Gothic History as Historical Ethnography

Anyone in the field of Gothic history must expect to be misunderstood, rejected, even stigmatized. This is hardly surprising, for the subject is burdened with the ideological weight of a readiness throughout the centuries either to reject the Goths as an embodiment of everything wicked and evil or to identify with them and their glorious history.\(^1\) Sympathy and antipathy have taken grotesque forms right down to the present: "Goths go home" (\textit{fuera godos}) adorns the walls of many houses on the Canary Islands today, demanding the expulsion of the mainland Spaniards. Jan Sobieski, king of Poland and in 1683 commander of the relieving army that saved Vienna from the Turks, was glorified as a Gothic Mars. That was hardly surprising, since there had been a long-standing tradition of equating Slavic peoples with East Germanic tribes. It is often necessary, however, to remind Central Europeans of the plain fact that a history of the Goths is not part of the history of the German people and certainly not part of the "history of the Germans in foreign countries." No such ideological controversy surrounds the Celts, for example, and everyone will gladly claim them as ancestors, because from the Irish, Scots, and Bretons there has been "no threat of annexation or war."\(^2\) Clearly the Goths are no threat either. Today no one can seriously boast of being their descendant, and no such descendant
would frighten people. Because nowhere in Europe did the Goths achieve the status of a nation, they dissolved at their downfall into a myth accessible to everyone. The result has been a long history of attempts to lay claim to the Gothic tradition.

At the Council of Basel (1431–1449), for example, a quarrel erupted between the Austrians and the Swedes when each side claimed to be the true descendants of the Goths and thus to outrank the other in questions of protocol. Barely one hundred years later, Wolfgang Lazius, court historian of Ferdinand I, sought to prove that the Gothic migration all across Europe had unified the region from the Black Sea to Cadiz so that “these countries are now with full right once more united under the dominion of the Habsburgs.” The pro-Gothic attitude reached its height of absurdity in Sweden under Olaus Rudbeck (1630–1702), professor at Uppsala. He actually claimed to have rediscovered Gothic Sweden in Plato’s Atlantis. He identified Old Uppsala as the acropolis of the Atlanteans and the pagan temple of the Svears as the temple of Apollo. Still today the second crown in the Swedish royal coat of arms stands for the regnum Gothorum. Rudbeck was also responsible for popularizing a doctrine of Greek ethnography in which the north enjoyed a virtually inexhaustible wealth of people, its inhabitants enjoying sound health and begettering children to a ripe old age, men of sixty retaining their procreative power, and women of fifty still bearing children. Rudbeck and his students, among them men like Montesquieu and Chateaubriand, could fall back on Jordanes’ description of Scandza as an officina gentium aut certe velut vagina nationum (factory of tribes and surely a mother of nations), which had brought forth the Goths and many other peoples. But of special importance right up to the time of Montesquieu was the tradition that the strong kingship of the Goths had remained rooted in the consent of the people, which meant that the Gothic king was popularly elected: “Les Goths conquérant l’empire romain fondèrent partout la monarchie et la liberté” (in conquering the Roman Empire the Goths laid the foundations for monarchy and freedom everywhere). Whereas most postrevolutionary Frenchmen today prefer their national hero, the comicstrip character Astérix, and care little about Goths living or dead, Chateaubriand called them nos ancêtres and even concluded: “Theodoric reste grand bien qu’il fait mourir Boèce. Ces Goths étaient d’une race supérieure” (Theodoric remains “great” even though he had Boethius executed. These Goths were of a superior race).

Even Anglo-American voices were not missing from the chorus of Gothicism. In 1843, for example, George Perkins Marsh announced the Gothic origin of England, the Pilgrims, and the heroes of the American Revolution,
all this in a book with the revealing title *The Goths in New England*. When
the terms *Gothicism, Germanism, and Teutonism* had already begun to
disappear from historians’ workshops, the Dane Johannes Jensen in 1907
expected *den Gotiske Renaissance* from the North Americans.\(^\text{12}\) Heinz
Gollwitzer has shown that these isms with all their variations had passed
out of use, or very nearly so, when National Socialism made possible a
nightmarish and ghastly resurgence.\(^\text{13}\) Thus the Polish port Gdynia-Gdingen
became the city Gotenhafen in the Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreussen. Even
during the war Nazi bureaucrats deliberated on how the formerly Gothic
territory of the Crimea could be settled with Germans and whether Simfero-
pol should be renamed Gotenburg and Sevastopol Theoderichshafen.\(^\text{14}\) This
criminal madness involved the transmutation of the pro-Gothic tradition
into a historical argument. In motivating concrete action, the pro-Gothic
sentiment had exposed itself as an attempt to turn back time and history,
indeed to destroy them. And yet this anachronistic perversion was already
behind the jubilant outburst of the usually level-headed Beatus Rhenanus:
“Ours are the triumphs of the Goths and Vandals!”\(^\text{15}\)

Of course the German and Scandinavian humanists were only reacting
to the doctrine of Gothic barbarism propagated by the Latin humanists,
especially the Italians. For Latin humanists everything “Gothic” had become
a term of abuse, a general concept for lack of culture and education, for
deficiency in way of life and in classical notions of architecture, for monkish
hypocrisy and backwardness. The humanists north of the Alps therefore
mistrusted their “Romanist” predecessors and colleagues and sought to
return to the original sources.\(^\text{16}\) In so doing they followed a method which
the prescientific study of the past had already developed and which Hans
Messmer has aptly called “the [moral] ethnographic approach.”\(^\text{17}\) The
foundation for all their efforts was a detailed study of the *origines gentium*,
among them especially the *Getica* or *Origo Gothica*, the work of Cassio-
dorus in the version of Jordanes.

The highly educated Cassiodorus, a Roman in the service of the Gothic
kings of Italy, composed an *origo gentis*, an account of the origins of a
people.\(^\text{18}\) His work formed part of a classical genre in which two separate
approaches had coexisted from the time of Caesar. Greek ethnography
preferred to derive the origins of the barbarians from primordial deeds of
Greek gods and heroes. In contrast, ever since Caesar, the Romans not
only accepted native traditions but on occasion even preferred them to the
familiar speculations of Greek mythographers. Indeed, a historian like Tacit-
tus would say nothing about the origin of the Britons because he knew of
no relevant native tradition.\(^\text{19}\) Although Latin ethnographers were therefore
more open-minded about barbarian traditions than their Greek predecessors, they did subject these traditions to an *interpretatio Romana*.\textsuperscript{20} This *interpretatio* did not go so far as to present the stories of tribal origins as a sort of second-rate Roman mythology. But because barbarian concepts and institutions were equated with or actually integrated into their Roman counterparts, Roman history became the goal of every *origo gentis*. As a result, anyone who seeks to write a history of the Goths takes on an impossible task: the sources present a history of the later Roman Empire into which the history of the Goths has been thoroughly absorbed. To recapture Gothic history the historian must write it as historical ethnography. But a historical ethnography of the Goths turns Cassiodorus’s historical structure upside down and seeks to allow the *Origo Gothica*, the particular origin of the Goths, to reemerge from the *historia Romana*.

Through assimilation, barbarian traditions became Roman history: “*Originem Gothicam fecit esse historiam Romanam*” (he made the story of Gothic origins to be Roman history); this is what Cassiodorus has Athalaric say about his *Origo Gothica*, which is known to us in Jordanes’s version under the title *Getica*.\textsuperscript{21} But because Roman history was also Christian, the Gothic pagan origins were absorbed into the Christian notion of history as God’s plan of redemption for mankind—what is often called providential history. For the genre of the *origines gentium*, the Gothic history of Cassiodorus was therefore no less revolutionary an innovation than Caesar’s ethnographic excursus in the *Bellum Gallicum* had been. In the formal structure of his work, Cassiodorus, as compiler of ancient and barbarian traditions, is unoriginal.\textsuperscript{22} But the content is unique, for Cassiodorus has provided the first *origo* of a people that had originally not been part of the ancient world yet, paradoxically, was now ruling a portion of the empire with imperial recognition.\textsuperscript{23}

Cassiodorus’s incorporation of Gothic history into the ecumenical *historia Romana* created the model for the medieval *origines gentium*, the last of which was that written by Saxo Grammaticus around 1200. Such works, most written in classicistic Latin, elevated the prehistory of a Germanic-Celtic-Slavic *gens* to the providential history of the *populus*, the *historia Romana*. An *origo* of this kind was seen as a legitimation of power. Consequently the *origo* and the *lex scripta*—the tribal origins and the tribal law—were put into writing at the same time.\textsuperscript{24}

In turning to the individual tribal histories, above all the rediscovered *Germania* of Tacitus as well as the *Origo Gothica*, the German humanists abandoned the approach of the medieval world chronicle. The latter had combined secular with sacred history and eschatology and had presented
between its covers the history of all mankind as the Christianized *historia Romana.*\textsuperscript{25} Consequently, whoever isolated a particular *origo gentis* from such a historical scheme secularized world history. In this effort the German humanists rediscovered the term *gens,* as for example in Wolfgang Lazius’s *De gentium aliquot migrationibus.*\textsuperscript{26} The notion of tribal migration entails a belief in continuity, survival, and the transfer (*translatio*) of historical claims and rights, and it opposed the Italian humanists’ concept of catastrophic barbarian invasions. Needless to say, both camps equated *Germanus* with *deutsch,* as is still evident in the English “German” and the Greek Γερμανός.\textsuperscript{27} Since the German humanists mistrusted ancient historiography, they used archaeology and philology to develop the notion of healthy, strong, and young migratory peoples.

The concept of young peoples renewing the decadent Roman world is a secularized by-product of the classical-Christian idea of renewal. While French romanticism and German historicism could still agree in the nineteenth century that the invading Germanic peoples “freshened the blood” of the West,\textsuperscript{28} today none other than archaeologists and anthropologists have put forth exactly the opposite argument: namely, that we are not dealing with young, vigorous peoples or a “healthy past.”\textsuperscript{29} Furthermore, putting the word *gens* into the context of the migrations was by no means tantamount to understanding its real historical significance. In his *History of the Germans* (1778) Michael Schmidt equated for the first time the phrase *migratio gentium* with ‘tribal migration’ (*Völkerwanderung*), a loan translation which Johann Christoph Gottsched already rejected with good reason on linguistic grounds.\textsuperscript{30} Schmidt’s equation is indeed semantically suspect, if not altogether false. Even during the Early Middle Ages the meaning of the term *gens* changed to such an extent that it came to embrace a wide spectrum of meanings, sometimes even contradictory ones. A Carolingian *gens Francorum* is closer to a modern nation than the *gens Francorum* of Clovis’s time. And to complicate matters, we have no way of devising a terminology that is not derived from the concept of nationhood created during the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{31}

Words such as *gens,* *genus/*γένος, *genealogia,* and *natio,* refer to a community of biological descent.\textsuperscript{32} The tribal sagas, however, equate *people* with *army* and thus remain true to historical reality.\textsuperscript{33} In addition, the sources attest the polyethnic character of the *gentes.* These *gentes* never comprise all potential members of a *gens* but are instead always mixed. Therefore their formation is not a matter of common descent but one of political decision. Initially this implies not much more than the ability to unite and keep together the multitribal groups that make up any barbarian
army. The leaders and chiefs of “well-known” clans, that is to say, of those families who derive their origins from gods and who can prove their divine favor through appropriate achievements, form the “nuclei of tradition” around which new tribes take shape. Whoever acknowledges the tribal tradition, either by being born into it or by being “admitted” to it, is part of the gens and as such a member of a community of “descent through tradition.”

The history of a gens is the subject of ethnography, and ethnography, as the name implies, deals “descriptively with peoples.” By definition these ἔθνη or gentes do not belong to the observer’s superior culture. They remain outside the civilized world. They are barbarians; their language does not sound human, more like stammering and mere noise. The barbarians also speak diverse languages all at once or side by side, for in their eyes language is no criterion of tribal membership. Under the assault of their horrible songs the classical meter of the ancient poet goes to pieces. Their religion is superstition, and though not actually pagan, it is hardly more than corrupted Christianity, heresy and worse. For barbarians can neither think nor act rationally; theological controversies are Greek to them. If a storm approaches, they fear the heavens are collapsing, give up any advantage they may have on the battlefield, and flee. At the same time, they are dominated by a horrible death wish: they actually look forward to dying. Even their women take part in battle. Barbarians are driven by evil spirits; “they are possessed by demons” who force them to commit the most terrible acts. Barbarians simply resemble animals more than they do human beings, concluded contemporaries, wondering whether barbarians shared in human nature at all. How tenaciously such ideas persist is revealed by the association of the department of prehistory with the Viennese Museum of Natural History. As “two-legged animals” the barbarians were viewed as incapable of living according to written laws and only reluctantly tolerating kings. Barbarian customs are described as strange, unpredictable, and dangerous in an evil person, “splendid vices” even in the virtuous. Their lust for gold is immense, their love of drink boundless. Barbarians are without restraint. They embrace one another for the kiss of brotherhood but are faithless to the alien. For just as civilized observers deny that barbarians are human, to the barbarians only the community of their unwritten customary law is considered the “world of humans.” But whether they are Germanic peoples or not, barbarians are generally considered good-looking. They are blond and tall, if dirty and given to strange customs of personal hygiene. They grease their hair with butter and do not mind its rancid smell. Only the Huns are ugly, the sons of evil spirits and Gothic witches. The repro-
ductive energy of the barbarians is inexhaustible. The northern climate of their native land, with its long winter nights, favors their fantastic urge to procreate. If a barbarian people is driven back or even destroyed, the next one already emerges from the marshes and forests of Germany or the greater Scythian steppe. Indeed, there are really no new barbarian peoples—descendants of the same tribes keep appearing.\textsuperscript{45}

In actuality, a tribe comprised surprisingly few people. Fifteen to twenty thousand warriors—which means a total of perhaps a hundred thousand people—are the greatest numbers a large people can muster.\textsuperscript{46} In defiance of the facts, the literary topos of overpopulation persists to this day. The various migrations are explained by the assumption that a given territory could no longer feed the people, whereupon the entire population, or a part of it, was forced to leave the land. Of course the notion of a \textit{ver sacrum}, a “holy spring,” when a tribe sent out its young men in search of land, is not mere fiction. It is also beyond doubt that a barbarian economy provided poorly for its people. After a good harvest, the people could hope to get through the winter without going hungry.\textsuperscript{47} Actual surplus, however, was either nonexistent or useless because reserves could not be stored. Everyone ate the same monotonous diet; the Huns were not the only ones who devoured their meat raw. If anyone was richer than his neighbor, if he had a bigger share of the “surplus” of the barbarian economy, he could use his wealth to purchase gold and hang it around his neck or that of his horse or wife.\textsuperscript{48} Hunger and want constantly threatened barbarian existence. Such privation did not arise because the population was multiplying wildly—in fact the numbers remained remarkably stable\textsuperscript{49}—but because barbarian society was in a constant state of war and because the enemy was not only the people living beyond a broad border zone but was as close as the neighboring village, the next clan, or another kin group of the same tribe. After the capitulation of Cumae, for example, Teja’s brother sought to become a Roman to escape the dangerous life of a barbarian. We may wonder why tribal traditions saw such chaotic conditions as harmonious. This could be so only because the barbarians lived the pathos of heroism to the fullest.\textsuperscript{50}

Barbarian history is the tale of the “deeds of brave men”;\textsuperscript{51} only the warrior, the hero, matters. Tribe and army are one, the \textit{gens} is the “people in arms.”\textsuperscript{52} When the tribe migrated an extraordinary social mobility prevailed in its ranks. Any capable person who had success in the army could profit from this mobility, regardless of his ethnic and social background. In the kingdom of Ermanaric there were—apart from Greutungian Ostrogoths—Finns, Slavs, Antes, Heruli, Rosomoni, Alans, Huns, Sarmatians, and probably Aesti as well.\textsuperscript{53} In the western “Gutthiuda” we find, besides the domi-
nant Tervingi (the Visigoths, as we call them), Taifali, Sarmatians from the Caucaland, and minorities from Asia Minor; in addition we must assume a considerable contingent of former Roman provincials, more or less strongly Romanized Daco-Carpian groups, other Sarmatians, and Iranians. The polyethnic structure of the Gothic peoples remained intact even within the Roman Empire. The Gothic army that settled in southern Gaul in 418 had the following composition: Tervingian-Vesian and Greutungian-Ostrogothic tribal elements; non-Gothic groups that had been Gothicized to varying degrees, among them Alans, Bessi from Thrace, Galindi from the Baltic Sea, Varni, probably also Heruli, and maybe even Saxons from the Loire and Garonne rivers. Among the elements of non-Gothic origin we must also list the barbarians from the settlements of the dediticii and the laeti, the Sarmatian, Taifalian, and Suevian colonies of the late Roman Notitia dignitatum. The kingdom of Theodoric the Great was no less polyethnic. As a Roman high magistrate and king of his Goths, he was actually in the best position to turn his army into a Gothic people, but the ethnogenesis itself involved non-Gothic elements. In his army marched Rugians, Vandals, Alans, Heruli, Sarmatians and Taifali, Gepids, and Alamanni. Apart from the Romans who served in Theodoric’s army and who were “Goths at heart,” there were also former Roman subjects, like the wild Breoni in the Tirol, who became federates of the Gothic federates.56

From the first appearance of the Gothic hordes on Roman soil, they attracted people from the native lower classes. At the time of migration this attraction was a great advantage because it alleviated a constant shortage of manpower. But in southern Gaul, Spain, and Italy the coloni were needed in the fields, not on the battlefields. Because Theodoric had staked his future on consolidation and stabilization, he prohibited the Roman peasant from joining the Gothic army. But the old attraction had not yet disappeared when the Ostrogoths were fighting for their survival. Totila not only accepted slaves and coloni into the Gothic army—and apparently in large numbers—but even turned them against their senatorial masters by promising them freedom and ownership of land. In so doing he permitted and provided an excuse for something that Roman lower classes had been willing to do since the third century: “to become Goths” out of despair over their economic situation.57 The principle of the time is clear: whoever proves himself as warrior is lord; whoever works, whether as a peasant, skilled craftsman, or merchant, is and will remain a slave.58 The fate of two Roman prisoners illustrates the social mechanism. The first, formerly a rich merchant, is taken prisoner by the Huns, changes his life-style and, though initially completely untrained, becomes a capable warrior. He wins riches
and freedom, contracts a “Hunnic” marriage, and climbs the social ladder of the army. The other Roman captive is an outstanding builder who uses Pannonian spoils to erect a beautiful bath for the same master his fellow prisoner originally served. But when the building is completed the architect does not gain his expected freedom. Instead, the Hun turns him into the lowest-ranking slave, a bath-attendant for the Hun and his family.\(^{59}\)

This social order and the value judgments and attitudes on which it was based were out of tune with Roman social thought and practice. They had to be abandoned if the tribe wanted to establish a kingdom on Roman soil. The surrendering of the primitive tribal structures initiates the process of assimilation, and former barbarians become part of the Roman world.

The institution that accomplished this transition in the face of all dangers was the Gothic military kingship. Rebounding from all setbacks and near catastrophes the Gothic kings, Amali as well as Balthi, repeatedly managed to prove and reaffirm themselves as a “race of gods and heroes.” Their success derives from their ability to adapt to circumstances better than their aristocratic competitors and, ultimately, to gain imperial recognition.\(^{60}\) Moreover, Balthic and Amal Goths each had to endure a forty-year wait: forty years lie between the autumn of 376, when the ancestors of the Visigoths crossed the Danube, and the signing of the Roman-Gothic foedus in 416, and forty years separate the battle of Adrianople in 378 from the imperial decision in 418 to settle the federate Goths in Aquitaine. Thus the Visigoths resembled the Chosen People, who remained in the desert for forty years after receiving the law before they were allowed to enter the Promised Land. Ostrogothic tradition draws this comparison only by way of allusion: forty years the Ostrogoths are said to have mourned the death of their king before they chose Valamir, Theodoric the Great’s uncle, as successor.\(^{61}\) Such an interregnum, however, did not entail any loss of legitimacy. On the contrary, a forty-year wait shows that God has tested and elected the people concerned; it marks and legitimizes God’s people.\(^{62}\) Kingship, gens, and election by God form the populus,\(^{63}\) which in the case of the Arian Goths only a mean-spirited homousian, a “Catholic” as we say, would have denied.

In the end, however, the Gothic military kingship was successful only when it “annulled” itself, in other words, when the kings succeeded in subordinating their peoples to Roman statehood and integrating them into larger territorialized units (patriae). Only the creation of a Latin-barbarian regnum—of a lasting successor state to the Western Roman Empire—restricted the possibilities of new tribal formations. With the creation of these patriae the free play of barbarian forces lost its dangerous effects.\(^{64}\) Around
590 the Visigoths gave their *gens vel patria Gothorum* the name *Spania, Gallia et Gallaecia.* Of the same order was the *Italia* of the Ostrogothic kingdom which Theodoric the Great created. The relatively swift fall of this state reestablished the Ostrogothic *gentilitas* as the army of the Goths with a military king struggling in vain for imperial recognition. Thus the last Ostrogothic kingdoms seem like the first; they are as easily shifted geographically as they are able to take on the most diverse territorial dimensions. At one time these *regna* consisted of a few *civitates* in Pannonia, Macedonia, Thrace, or Moesia. Then the Goths were masters over substantially more than twenty provinces in Illyricum, Italy, and Gaul. After that a force composed of “only Belisarius and his retainers destroyed the power of Theodoric.” Defeated and robbed of their Amal legitimacy, the Ostrogoths of the year 540 would have been only too happy to have their kingdom limited to the transpadane provinces of Liguria and Venetia-Istria. For one year they repeated their offer to the emperor, while their dominion was shrinking further and finally comprised no more than the old royal city of Pavia. Then, almost out of nowhere, came the mighty rise of the “tyrant” Totila and the recapturing of “Gothic rule over the Italians.” In 550, finally, two years before the destruction of the Ostrogoths, Totila would have been content with a kingdom made up of the Italian peninsula without her adjoining lands and islands. Compared to this “accordion state” of the Ostrogothic army, the Visigothic kingdom seems remarkably stable, which is all the more surprising since the loss of Balthic legitimacy was accompanied by heavy losses to the Byzantines and the Franks. Precisely the way in which the army of the former “Alaric Goths” overcame these catastrophes and setbacks shows how deeply it was rooted in the prefecture of Greater Gaul. For two generations—counting from 507—the Visigoths lost land and battles to the Franks and Byzantines. Yet their kingdom retained a remarkable territorial extent. Here Goths from the lost provinces could find a new homeland; from here reconquest and future expansion could begin. Although the king was killed and the royal city lost, the defeated kingdom of Toulouse did not dissolve into a mobile Gothic army; it simply shifted its center, first to the Mediterranean coast and finally to Toledo. The kingdom named after this city consolidated into a higher political entity, an early medieval *regnum* in which the notion of *gens* was given the new meaning of a legally constituted “national people.” There is no indication that the Spanish Visigoths still saw themselves as a community of descent through tradition.

Modern language fails to grasp conceptually the origins of such a commu-
nity and the changes it underwent. This leaves an alternative that should not be carelessly adopted: that of retaining the Latin term *gens*, taken from the sources. A *gens* is a large group as much as a clan, a fraction of a tribe as much as a confederation of several ethnic units. The *gens* of the migrations had no *patria*. Therefore it had no distinct national identity; it was still an open process. A *gens* in the *origo* stage is always wandering—*in peregrinatione*—in order to grow through the kingship and the faith, whatever that may be, into a *populus*. *Stamnesbildung und Verfassung* (tribal formation and political constitution), the duality which Reinhard Wenskus described in 1961, is the subject of an historical ethnography. As for Gothic history, we are here dealing with the confrontation between a tribal society and a state. There are familiar analogies for us to understand what the term *state* means historically. Without reviving the fruitless debate over the use of the term *state* prior to modern European history, we can say that the *imperium Romanum* of late antiquity as well as the Carolingian empire had the characteristics of a state. In these states the territorial element, the *patria*, remained the vital component; the *gens* had to establish its legitimacy by becoming the *patria*. This is what the Visigoths in Spain expressed in the classic phrase *patria vel gens Gothorum*. These Goths had transcended the “Scythian character” of the migratory *gentilitas*.

The original, that is, the “Scythian,” *gentes* had no fixed structures. That explains how Synesius of Cyrene could tell his emperor Arcadius that there were really no new barbarians. They did in fact constantly invent new names and disguise their appearance to deceive the Romans—the civilized world—but strictly speaking the Scythians had remained the same since the days of Herodotus. Less than a hundred years after Synesius it had become possible to replace the traditional Scythian name with that of the Goths: polyethnic bands of mounted warriors who came from northeastern Europe were now considered Goths, just as they continued to present themselves as Scythians to traditional ethnography. According to this view, all of Ludwig Schmidt’s East Germanic peoples, including the non-Germanic Alans, belong to the Gothic peoples and profess the same heretical religion. It is true that by 600 the tribal structure of the Goths had changed significantly: their “statehood” was limited to the realm of the Spanish Visigoths, and they were a “national people” of Catholic faith. Nevertheless, the Goths of Toledo continued to be called a *gens*, as if they were merely a community of descent to which even a soldier of the Byzantine army could belong. The difficulty of putting into practice Otto Brunner’s request that historians take their terms from the language of the sources is clear.
Whoever uses the word *gens* must be aware of the many variations it embraces.\textsuperscript{81} If we recount the “Gothic saga” with all this in mind, it would sound something like this:

Once upon a time there was a small people—because of the story’s uncertain origins, one is tempted to begin the account like a fairy tale—calling itself Goths, which means “men.”\textsuperscript{82} It stepped onto the stage of history at the time when the Romans were penetrating into free Germania. In those days the Gothic settlements were strung along the southern coast of the Baltic Sea from Pomerania to the East Prussian Passarge river. Archaeologists equate the earliest history of the Goths with the artifacts of a culture named after the East Prussian town Willenberg-Wielbark. In this distinct, apparently indigenous culture there appears a “guiding fossil” that accompanied the Goths everywhere on their extensive wanderings: the body of a dead Goth was placed into the grave without weapons. This presupposes a belief in an afterlife vastly different from that of other peoples and cultures. As far as we can tell, these early Goths had nowhere reached the river Oder in the west. In fact, it is disputed whether this river ever bore the name Guthalus, despite the claims of some scholars that the Oder was a “Gothic river” and the counterpart to the Scandinavian Götaälv.\textsuperscript{83} The tales of this early period, however, are all but lost, in spite of, or in fact because of, the Amal saga of the Scandinavian origin of the Goths.\textsuperscript{84} In any case, the Goths—or Gutones, as the Roman sources called them\textsuperscript{85}—were initially under foreign domination or formed at best a semiautonomous group within a tribal confederation,\textsuperscript{86} a *nomen antiquum*.\textsuperscript{87} The Gutonic peoples differed from their closest neighbors neither in their weaponry nor in their institutions; even the kingship they all had in common. According to the Hippocratic school of Greek ethnography this latter fact should indicate an advanced level of “statehood” among the Gutones. Moreover, these kings were special: for Germanic standards they had an unusual amount of authority. From the time we hear of these kings they rule more like the kings of the migratory army than the tribal kings of the last centuries before Christ.\textsuperscript{88} To join the Gutonic kings one did not have to be a Guton or a free man, one had only to be a good warrior and follow the king faithfully.\textsuperscript{89} In this way a body of royal retainers developed, an *exercitus Gothorum*, which soon surpassed the military capabilities of the surrounding peoples. This explains the apparent contradictions accompanying the early history of the Goths: they were originally a dependent and for a long time a small people who nevertheless occupied a large area extending from the Passarge river in Prussia through eastern Pomerania nearly to the Oder. Then the Gutones fought against the great powers of their time. In the end—no later
than five generations after we first hear of them—they settled on the eastern, Sarmatian bank of the central Vistula. There they formed the core of that "barbarian avalanche" that rolled over the Roman border along the Danube in the last third of the second century and brought about enormous changes as far as the Black Sea. Taking the Roman point of view, we still speak of the Marcomannic wars, a term that does not do justice to the full dimensions of the events. The Gutones who penetrated into the region between the lower Danube and the Don at the end of the second century were in any case no longer a small people. They asserted themselves successfully against barbarian rivals and soon stood at the head of polyethnic federations, of course still under royal leadership. From 238 the Gothic assaults devastated the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire for more than forty years. Compared to this the Marcomannic wars had been merely a weak prelude. The Goths of the third century were considered a new people to whom the old Scythian name applied. No ancient ethnographer made a connection between the Goths and the Gutones. The Gutonic immigrants became Goths the very moment the Mediterranean world considered them Scythians.91

This first large kingdom of the Goths outside the empire fell apart in the late third century when it was defeated and almost annihilated by the emperors Claudius II Gothicus and Aurelian,92 whereupon the gens split up permanently. East of the Dniester it was probably the Amali who succeeded in preserving the royal Goths—the Greutungian Ostrogoths—while along the lower Danube/Ister there grew up the powerful oligarchy of the Balthic-Tervingian Vesi. This oligarchy developed a political system with multiple centers, which made possible the first territorialization of the gens at the doorstep of the Roman Empire. The invasion of the Huns destroyed both the eastern kingdom as well as the western oligarchy of the Goths. Those among both peoples who did not want to become Hunnic Goths and who were able to escape subjection crossed over into Roman territory. There they became foederati of the empire, that is to say, they became members of the Roman military forces. As such they could maintain ethnic and political identity only when commanded by their own chieftains. In keeping with Roman constitutional practice, however, these chieftains had to be "kings" as well as military "officers" recognized by the emperor. Thus a new barbarian kingship was established and at the same time such kings took their place within the highest levels of the Roman military bureaucracy. The oldest tribal creation of this kind of kingship was that of the Visigoths. This book emphasizes this process of integration, that is, the history of the Gothic ethnogeneses on Roman soil. In this kind of Gothic history the
following elements are only of peripheral importance: (1) mere lists of the names of Gothic tribes, as, for example, Cassiodorus’s linguistically significant catalog of Scandinavian peoples;93 (2) the history of the Crimean Goths between the invasion of the Huns and the time of Justinian;94 and (3) the fate of individuals who had gone over to the Romans.95

Both the Visigothic and the Ostrogothic regna did have their roots in barbarian tradition, but they were Roman institutions linked to the highest Roman magistracies with vice-imperial powers.96 Consequently, the Gothic gentes are not only exercitus Gothorum but at the same time Roman federate armies. As successors to the Roman imperial forces they possessed a modified right of transferring power: the Goths do not raise up an emperor but a king.97 From the point of view of the Roman constitution, the barbarian monarchy therefore represented that anomaly that reconciled the practice and theory of late antique statehood. Thus the gens is institutionalized or, if one prefers, imperialized. It had to give up its original “Scythian” ways if it was to form a permanent state. Thus Theodoric the Great took the imperium Romanum as the model for his regnum,98 and Leovigild did the same in Visigothic Spain.99 But if the barbarians were Romanized, the ancient world was barbarized. In politics and law the Roman name lost its ecumenical meaning and came to designate only one gens among many; a gens to which a Flavius Amalus Theodoricus belonged by law,100 to which a “common” Goth had social ties,101 and whose founding father was the same as that of the Burgundians and Franks.102

The Goths as outsiders, as barbarians, form the subject of historical ethnography. Law and cult, lex and religio, were considered synonymous. The last account that attests pre-Christian, if already thoroughly ecclesiasticized beliefs among the Visigoths dates from the fifth century.103 In Italy under Theodoric the Great, remnants of the old religio were abolished without further ado, unless they served to enhance the “splendor” of the Amal clan.104 Thus the king ordered his retainers, the saiones, to put an end to the Gothic custom of burying precious metals as grave furnishings. It is true that the saiones were told to proceed carefully, to try to recover the treasures entrusted to the earth without destroying the graves. Yet it was no longer the Gothic tradition but the Roman model that was to be the norm for burial customs and hence also for the ancestor cult.105 The old religious beliefs must have been in an advanced state of decay if a royal decree could abolish them. While the Christian king Theodoric was taking steps against the last remnants of heathen practices, he was, however, using his own line of ancestors as the basis for the legitimacy of the Amal clan believed to be Ansis-Aesir. The source and foundation of the ancestral line
is the “saga” that spans seventeen generations of Gothic history and thus covers nearly half a millennium. From the Anic tradition, from the descent from Gaut/Gapt, Amal, and Ostrogotha—heroes and half-gods who “were no mere mortals”—emerges the justification for including the Amali among the nobility of late antiquity. What Alaric I had once achieved in purely economic terms, namely, a top senatorial salary, the Amali surpassed many times over and were, like the “younger” Balthi, admitted into the circle of the leading families of the ancient world. The collective memory of the Goths did know pre-Amal and pre-Balthic “deeds of brave men,” but this memory came to an end along with the history of the royal Amali and Balthi in the fourth decade of the sixth century. It shared the fate of these clans, and after their end it was transformed into a general heroic legend that belonged to no specific people. One generation before their fall the Amali had succeeded in monopolizing the entire Gothic tradition. From this tradition they derived their justification for their claim to the first place, “the highest nobility,” within the Latin-barbarian world of “kings and peoples.” At that time Cassiodorus Senator composed the Origo Gothica, which Jordanes, a Goth from the Balkans, shaped into its present form in Constantinople during the winter of 551. This history tells of the “origin and fall” of kings and kingdoms. It structures its account “from ancient times to the present day following the generations and successions of kings” and for this draws on the “songs of the ancestors,” the tribal memory. The Italian regnum, which Cassiodorus already considered a part of the ancient world, was destroyed by Justinian’s reconquest. Nevertheless, Jordanes remained faithful to the attitude of Cassiodorus: the younger Jordanes, “as someone who derives his descent from the Gothic gens,” lets the history of the Goths end with a “fortunate defeat.” In his eyes, with the fall of the Amal kingdom, Gothic history ended in the victory of Belisarius over King Vitigis and his wife Matasuntha, Theodoric’s granddaughter. Freed from her defeated husband by his death shortly thereafter, the last of the Amali could give her hand in marriage to the emperor’s nephew Germanus and thus unite the glorious tradition of her clan with that of the Anicii. In this legitimate way took place the transformation of the Amal-Balthic origo Gothica into the historia Romana. Whoever wanted to become king of the Goths after 540 lacked the symbols of power, both the concrete symbols as well as the “splendor of the clan.” Remarkably enough the Visigoths, from 531 on, were able to come to terms with the problems that destroyed the Gothic kingdom of Italy during the dramatic fifteen years after 540. Neither the kings of the transition period nor the rulers of Toledo could fall back on an ethnic memoria that
would have reached back to a time before the invasion of the Huns. In fact, the Visigothic kings had to fight this *memoria* as the political tradition of the nobles.\(^{116}\) The only remnant permitted was the *lex Gothica* as a law code written in Latin, changed and greatly expanded through Roman additions, and enriched with biblical *exempla*.\(^{117}\) Some of this law, though by no means all of it, made its way into the royal laws of the *leges Visigothorum*.\(^{118}\) Gothic law, however, survived not only the fall of the Visigothic kingdom but that of the Italian *regnum* of the Ostrogoths as well. Far into the Middle Ages Goths from Italy, Catalonia, and southern France professed their own law.\(^{119}\) But the Gothic “songs of the ancestors” that are mentioned from the mid-sixth century\(^{120}\) are fundamentally different in content and political significance from the oral traditions to which the *Origo Gothica* referred. The disappearance of the royal bearers of tradition marked a deep break in the history of the Goths. From the diverse *memoriae* of the *gens* were preserved only the concepts of a Gothic community of law and, only until the sixth century, that of a Gothic religious community; both concepts together, as well as each by itself, formed the community of all those who recognized the *lex Gothica*.\(^{121}\)

While early medieval “tribalism” acknowledged the diversity of peoples within a community of law, it had already absorbed enough Catholicism to exclude the diversity of religious beliefs. “Gothic law” could therefore survive the sixth century only if it separated itself from the Gothic cult and remained simply the basis of a community of law. Pagan Roman ethnographers had noted as barbaric such archaic institutions as human sacrifice or cult secrets.\(^{122}\) Still around 400 many a pagan even saw the barbarian as a companion in arms from whom he expected support in the struggle to preserve the “religion of the forefathers.”\(^{123}\) To the Christian observer of that time, in contrast, paganism was fundamentally barbarian; for him it was the superstition of the “internal and external proletariat.”\(^{124}\) When the barbarians accepted Christianity there disappeared one of the most important obstacles to their integration into the Christian world. But since the Gothic peoples—unlike the Franks—initially became Arians, the *lex Gothica* seemed to serve as a sort of tribal religion. But Gothic Arianism could never truly fulfill the function of a tribal religion. Reports of Goths supporting the Roman Arians and vice versa are rare after 430.\(^{125}\) The pagan tribal religion embodied the belief in the divine descent of the *gens* and its royal clan; it preserved the notion of a legal and religious community that embraced the living and the dead and that was constantly renewed through the cult. Only when this religious and political identity was threatened did the Gothic leaders react with severe persecutions, as was
the case with the fourth-century Tervingian aristocracy and in the period immediately preceding the Visigothic conversion to Catholicism. It is true that Gothic Arianism preserved a sense of separateness between Romans and Goths much longer than was necessary. But we know of no instance when a Goth who had become a Catholic lost his tribal membership on account of it. Conversion—mutata religio—also rarely led to discrimination, let alone persecution. Already two popes of the sixth century are considered Goths and Roman citizens: Sigisvult’s son Boniface II (530–532) and Hunigild’s son Pelagius II (579–590). The third council of Toledo in 589 spelled the end of Visigothic Arianism. Traces of the Ostrogothic religious traditions can be found among the Lombards as late as the seventh century, but those who adhered to these traditions were as little a people as the Gothro-Arian soldiers in the Byzantine army.

From the moment the Goths gave up their native language and dress, there vanished another important reason for contemporaries to see them as barbarians. Around 430 Romans and barbarians differed in their religion (ritus), their language (lingua), their dress and personal hygiene. To be sure, even in those days many Romans—subject to heavy taxation and weary of the state—would probably rather have endured the “stench of barbarian bodies and clothes” than the “mad injustice” of their own countrymen. A generation later Sidonius Apollinaris jokes that the barbarian Burgundians were afraid of committing barbarisms in their own barbarian language in front of a Roman noble, so proficient had he become in their tongue. At the same time the barbarians learned from him the Roman law, improved speech, and a Latin spirit. But the Latin West was in fact more intolerant toward the dialects of the ethnic minorities than the Graeco-Slavic East. There the Gothic language, though in a foreign environment and without royal protection, survived the centuries, whereas in Spain, Gaul, and Italy Gothic as a living language probably did not see the opening years of the seventh century. The same goes for barbarian dress. The “Scythian furs” of the fifth-century Goths appeared barbaric. A century later, long before the last evidence for a spoken Gothic language, we have no more reports about this unusual Scythian costume, unusual because unsuited for the Mediterranean region.

The Goths did not disappear, even after they had lost their kingdoms. But they had long ceased to be barbarians, let alone barbarian federates. The Gothic people, which presented itself as a Gothic army, became an early medieval gens that stopped wandering through Europe. In the West and the East they had become Roman Goths, who attracted the attention of the still largely pagan gentes beyond the Roman frontiers in a peculiar
way. Among these peoples Theodoric of Ravenna was remembered either as the exemplary Dietrich von Bern or looked upon as the demonic personification of the god of war. Indeed, in the realm of myth and saga the Gothic name disappeared completely; one spoke of the descendants of the Amali, the Amalungi, if one meant the Goths. But the Goths themselves, from the middle of the sixth century, are no longer the subject of historical ethnography; from that time we must write about them in a different way.