

*The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila.*² By E.A. THOMPSON. Introduction by Michael Kulikowski. London: Duckworth, 2008. Pp. xxiii + 186. Paper, \$24.00. ISBN 978-0-7156-3700-5.

Thompson's (henceforth, T.) *Visigoths* first appeared in 1966. It was a pioneering study of Gothic society during the important but obscure time from the reign of Constantine I (306–337) to that of Theodosius I (379–395), for most of which the Goths were close associates of the Roman Empire but still outsiders. During this period Ulfila, a Goth of Roman provincial descent, was recruited by the Arian church establishment of Constantinople to support fellow Arian Christians in his homeland, to which end he devised a Gothic alphabet and translated the Bible into Gothic. The 2008 volume, though presented as a second edition, is a reprint of that of 1966, with the addition of an Introduction by Michael Kulikowski (henceforth, K.) and a translation of the *Passion of St. Saba the Goth* by John Matthews, first published in Peter Heather and John Matthews, *The Goths in the Fourth Century* (1991, Liverpool). The reprint's hybrid nature is evident in, for example, the lack of pagination of the Introduction (the "K" numbers below are mine), and by the re-use of the original Index, which ignores new material.

T.'s *Visigoths* was highly influential. As K. says (p. K2), its originality lay in taking *Germani* seriously, not as elemental forces but as ordinary people reacting to shifts in their circumstances. T., like many other distinguished historians of his day (e.g., de Ste. Croix, Finley, Hill and Hobsbawm), drew this fruitful approach from Marxist historical materialism. Key elements were T.'s consideration of emerging archaeological evidence, relating to what is now called the "Sîntana de Mureş-Černjachov culture," and his identification of neglected hagiographical works, such as the *Passion of St. Saba*, as potential sources of historical information. There has been much work, however, done on the Goths since 1966, one result of which is, ironically, as K. notes (pp. K6–7), a recognition that there were no "Visigoths" before the 5th century, and thus only "Goths" "in the time of Ulfila." The new work was reflected in Heather and Matthews' *Goths*, which follows T.'s *Visigoths* so closely that it may be regarded as its proper second edition. Perhaps too closely: Heather and Matthews also make much of the "Sîntana de Mureş-Černjachov culture" and of Saba. *Contra* K. (p. K7) I have expressed my doubts as to both the validity of the *Passion* as evidence for Gothic life, and the "Gothicness" of the Sîntana de Mureş-Černjachov material (in *CR NS* 43 (1993); on the archaeology, see now also Andrew Poulter, in John Drinkwater and Benet Salway, eds., *Wolf Liebeschuetz Reflected* (2007, London). But *Goths* contains much valuable material and, supplemented by Heather's *Goths and Romans* 332–489 (1991,

Oxford), may be said to have replaced *Visigoths* as the standard work in English.

So why the reprint? In his Introduction K. expresses grave dissatisfaction with the current state of early-Germanic and, in particular, Gothic studies. At fault are two new “interpretative trends” (p. K4). The first, stimulated by the work of Richard Wenskus, is “ethnogenesis”: the contention that there were no permanent Germanic “tribes” or “peoples” engaged in great “migrations,” but only constant “cores of tradition” maintained by small elites, around which various political associations, made up of various ethnic groups, perennially formed, dissolved and re-formed. The second, which K. has elsewhere (*JRS* 98 (2008) 269) associated with “recent Oxonian writers,” is a reversion to the model that ethnogenesis was devised to supplant: a vigorous re-statement of the existence and importance of tribal and national identity, and of “migration” and “invasion.” In T.’s *Visigoths* K. sees a pure spring of historical reconstruction, rising upstream of waters now contaminated by such notions. K. also sees T. as an early, albeit unconscious champion of a more valid explanation of events—recently developed by K. in his *Rome’s Gothic Wars* (2007, New York and Cambridge)—that the “Germanic” peoples of the Later Roman Empire were a construct of that Empire.

There is no doubt that, unusually for his time, T. made much of the “Romanness” of the Goths, presenting them as open to Roman influences and benefiting greatly from them, and thereby accepting that the Empire was a huge force in their evolution (e.g., in their post-376 conversion to Christianity: pp. 86, 90–1, 106–7, 127–8). In line with contemporary thinking, however, from beginning to end (e.g., pp. 1–2, 144) he treated the Goths as a migratory people; and one wonders what he might have made of ethnogenesis. Since T.’s *Visigoths* was published five years after Wenskus’ *Stammesbildung und Verfassung* (1961, Cologne and Graz), an awareness of this might reasonably have been expected in his text, as is not the case. But *Visigoths* was a deft amalgamation of earlier articles, and the second in a trilogy of major works, *The Early Germans* (1965, Oxford) and *The Goths in Spain* (1969, Oxford), with which T. was already engaged and all of which were rigorously source—not “model”—based. Furthermore, Wenskus’ ideas registered only slowly in anglophone scholarship—probably not until after their deployment by Herwig Wolfram in his *Geschichte der Goten* (1979). T. is thus free of ethnogenesis. On the other hand, as I re-read him with ethnogenesis in mind, I became convinced that, if he had ever engaged with it, he would not necessarily have rejected it out of hand. For while T. stresses the Goths’ Romanness, he also stresses differences between them and Romans, in particular (e.g. pp. 113, 128) pointing up the Goths’

choice of Arianism over Catholicism, as a means of maintaining such differences. In short, T. identifies a “strategy of distinction”—the subject of a recent book edited by a leading scholar of the current generation of Wenskus’ followers (Walter Pohl, *Strategies of Distinction*, 1998). He also emphasizes the fragility of Gothic political and religious structures (pp. 43–4, 62–3, 101, 128–30), and when discussing tribal cults (pp. 56–7, 62–3), he seems to come close to identifying elements of a “core of tradition.”

While it is therefore gratifying to have *Visigoths* available again at a reasonable price, the book is not quite the “Urquelle” K. would have it be. Nor, it must be said, does it offer “a full and coherent vision of Gothic history before the Danube crossing of 376” (p. K1). The narrative is, and remains difficult: we simply do not know enough about Gothic life in this period. But this is a book that should continue to be read, for it contains *aperçus* ahead of their time. In the context of recent debate, for example, I was struck by T.’s early identification of Roman aggression as a significant feature in “barbarian” wars (p. 12). A final point: in a brief but very useful closing bibliographic review, K. observes (p. K9) “the two-volume Teubner edition of Ammianus Marcellinus by W. Seyfarth (1978) improves dramatically on the text of Rolfe from which Thompson worked.” Edward Thompson, like Hugo Jones, belonged to a generation of philologists who had no need for Loeb translations. As Thompson’s original list of abbreviations (p. xi) shows, for Ammianus he used not Rolfe but Clark.

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