2011

The Identity of Late Barbarians: Goths and Wine

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CHAPTER TWELVE

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Wine, symbol of civilization in the Mediterranean for millennia and still a profound cultural marker in Europe today, is not often associated with the Goths.[1] But there is evidence allowing us to add this Northern European barbarian people to the tapestry of ancient wine production[2] at the same time that they were beginning to cultivate the first European barbarian literature with the translation of the Bible into the Gothic language.

The word "culture" is used as a metaphor of cultivation in our modern understanding of cultural identity. A classic ancient explication comes from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. The character defending philosophy (M.) tries to explain why so many philosophers can live morally bad lives. "All cultivated minds do not bear fruit. To continue this metaphor, just as a field, however good the soil, cannot be productive without cultivation, so the mind cannot be productive without teaching. So true it is that the one without the other is ineffective. The cultivation of the mind is philosophy (*cultura autem animi philosophia est*); this pulls out vices by the roots and makes minds fit for the reception of seeds and commits them to the mind and, so to speak, sows in the mind seeds of a kind to bear the richest fruit when fully matured" (2.13).[3] Had the Goths gone from literal cultivation of grapes to metaphorical cultivation of their unique culture?

Let us take up the question of the cultivation of wine first. Of the three "B's" of the barbarians - butter, britches, and beer - their use of dairy products earned the Scythians, and Northern barbarians in general,

a reputation as "milk drinkers." We have seen that trousers, practical for cold climates and horseback riders, were considered by Greeks and Romans as stereotypically barbarian dress.[4] What about beer versus wine? From stories of the first Gallic invasions in Italy being driven by a novel wine thirst to Tacitus's puzzlement at "a sort of wine made from fermented barley,"[5] beer and the lack of wine characterized barbarian people in ways that even language did not. For instance, I would guess that a Celtic mercenary in a Hellenistic army, no matter how perfect his Greek, would raise eyebrows if he waxed eloquent to his Greek comrades on the virtues of ale.[6]

But as with many stereotypes, barbarian beer drinking does not hold up very well to the evidence for two reasons. On the one hand, recent archaeological work has warned us that there may have been a good deal more beer drinking going on in the eastern Mediterranean than literary sources admit. And on the other hand, even our Greek literary sources refer to barbarian wine production and drinking.[7]

A growing body of evidence for beer drinking has emerged over the last few decades.[8] Michael Homan argues from evidence in early Hebrew texts that the social prestige of wine drove the abundant pleasures of beer drinking out of literature. In fact, he asserts that even the editing of Hebrew texts reflects this bias, as the term *šēkār* (Greek *sikera*) has been translated as "strong drink" for centuries, while it could far more easily be understood as beer.[9] Homan adds archaeological evidence, from excavated pottery to painted reliefs, to demonstrate beer's wide sway in the eastern Mediterranean. Moving us nearer to the Greek-speaking world, Greenwalt quotes Archilochus to illustrate a Phrygian beer mug's use, and Mellink identifies beer drinkers in a wall painting in Gordion.[10] These references are usually interpreted to refer only to the highly civilized Asian barbarians of Lydia and Phrygia, but Paul McGovern has argued that Homer's discussions of *kykeon*, often simply translated as "potion," refer to a grog made from wine, cheese, and fermenting barley, which may well be depicted in Mellink's wall painting.[11] Though I am inclined to wait for more evidence before concluding that Greeks drank beer, recent work makes us hesitate before passing judgment.

The record for barbarian viticulture, however, is far stronger than for Greek beer. From the beginning of Greek literature we see in Homer's *Iliad* the Greeks fueling their Trojan siege with Thracian wine. My guess

is that Western European peoples did not make much wine until they met the Romans, and surely they could not do so farther north than where grapes could grow. But in the Balkans and Black Sea area the issue becomes more complex, and more confused as time passes. Not only was Achilles drinking a fine Thracian vintage in his tent, but there seems to be good evidence that the Thracians were making wine at least as early as the Greeks. Even if Scythians preferred fermented milk, wine was being produced in the Black Sea area from a very early date.[12] By Hellenistic times we read of the Balkan barbarians, Macedonians and Molossians,[13] for example, making wine. Which brings us chronologically to the later barbarians.

Suddenly around AD 270, Greeks, Latins, and Persians simultaneously started using the word "Goth" for the people inhabiting the area of modern Bulgaria, Crimea, Romania, and Serbia. Barry Cunliffe has introduced us to the magic bag of the Celts. If I can borrow the image, the Gothic bag today seems to include all things distinct from classical Greco-Roman taste – ornate cathedrals, long-winded novels, and pale teenagers in black clothes. But the realities of ancient Goths remain elusive today. And yet they had what makes them unusual among European barbarians: they not only contrived a way to write their language down, but we still have a good deal of it, manuscripts from the sixth century BC and inscriptions from the late fifth century BC.[14]

There is also evidence that Goths made and drank wine, contrary to our stereotype of the Goth as a tall Nordic type in furs who only tasted wine after he had slaughtered everyone in the vineyard.[15] The Gothic translation of the Gospel of Mark 12, the parable of the vineyard, offers a different picture. The New International Version states: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower." It is hard to imagine our wild-eyed barbarian as someone who could understand this sentence, and even less as having the technical words in his language for the elements of wine production. (Even our modern translation struggles with the Greek *hypolenion*, or "vat for collecting juice under the winepress"; the King James Bible has "winefat"). But Gothic comes up with *dal uf mesa*. Gothic *dal* is cognate to German *Tal* and English "dale" or "dell"; *uf* with a dative refers to "under" as a position; and *mesa* seems to come from

Latin *mensa* – enough Latin in the Gothic term "winepress" to raise questions regarding sources of agricultural influence.

This could mean a very crude "ditch under the table." Or it could represent the standard Gothic term for a familiar part of the winemaking process. It is interesting to note that the translator did not just transliterate the Greek term, as he tends to do some 20 percent of the time, especially when stumped by the poverty of the Gothic language.[16]

Indeed, circumstances argue that the Goths were familiar with wine production and could have had winepresses. Our translators were those Goths living in the Roman province of Moesia (modern Serbia) in the mid-fourth century AD, where presumably wine had been made for some time. Some Goths were thought to have come from the west and north Black Sea area, where winemaking had been known for a millennium or longer. And, as Christians, they were using wine regularly in their liturgy. There is no reason to assume that they did not actually make their own wine.[17]

Some pertinent archaeological evidence comes from Volgum (modern Fenékpuszta), a trading city on the southern end of Lake Balaton in modern Hungary, where excavations have found numerous grape seeds and vine stakes (Map 1.1).[18] According to the excavation report, the style of the bells buried with children, the vessels and ornaments placed in the graves, and the type of grave construction attest to the presence of Sarmatians and eastern Germans.[19] The city walls were rebuilt around AD 350 in Roman style, but the contents of the graves indicate that the inhabitants were Sarmatians and Germans from the Black Sea area. Both ethnic groups were apparently Christian and partially Romanized. Considering that our oldest Gothic inscriptions were found in graves about 25 miles away (Hács), and that literary evidence shows that the Gothic tribes consisted of many ethnic groups, including Romans, however, one begins to suspect that these "Germans" and "Sarmatians" were actually Goths who had begun to make wine.[20] The Goths who wiped out the Romans at the battle of Adrianople in 378 might well have retired to their villas to enjoy the latest vintages.

Some consideration of this archaeological work and a critique of its interpretation may be helpful here. A team of Hungarian scholars excavated Volgum and its environs early in the twentieth century; sadly, some

of their crucial finds were lost during World War II. When the excavations resumed after the war, Károly Sági first published interpretations of the site and its region for a non-Hungarian audience in the 1970s. Sági presents the details related to viticulture tersely: "We would like to point out that the influence of fourth-century Roman agricultural methods in this area is observable right through the invasion of the Magyars. Grape seeds and vine stakes from the graves and settlement areas of the time of the migration of peoples came to light."[21]

It would have been preferable if Sági had specified the contextual dating of these grape seeds and vine stakes. His own discussion implies that they were present continuously, from what he sees as a Roman foundation established by the emperor Constantius around AD 350 to the eventual invasion of Magyars at the end of the "migration of peoples." This latter term has become increasingly problematic since the time of Sági's writing. His narrative posits, as we have seen, Romanized Germans and Sarmatians in Constantius's fortified city, followed by the Alani, who damaged the site in 374. While recognizing agricultural continuity, he goes on to investigate an apparently planned and systematic destruction and rebuilding of the city in the mid-fifth century, after which we can be sure that it became a Gothic city. In fact, Volgum served in the 460s as the capital of the Ostrogoth king Thiudimir, whose son, born in Volgum, became the most celebrated Goth in history, Theodoric the Great.[22]

Two related points about this site are of particular importance for us: the agricultural continuity and the ethnic constituency. Not only are grape seeds and vine stakes found consistently throughout the period, but the excavations of the mid-fifth century destruction level revealed that a great number of Roman-style iron farming tools had apparently been systematically buried. The reason for this is obscure,[23] but the presence of these tools in the mid-fifth century adds weight to our assertion that whoever was living in this city from 350 to 450 cultivated in the Roman style and therefore probably produced wine. Thiudimir's violent takeover of the city around 455 does not force us to conclude that this meant that the Goths drove out any other ethnic group or an occasional isolated survivor of a Roman past.

The consistent agricultural practice, ethnic diversity of grave goods, and frequent disturbances seem rather to point to a period ripe for

ethnogenesis.[24] We can read this as a place and period in which various members of Gothic armies who had been in close connection with the Roman Empire for generations had settled down to live an agricultural existence, as was most common for so-called federate Goths ever since the mid-fourth century. It would seem unlikely that Alani or Huns fresh from the East would have taken over the city and immediately settled down to Roman-style agriculture. It would seem equally unlikely that Constantius had settled a group of "real" Romans in this area in 350, and that they retained their distinct identity through a century of attacks by marauding armies of equally distinct ethnicity. Given the dominance of Goths in the region from about 370 on through the fifth century, it seems plausible that the people in the city called themselves Goths and that these Goths made wine.

At the same time, the Goths translated the Bible into their own language. Though many European barbarians had from antiquity left us evidence that they could represent their tongue with written symbols, only the Goths have left us a translation of a Greek text into their language. The motivation for this was very new: only Christianized barbarians would have felt the need to share a sacred Hebrew or Greek text with people of all classes and educational levels. The story is that Wulfila, the Gothic grandson of enslaved Greek ancestors, made this translation while in exile from the pagan Goths on the other side of the Danube.[25] This was the first European barbarian Bible.[26] And in fact, this Gothic Bible represented the first step of a Northern barbarian people toward what we term a "national identity."

An interesting parallel with another barbarian people can be seen in the Armenians. Around 400 a certain Mosrob created an Armenian alphabet and wrote a translation of the Bible into Armenian, as well as an Armenian version of the Syriac liturgy used at the time.[27] It can be argued that this literary language cemented the Armenian identity to a degree that no other ancient barbarian people achieved. The subsequent history of Armenians who survived every major invasion that swept across Western Asia, from the Umayyads right through Sovietization into the present, is almost unparalleled among ancient barbarians. Looking to parallels in early modern Europe, it is generally agreed that the Wycliff and King James bibles played a major role in the evolution of the English language, and of the idea of a nation.[28] Why should we be

surprised that the Gothic Bible was beginning to play a similar role in late antique Gothia?

The answer may be that we have come to fear that Gothic myth lurking behind so many of Europe's nationalist excesses.[29] From Austria to Sweden the Goth became a symbol of national strength, a fresh, noble, unspoiled successor of the Roman Empire, the fearless warrior, bold ancestor of modern Europeans fated to dominate the world. This fear may be driving early medieval historians into the extreme position they have established, that is, that Gothic peoples had almost no sense of tribal identity or sense of loyalty to the crude kingdoms that they rigged up in the fifth century.[30] They were just a jumble of warriors looking for a good army, and when this army formed it would have made up a new name for itself.

To return to the Armenian parallel, two major differences may help to clarify the special case of the Goths. First, the Armenians never became part of the national mythology of a modern hegemonic state. Unlike the Goths, who were claimed by a wide variety of imperialist, even genocidal modern nations, the Armenians have preserved an unimpeachable record of victimization from Persian and Roman oppression in antiquity to Turkish genocide in modern times. If they had violently conquered and oppressed Europe and Western Asia in the modern period, as the Nazis and others did, we would be having a very different discussion about the early Armenian "myth" of being a nation.

Second, the Armenians enjoyed more than a millennium under relatively tolerant Islamic rule, during which time they were able to define their identity against the Umayyads, Abbasids, Seljuks, and Ottomans by cultivating the language and literature that early Christianity had given them. In short, the Armenians enjoyed excellent historical circumstances to elaborate an identity, and still today enjoy excellent political circumstances for an open discussion of it.

The Goths, of course, enjoyed neither. Through complex processes their cultural legacy was all but wiped out by the seventh century. The gradual disappearance of Gothic can mostly be attributed to waning political influence after the ascent of the Franks and Lombards, though the language may have lingered in pockets in the Iberian Peninsula, the Danube region, and Crimea. What slender legacy was revived in the modern period was so poisoned with moral repugnance that we are still reluctant to address it. But the differences between Goths and Armenians

actually show that they were in a similar stage of cultural development in the fourth and fifth centuries. Both were cultivating an infant literature, and presumably an identity distinct from those of the dominant imperial cultures surrounding them. If the Goths had landed in a relatively consistent, tolerant, and yet culturally challenging imperial setting like the Islamic empires, and if modern hegemonic European states had looked elsewhere for a mythology of conquest, the Goths might well have headed toward an identity as stable as that of the Armenians. This shared fourth- and fifth-century experience is what I would call the first stages of defining cultural independence.

The local production of a fundamental commodity like wine could represent both a desire for economic independence from the Hellenized empire to its south and a process toward cultural independence; and though I am suggesting that the need to translate Christian texts and liturgy into Gothic triggered a process toward cultural independence, many other influences were at work. It seems clear, however, that while Roman historians speak of the empire's failure to assimilate the barbarian Goths, from the Balkan Gothic perspective we can see barbarian viticulture and literature as cultivated efforts to break away from their Greco-Roman neighbors.

Notes

1. I have not found any mention of wine in the many articles and books devoted to the Goths that are listed in my works cited.
2. The role of polyculture's triad of grain, wine, and olive oil in the development of Mediterranean civilization has been well discussed. A brief overview can be found in Greene 1990, 72–73. Drews 2001 also touches on agriculture in the origins of Indo-Hittite languages in Anatolia.
3. I modified the translation of King 1927, 159.
4. See Bonfante, Chapter 1, in this volume.
5. Livy 5.33; Tacitus, *Germania* 23.
6. For wine as a status symbol among barbarians, see an explanation of the respective value of the wine imported into Europe and bought by a Celtic chieftain: Cunliffe, Chapter 13, in this volume.
7. Homer, *Iliad* 9.72, speaks of Argives drinking Thracian wine.
8. See Nelson 2005 for a sweeping revision of the place of beer in history.
9. The first example in the Septuagint comes from Leviticus 10.9.1, which is translated in the New American Standard Bible: "Do not drink wine or *strong drink*, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting...." Homan 2004, 84, points out that though many translators of early Mesopotamian texts have chosen to use the word "wine," the word *šikaru* clearly refers to beer.

10. Mellink 1975, 92-93; Greenwalt 1997, 199.
11. *Iliad* 11.639-641 (description of a *kykeon* party) and *Od.* 10.233-236 (Circe's potion) present the only literary evidence from which McGovern argues that the presence of barley presumes that it was fermented along with the wine and cheese. See also the *kykeon* that Demeter drinks when she comes out of her mourning in *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 210.
12. Krapivina and Kudrenko 1986; Kryzhitskii and Krapivina 1994, 189. McGovern 2003 exploits the technique of chemical analysis of residues in excavated ceramics for historical results. For ancient wine see also McGovern et al. 1995; Murray and Tecuşan 1995; Witt 1997; Papadopoulos and Paspalas 1999.
13. *Hippiatrica Parisina* 376; Oder and Hoppe 1927, 29-114. See Xenophon, *Anabasis* 5.4.29, for an account of another Black Sea barbarian people making wine. Šceglov 1982 goes into some detail on local wine production, and on the relations between barbarians and Greeks in the Hellenistic Black Sea region.
14. See Scardigli 2000 for the current state of Gothic texts.
15. On the stereotype of the Northern barbarians see Keyser, Chapter 2, and Cunliffe, Chapter 6, in this volume.
16. For example, Gothic *aiwaggêljô* from Greek *euangelion*. Wolfram 1988, 90, calls for caution when using etymology to create historical judgments.
17. Schrenk and Weckbach 1997 and Scott 2002 present groundbreaking work on wine's place in medieval Central Europe.
18. Sági 1951, 1961, 1970 covers various interpretations of the site of Volgum and environs. Jacob 1997 vividly describes the archaeological problems involved in understanding late Roman and early medieval wine production.
19. Sági 1970, 152, recognizes that these Germans and Sarmatians were Romanized and were part of the Roman imperial defense system. Wolfram 1988, 91ff., discusses the integration of steppe horsemen like the Sarmatians into the Gothic territories on the Danube. According to Sági, the Christian-style burials within the city imply that the barbarians in Volgum were Christian; one might object that a few Christian burials do not necessarily prove that the Sarmatians and East Germans were in any significant way Christianized.
20. Wolfram 1988, 7, lists Finns, Slavs, Antes, Heruli, Rosomoni, Alans, Huns, Sarmatians, and probably Aesti as well in the Gothic kingdom of Ermanaric, along with a strong contingent of "former Roman provincials." Though this kingdom was situated north of the Black Sea, it coincides chronologically with our discussion of Goths in the late fourth-century Danube region.
21. Sági 1976, 396: "Wir möchten jedoch darauf hinweisen, daß sich der Einfluß der römischen Agrotechnik des 4. Jh. auf diesem Gebiet bis zu den landnehmenden Ungarn beobachten läßt. Traubenkerne und Rebestücke sind schon aus den Gräbern und Siedlungen der Völkerwanderungszeit zum Vorschein gekommen." (Read *Rebestöcke* for *Rebestücke*?)
22. Jordanes, *Get.* 52, explains Thiudimir's seat established *iuxta lacum Pelsois*, presumably Volgum, the only significant city on Lake Balaton in the fifth century. This settlement is generally dated to 455, at the time of Theodoric the Great's birth. See Sági 1976, 159.
23. This presents a mystery, for which Sági 1976, 153-156, gives an ingenious if somewhat elaborate explanation.
24. The literature on ethnic identification is vast; Pohl 2005 gives a recent overview focused on our period, while Roosen 1989 gives a clear, accessible explanation of the theory of ethnogenesis.

25. The essential sources for this story are Auxentius 307r (Gryson 1980, 244–251) and Philostorgius 2.6 (Winkelmann 1981).
26. Latin, Syriac, and various Egyptian dialects had their own Bibles earlier.
27. For Armenian early history, see Garsoian 1999.
28. See, e.g., Greenfeld 1992, 53ff.
29. Geary 2002, 99–103, and Wolfram 1988, 1–3, discuss European nationalist historiography. For discussion of the early history of nationalism, see in particular Hastings 1997, Smith 2000, and Marx 2003. See also Bonfante, Chapter 1, in this volume.
30. Wolfram 1988, Heather and Matthews 1991, Goffart 2006, Heather 2006, and Kulikowski 2006, present a variety of opinions on Gothic cohesiveness.

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