wanted to create Gothia (VII 43, 5).³⁵ But now he sees that it is time to change his politics. If he cannot be “the transformer of the Empire” then he is going to be the supporter and restorer of the Roman Empire (VII 43, 6).³⁶ This idea is especially important for Orosius and it is also a message to the Romans to move past their prejudices against Barbarians and to cooperate with them in order to restore the Empire.

The speech can also be understood as a message for the Goths. When Orosius records these thoughts, Athaulf is no longer alive but his words can serve as examples for the Visigoths to strive for peace with the Romans and to serve the interests of the Roman state like their ruler wanted.

By 414 after the crisis in 410, most problems were handled: Constantius drove the enemy away from Italy, he restored the power of the legitimate ruler with the help of Athaulf in Gaul, he controlled Barbaric peoples in Hispania and he suppressed the uprising in Africa.³⁷ The poem of Rutilius Namatianus also displays optimistic thoughts besides Orosius, where he praises Rome in more than a hundred and ten lines.³⁸ The following lines are of interest (131-140):

*utque novas vires fax inclinata resumit,
clarior ex humili sorte superna petis.
porrige victuras Romana in saecula leges,
solaque fatales non vereare colos,*

³⁴ See also: Székely 2003, 24-32.

³⁵ Oros. VII 43, 5.: *se imprimis ardentem inhiasse, ut obliterato Romano nomine Romanum omne solum Gothorum imperium et faceret et uocaret essetque, ut uulgariter loquar, Gothia quod Romania fuisset et fieret nunc Athaulfus quod quondam Caesar Augustus,*

³⁶ Oros. VII 43, 6.: *at ubi multa experientia probauisset neque Gothos ullo modo parere legibus posse propter effrenatam barbariem neque reipublicae interdici leges oportere, sine quibus respublica non est respublica, elegisse saltem, ut gloriam sibi de restituendo in integrum augendoque Romano nomine Gothorum uiribus quaereret habereturque apud posteros Romanae restitutionis auctor, postquam esse non potuerat immutator.*

³⁷ See also: Oros. VII 43, 17.

³⁸ Rut. Namat. I 47-164. See also: Wood 1998, 516-537, 531.

*quamvis sedecies denis et mille peractis
illud annus praeterea iam tibi nonus eat.
quae restant nullis obnoxia tempora metis,
dum stabunt terrae, dum polus astra feret!
te reparat quod cetera regna resolvit:
ordo renascendi est crescere posse malis.*

The inscriptions “*Urbs Roma Aeterna*” and “*Roma Invicta*” appear on contorniate medals minted around 415-416, signalling the belief in the rejuvenation of Rome.³⁹ The favourable situation of the Empire made it possible for the Visigoths and Romans to further negotiations. The novel politics of Constantius and Athaulf, their cooperation and their mutual concessions paved the way for a successful peace treaty.

4. Orosius mentions Athaulf’s assassination (415) only briefly: *cumque eidem paci petendae atque offerendae studiosissime insisteret, apud Barcinonam Hispaniae urbem dolo suorum, ut fertur, occisus est*. Olympiodorus gives a more detailed account of the event (fr. 26):⁴⁰ Athaulf was assassinated by one of his subjects, Dubius who wanted vengeance for his late master, probably Sarus who, in turn, had been killed on orders by Athaulf. There were long-standing rivalries raging between the leaders of the Gothic society.⁴¹

5. Following the death of Athaulf, Sarus’ brother Sigeric ascended to the throne.⁴² Sigeric reigned for seven days only, or as Orosius described it: *Post hunc Segericus rex a Gothis creatus cum itidem iudicio Dei ad pacem pronus esset, nihilominus a suis interfectus est*.⁴³ Olympiodorus, however, paints a completely different picture of Sigeric’s brief reign: he had Athaulf’s children from his first marriage killed and forced Placidia to walk in front of his horse with the other prisoners (fr. 26)⁴⁴. There are no signs that would point to the new Gothic ruler wanting to reach any agreement with the Romans following Athaulf’s footsteps.

Vallia, a member of Athaulf’s family, the Balths, succeeded Sigeric on the throne.⁴⁵ In Orosius’ account: *Deinde Vallia successit in regnum ad hoc electus a Gothis, ut pacem infringeret, ad hoc ordinatus a Deo, ut pacem confirmaret*.⁴⁶ First Vallia didn’t want to continue with Athaulf’s policies. He tried to cross over to Africa with his troops but failed. He was, therefore, obligated to con-

³⁹ Lippold 1952, 32.

⁴⁰ Blockley 1983, 188.

⁴¹ Rousseau 1992, 345-361, 356; Wolfram 1990, 161.

⁴² On Sigeric see: Jones, Martindale 1980 (PLRE II.) 987.

⁴³ Oros. VII 43, 9.

⁴⁴ Blockley 1983, 188.

⁴⁵ On Vallia see: Jones, Martindale 1980, (PLRE II.) 1147-1148. Blockley 1983, 188.

⁴⁶ Oros. VII 43, 10.

tinue talks with Honorius and Constantius. In 416 they reached an agreement so they kept up the line of peace treaties which were started by Athaulf and finished in 418 by Theodoric, and which laid the foundations for the cohabitation of Romans and Visigoths for decades. The accord of 416 also settled the issue of grain transports and the military tasks of the Visigoths (fr. 30).⁴⁷ The Visigoths received 600,000 *modius* of grains and the assignment to get rid of enemies, both internal and external in Hispania. The treaty also arranged for Galla Placidia to return to Ravenna.

In the final chapters of Book 7 where Orosius depicts contemporary problems, a new perspective is taking shape. His anti-barbaric feelings are not universal anymore and he differentiates between the different Barbaric peoples. He continues to condemn Vandals but takes Visigoths to be the instruments of divine providence who, even at the sacking of Rome, were less destructive than the Celts in the 4th century B.C. or Nero when the city was burned down. As another aspect, by 416, as a result of the 40-year-long wandering in the Empire, the institutions and customs of the Visigoths had considerably changed. In addition to Christianization, the long-standing commercial relations between Romans and Goths as well as recruitment among Barbarians for the Roman army that became customary in the 4th century narrowed the cultural gap between Romans and Goths.⁴⁸

Orosius reacts to contemporary problems and sees that the military power of the Goths is necessary to defeat the usurpers and to control Barbarians pillaging in the Western Empire. The central theme of the final chapters is the necessity of reaching a peace agreement between the Romans and the Goths, a prerequisite of which is the change in the attitudes of Athaulf and the Goths which, in turn, can already be detected in the king's speech in Narbonne. Orosius takes the marriage of Athaulf and Galla Placidia to be the symbol of agreement surviving the death of the Gothic king. Constantius and the Gothic kings, Athaulf, and later his successors, Vallia and Theodoric, continue with the treaties of mutual advantages and concessions, and in 418 the federate kingdom of Toulouse (Tolosa) is created in Aquitania.⁴⁹

The four empires, like the four cardinal points symbolize completeness for Orosius.⁵⁰ He places Rome as the last in the line of empires. This empire does not perish, allowing for a new one to take over its place but Orosius is hopeful

⁴⁷ Blockley 1983, 194; Demandt 2007, 149; Wolfram 1990, 177; Liebeschuetz 1990, 73. Cf. Isid. *Hisp.*, *HG* 21.

⁴⁸ Liebeschuetz 1990, 77.

⁴⁹ See also: Burns 1992, 362-373.

⁵⁰ Goetz 1980a, 362-363.

that the Roman Empire can change, can embrace Christian Barbarians and can revive to be a flourishing, working state again.

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