As if from this people I traced my origin: hypotheses on the life of Jordanes

Como si de esta gente yo trazase mi origen: hipótesis sobre la vida de Jordanes

Otávio Luiz Vieira Pinto

University of Leeds, Reino Unido

rocha.pombo@hotmail.com

Introduction

The *De Origene actibusque Getarum*, universally known as *Getica*, is one of the most well-known texts of the Early Middle Ages (Liebeschuetz, 2011; Bodelón, 2005; Amory, 2003; Christensen, 2002; Gillet, 2000; Weißensteiner, 1994; Bradley, 1993; Goffart, 1988; Croke, 1987; O'Donnell, 1982). It is commonly regarded as one of the first accounts on the pre-Roman history of a barbarian *gens* – in this case, the Goths – written by a non-Roman, known as Jordanes (Wolfram, 1990: 27). In this sense, the *Getica* is a valuable text for scholars looking into ethnical traditions and cultural frameworks that might have been

lost or ignored by Roman authors, centred in their own cultural and literary scopes.[1]

In the past decades, the *Getica* sparkled countless historiographical debates concerning its factual accuracy, its general purpose and its effectiveness in dealing with veridical Gothic matters.[2] Because it was written as Justinian was finishing – and winning – his campaign against the Ostrogoths in Italy, some researchers, such as Walter Goffart, saw in it a propagandistic tone, whose value was embedded in a contextual setup rather than a proper historical narrative (Goffart, 1988: 20-111). For Goffart, Jordanes was composing a positive "love story", one that had the history of the Goths as a background in order to enhance Justinian's triumph over a seemingly successful people, and assert union and peace through the marriage of the Ostrogothic princess, Mathasuntha, with Germanus, nephew of emperor Justinian (Goffart, 1988: 68-83). The whole preamble of Goths, of heroic deeds and glory was just a build-up to its real goal: state that the Anicii and the Amali, respectively an aristocratic Roman family and the Ostrogothic royal lineage, were now together and the war would end with a strike of love and unity.

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[1] In this paper, we will refer to primary sources through the name of the author, work and passage. Proper reference can be found in the bibliography. For the Latin text of Jordanes, I will use Mommsen's edition; for Cassiodorus, Adriaen's edition as found in the *Corpus Christianorum*; for Procopius, Dewing's edition as found in the Loeb series. Equally, translations, unless stated otherwise, will be Mierow for Jordanes' *Getica* and Regan for Jordanes' *Romana* (available online), Dewing for Procopius and Walsh for Cassiodorus (references, again, in the bibliography).

[2] To address and settle down some of these debates, Christensen published his fundamental book on Jordanes. He thoroughly covers the scholarship on the topic, with special attention to Jordanes' relation to Cassiodorus and the factual accuracy of his claims. Cf. Christensen, 2002.

Other historians, such as Wolfram, Pohl and Liebeschuetz, were more concerned with its historical implications (Liebeschuetz, 2011; Pohl, 2005; Wolfram, 1990): how much of genuine Gothic traditions did Jordanes conveyed? Did he maintain, within the lines of his *opus*, the thought of Cassiodorus? After all, in the preface, the author affirms that the purpose of the *Getica* is to abbreviate the History of the Goths written by Cassiodorus, an Italian bureaucrat who served under Ostrogothic kings until 540, when Belisarius took over Ravenna and sent the king Vitiges and his close entourage to Constantinople as glorified hostages (Burns, 1984: 95-97).[3] Among this historiographical strand, few are the hegemonic conclusions, many are the prevaricating answers: maybe Jordanes indeed kept some of Cassiodorus' arguments? Maybe Jordanes indeed narrated ancient Gothic traditions?

Consensus over the *Getica*, then, remains at a very basic level: historians agree that it was written by Jordanes, an author who also wrote a volume called *de summa temporum vel origine actibusque gestis romanorum* (generally known as *Romana*), which verses over the origin, the vicissitudes and the imminent end of the Roman empire; it was completed around 551; it was written in Constantinople or somewhere nearby, in the East; Jordanes, its author, was not a Roman. However, even if most of scholarly agreement on the *Getica* rests upon its production rather

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[3] Volentem me parvo subvectum navigio oram tranquilli litoris stringere et minutos de priscorum, ut quidam ait, stagnis pisciculos legere, in altum, frater Castali, laxari vela compellis relictoque opusculo, quod intra manus habeo, id est, de adbreviatione chronicorum, suades, ut nostris verbis duodecem Senatoris volumina de origine actusque Getarum ab olim et usque nunc per generationes regesque descendentem in uno et hoc parvo libello choartem. [...] Quorum quamvis verba non recolo, sensus tamen et res actas credo me integre retinere. Jordanes, *Getica*, I, 1-2.

than upon its content, we hardly discuss who Jordanes really was. It may seem rather pointless to elaborate long arguments over a text whose author's ideological ground and political stances are basically unknown.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore Jordanes' background and, having achieved concluding remarks on this topic, offer new panoramas to understand the *Getica*, its content and its goals.

Jordanes as a man of *otium*

In both his works, Jordanes reveals a few personal details. In the preface of the *Getica*, he dedicates his work to his friend, Castalius, acknowledging that this same person requested an abbreviation of the Gothic History written by Cassiodorus, but in Jordanes' style and words. The *Romana*, on the other hand, is dedicated to a certain Virgilius.[4] Although some historians, pre-eminently Momigliano, suggested that this Virgilius was, in fact, Pope Virgilius, we have reasons to believe that both he and Castalius were laymen (Momigliano, 1984). In the *Romana*, when Jordanes is explaining his reasons to narrate the tragedies that befell the Roman Empire, he coaxes Virgilius to turn himself to God:

> This [narrating the vicissitudes of Rome] I have, however briefly, nonetheless completed in the twenty-fourth year of Emperor Justinian, in this one tiny book dedicated to you. I have added to it another volume on the origin and deeds of the Getic people, which I published some time ago for our common friend, Castalius, so that, learning of

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[4] Vigilantiae vestrae, nobilissime frater Vigili, gratias refero, quod me longo per tempore dormientem vestris tandem interrogationibus excitastis. Jordanes, *Romana*, 1.

the disaster of various peoples, you might desire to become free of all trouble and turn to God, who is true freedom.[5]

It seems unthinkable that Jordanes would treat the Bishop of Rome in this casual manner. Even worse, it is not probable that he would try to persuade a pope to live a more religious life.

This is consistent with another biographical hint left by Jordanes in the *Getica*. At some point in the narrative, he declares that he was a *notarius* for a certain barbarian chieftain before becoming himself a *conversus*. This is usually taken as proof that he became, later in his life, a monk.[6] Although potentially an accurate argument, it does not necessarily convey the tone of this 'conversion': Jordanes, just like Cassiodorus, could have turned himself to a more contemplative, religious life, without necessarily being part of an ecclesiastical institution – including a proper monastic existence (O'Donnell, 1979: 60-61). Even his affirmation, content-wise, is similar to the one left by Cassiodorus in his *Expositio Psalmorum*:

> Some time ago at Ravenna I thrust aside the anxieties of official positions and the flavour of secular cares with their harmful taste. Once I had sampled that honey of souls, the divine psalter, I did what longing spirits often do, and plunged eagerly in to examine and to

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[5] (…) in vicensimo quarto anno Iustiniani imperatoris, quamvis breviter, uno tamen in tuo nomine et hoc parvissimo libello confeci, iungens ei aliud volumen de origine actusque Geticae gentis, quod iam dudum communi amico Castalio ededissem, quatinus diversarum gentium calamitate conperta ab omni erumna liberum te fieri cupias et ad deum convertas, qui est vera libertas. Jordanes, *Romana*, 4.

[6] This idea was mainly championed by Mommsen in the preface of his edition of Jordanes' *opera*. The argument of Jordanes as a monk, since then, appears regularly in scholarship about Late Antiquity. For a summary and a history of this argument, cf. Christensen, 2002: 94-101.

drink in sweet draughts of the words of salvation after the deep bitterness of my active life.[7]

After writing these words, Cassiodorus spent the good part of the next decade writing and contemplating life in Constantinople. He did not join the ranks of monasteries nor local churches. He would eventually set the ground for the monastery of Vivarium, in Southern Italy, but the spiritual life there emphasised learning and copying of books – and seemed rather independent from the church (Viscido, 2011). A similar situation could be happening to Jordanes at that stage: he had served as an administrator and, pessimist with his political, active life, he decided to lead an existence of contemplation. Therefore, what both Cassiodorus and Jordanes seem to do is switch the *negotium* for the *otium*.[8] Not necessarily become a clergyman, but dedicate their lives to a higher, more meaningful purpose within the logics of Christianity.

Henceforth, through his immediate audience, this is our first hint of Jordanes' background: he seemed to be a man of *otium*, a religious person who was dedicating his life to contemplation, but not necessarily became an 'active' monk (in an institutional sense). His friends Castalius and Virgilius could have been members of an educated, possibly lower aristocracy, who were interested in history and customs of Romans and Goths – given that Justinian

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[7] Repulsis aliquando in Ravennati urbe sollicitudinibus dignitatum, et curis saecularibus noxio sapore conditis, cum psalterii celestes animarum mella gustassem; id quod solent desiderantes efficere, avidus me perscrutator immersi; ut dicta saluraria suaviter imbiberem post amarissimas actiones. Cassiodorus, *Expositio Psalmorum*, praefatio.

[8] Although the ideas of *otium* and *negotium* are dear to Classic authors and denote a prerogative of aristocratic life, they are employed here with a loose, figurative meaning: as a way to differentiate divergent approaches to civic or social duties. One could either be dedicated to politics and state matters, or turn him or herself to a more religious, contemplative or intellectual life.

had already spent many resources of the Empire in his wars, being interested in the deeds and legends of the enemy was not at all surprising. Moreover, through a pessimistic world view, Jordanes was trying to motivate his friends to follow his path. His disillusionment with an active, political life could hint at what the *Getica* (and the *Romana*) was not: a politically engaged text (O'Donnell, 1982: 238). We have all the reasons to believe, mostly because he said he had converted, that Jordanes did not have any political or social preponderance, and this scenario points to the fact that his works were indeed the result of intellectual and personal interests rather than tools to, somehow, affect the policies and decisions of the higher spheres of Constantinople. The argument of the *Getica* as a clog in Justinian's political machine, championed by Goffart, cannot fully make sense if Jordanes, as a person, was in no position to engender such a thing.

Jordanes and the ethnic debate

Certainly, the biggest academic attention that Jordanes' biography usually receives concerns his ethnicity. We know he was not a Roman-born author, but we cannot identify with certainty what was his identity. The most widely accepted theory is that he was a Goth. This conclusion derives from the closing remark that Jordanes himself wrote in the *Getica*:

> Thou who readest this, know that I have followed the writings of my ancestors, and have culled a few flowers from their broad meadows to weave a chaplet for him who cares to know these things. Let no one believe that to the advantage of the race of which I have spoken — though indeed I trace my own descent from it — I have added aught besides what I have read or learned by inquiry. Even thus I have not

included all that is written or told about them, nor spoken so much to their praise as to the glory of him who conquered them.[9]

This is a very tricky passage, because the Latin is ambiguous. When Jordanes affirms that he "traces [his] own descent from it", the original text goes *quasi ex ipsa trahenti originem*. The term *quasi*, originally meaning "as if", throughout Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, gets used more like *ut*, that is, a conjunction with a causal meaning, such as "as", "how", "because" (Galdi, 2010: 359; Galdi, 2008). In other words, this passage could read both as "as if I traced my own descent from it" or "because I trace my own descent from it".[10] Even though Jordanes employs the particle *quasi* another 23 times in the *Getica* and 34 in the *Romana*, the usage is not really consistent, as it works both as a causal and a comparative conjunction (it seems to be more causal in the *Getica*, but more comparative/illustrative in the *Romana*).

Hence, even though translations of the *Getica* tend to gloss over this ambiguity (Sánchez Martín, 2001; Devillers, 1995; Mierow, 1915), they still choose to read the author as a Goth – and *quasi* as a causal conjunction.[11] Scholars like Christensen have postulated that, overall, the sentence cannot be fully understood and, through the principle of Ockham's Razor, we should accept

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[9] Haec qui legis, scito me maiorum secutum scriptis ex eorum latissima prata paucos flores legisse, unde inquirenti pro captu ingenii mei coronam contexam. Nec me quis in favorem gentis praedictae, quasi ex ipsa trahenti originem, aliqua addidisse credat, quam quae legi et comperi. Nec si tamen cuncta. quae de ipsis scribuntur aut referuntur, complexus sum, nec tantum ad eorum laudem quantum ad laudem eius qui vicit exponens. Jordanes, *Getica*, LX, 316.

[10] For the debate of this specific paragraph of Jordanes, I will employ translations of my own rather than relying on Mierow as, concerning this passage, his version seems to be too convenient and lacks insight.

[11] The one exception to this widespread version is the German translation of the *Getica*, cf. Möller, 2012.

that Gothic ethnicity is the simplest, most obvious choice (Christensen, 2002: 89-93). However, this long-standing assumption ignores the possibility of an editorial error (Bradley, 1995): Theodor Mommsen, the editor of Jordanes' work in the *Auctores Antiquissimi* volume of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, is responsible for the most common version of the text available to us. His were the grammatical choices and the normalisation of the many problems with the manuscripts – Karl Closs, an earlier editor, when discussing the manuscript tradition, complained of "the criminal spreading of both the force and damage of time, and the inattentiveness of copyists, their negligence, stupor, ignorance and sometimes even their wilfulness" (Closs, 1861: ii-iii). Clearly, the codices were problematic, the medieval copying complicated, and the results of it were felt by the modern editors.[12] Moreover, there is the problem of Jordanes' Latin: he was commonly regarded as a limited, ignorant writer (an *agrammatus*, as Jordanes himself humbly says) whose Latin was poor and decadent (Mierow, 1915: 1). This judgment tends to ignore not only an academic elitism in establishing the purity and value of a style or language, but also the fact that Latin could have easily been Jordanes' third or fourth language. He knew Greek and must have known one or two other Germanic and nomadic dialects, so it is not surprising that his mastery of Latin was not on par with that of Cicero, Boethius or even Cassiodorus.

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[12] The main manuscript – basis for Mommsen's edition – was lost in a fire. Overall, what I mean by "editorial error" is that we cannot be absolutely certain of the accuracy of the remaining manuscripts because the transmission is problematic. The original Latin in specific passages could have been different and, in a paragraph where grammar and meaning become crucial, like the one in debate here, our conclusions have to be, at best, dubious and careful. Cf. Bradley, 1995.

With all these problems, it becomes even more difficult to rely on an already ambiguous sentence to claim that Jordanes was probably a Goth. If the issue is editorial, suffices to say that we could even propose different punctuation and different translation altogether (beyond the possible meanings of *quasi*, as mentioned above). The original *Nec me quis in favorem gentis praedictae, quasi ex ipsa trahenti originem, aliqua addidisse credat quam quae legi et comperi* ("Let no one believe that, in favour of this people, because I trace my origin from them, I added anything besides what I have read and learned") could become *Nec me quis in favorem gentis praedictae, quasi ex ipsa trahenti originem aliqua addidisse credat, quam quae legi et comperi*, that is, "Let no one believe me in favour of this people, as if I, reporting their origin, had added things beyond what I've read and learnt". Therefore, tinkering with this passage is an endless, ambiguous task and, after all, it is very compelling to just accept the Gothic alternative: as Christensen reported, authorities of the past, such as Wagner and Grimm, believed that reading the passage with "as if I", that is, the comparative meaning, was too artificial (Christensen, 2002: 90). The same could be said of the opposite meaning, i.e., the causal. "Jordanes as a Goth" is just too convenient to anyone that expects to see proper Gothic traditions within the *Getica* – this ethnic postulate asserts this work as the first non-Roman history about the Goths written by a Goth, and we could argue that both these things (Jordanes as a Goth and the *Getica* as a Gothic text) are inaccurate. The *Getica* is not only a history of Goths (it deals as much with Huns, with Gepids and with the people of Dacia and Moesia as with Goths), and Jordanes is not necessarily a Goth. The ambiguity of his affirmation should be proof that, if anything, we should not be too clear-cut in assigning him an ethnonym – and in this sense, Mommsen seems quite sensible in

thinking that the ambiguity of the sentence translates the ambiguity of a possibly mixed background.[13]

As polemic as that passage is, there is another big point of debate in the *Getica*, which influences our interpretations of his origins. Jordanes, as he describes the division of lands after the death of Attila, mentions that his grandfather, Paria, worked for an Alan leader, Candac. He also drops the name of his actual father, the odd-sounding Alanoviamuth. Trying to unveil the etymology of his father's name is also an endless task: Christensen listed all the arguments and theories, and all of them are unconvincing. The only thing that is moderately accepted is the idea that the name got lost in later copies of the manuscript, and it could be two different words: Amuth his name, *Alanovi* being some sort of genitive or qualitative ("of the Alans" or something among these lines). Some suggested that *vi* is a corrupted form of *d(ux)*, which would render the name *Alanorum dux Amuth*, or a general of the Alani or of Alani ancestry (Christensen, 2002: 90-95). This is quite an interesting theory, because Jordanes never really affirms that his father worked for the Alans – his grandfather, yes, served Candac the Alan, and Jordanes himself served as a *notarius* for his nephew, the Ostrogoth-Alan Gunthigis (as we will discuss further ahead). It would have been quite odd to include this mark of servitude in his father's name, especially because we do not know if he also worked for the Alani.

Moreover, another aspect is ignored when talking about Jordanes' family. Alanoviamuth sounds very much alike a name already registered in Procopius: Filimuth (or Philemuth), a Herul

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[13] In the preface for his edition, Mommsen believes that Jordanes should be, at least, partially Alan, given that his family worked for the Alani and his father, called Alanoviamuth, apparently contained a genitive form in his name (*alano / alanorum*, "of the Alans").

commander that fought during the campaigns of Justinian.[14] Another Herul named by Procopius is Fara. Fara could have been a Germanic nickname, and we could believe that this is also the case with Paria. Both Paria and Fara could stem from the same word *Farja* or *Faran*. *Farja* is not accounted as a proper name, but is an East Germanic word for "travel" (Schönfeld, 1911: 85-86, 180). We know very little about the Herulean language besides some proper names, and even then they are basically equal to some Vandalic, Gothic or even Lombardic names (Woolf, 1939). All these languages shared a same East Germanic origin, so it is not surprising that they look and sound similar, especially in the archaic art of name giving − on the other hand, it is surprising that these Germanic names, like Paria, are immediately seen only as Gothic words. That is the case with the suffix *-muth* in Jordanes' father name. According to some authors, as mentioned before, *-muth* is a Gothic particle. Schönfeld postulates that *-muth* indeed comes from the Gothic *-möds,* meaning "wrath" (akin to modern English "mood"). However, he also says that in the Herulean language the -s undergoes apocope, rendering the final -d sound muffled and the -ö becomes -ü. Therefore, even if the whole name Alanoviamuth is still mysterious, we can understand that its ending probably includes a Herulean mark, that is, the apocope and the sound-shift (Schönfeld, 1911: 9 − 10).[15]

Definitive conclusions are, of course, still abstruse, even after clarifying these arguments. Nonetheless, we can postulate a few

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[14] εἵποντο δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ τοῦ Ἐρούλων ἔθνους πλέον ἢ τρισχίλιοι, ἱππεῖς ἅ παντες, ὧν ἄλλοι τε καὶ Φιλημοὺθ ἦρχον, καὶ Οὖννοί τε παμπληθεῖς. Procopius, *De Bello Gothico,* IV, 26, 13.

[15] Other Heruli names recorded in Procopius are Aruth, Aluith, Ochus, Uligagus, Datius, Grepes, etc. Cf. Goffart, 2010: 335. With Aluith and Aruth we can see the apocope and the muffled −d rendered as −th.

things about Jordanes' identity. Judging by his own words, he claimed to be close to the Goths, that is, his ambiguous sentence at the end of the *Getica* could mean that he traces his ancestry from Gothic roots, but it could easily signify an historical affinity, rather than a proper belonging to that group – admitting a clear-cut identity might be dangerous and methodologically too convenient. This fluidity is further established when our author mentions his father and his grandfather names. They cannot be easily translated or identified, but they certainly seem to be East Germanic and, comparing with similar names, we can see Herulean elements. Although it should not rely on names alone to assign a certain ethnonym,[16] identifying Jordanes as a Herul (or, at least, a vague East Germanic ethnicity that is not, necessarily, Gothic) might prove correct and accurate when faced with another biographical element, his work in Moesia as a *notarius*, which we will discuss below.

Before we continue to discuss our last topic, we should understand further why Gothic identity was sufficiently well-known that, by the time Jordanes wrote the *Getica*, there was

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[16] Indeed, names are never reliable sources of ethnicity. Jordanes himself admits that many Goths took Hunnic names, Sarmatae took Germanic names, etc. (Ne vero quis dicat hoc nomen a lingua Gothica omnino peregrinum esse, nemo qui nesciat animadvertat usu pleraque nomina gentes amplecti, ut Romani Macedonum, Greci Romanorum, Sarmatae Germanorum, Gothi plerumque mutuantur Hunnoru. Jordanes, *Getica*, IX, 58). Jordanes' own name has a mysterious meaning, as it is not clear if it is connected to the River Jordan or if it is a wrong rendering of a Gothic name, such as Iornandis, cf. Christensen, 2002: 88-89. The point is that the Latinisation (and Hellenisation) of these names (Alanoviamuth, Aluith, Aruth, Filimuth) seems to follow a pattern of the Herulean language or dialect. There are a plethora of Gothic names ending in -*möds* that are written with this very Gothic suffix. Therefore, it seems that the suffix -*uth* and -*iuith* at least come from a Herulean *sprachraum*, that is, a context in which Heruli were fundamentally present.

public interest in their history and their deeds (that is exactly what motivates the writing of that work in the first place). Jordanes has to go around this ethnic recognition to establish that Getae, Scythians and Dacians, when convenient, were the same thing as Goths. His equation "Getae = Goth" is one of the most acknowledged points of the work and part of the rhetorical framework of the *Getica* is engineered in order to support this argument (Rix, 2015: 194; Gillet, 2009; Merrills, 2005; 100-121). It would have been easy for Jordanes to establish his own identity – and his own authority – in the text if he just said, straight away, that he was a Goth. Moreover, it seems, by the conciliatory tone at the end of the work (the marriage between Germanus and Mathasuntha), that being a Goth was not necessarily a political or a social problem in Constantinople by 551. Vitiges, the very king of the Ostrogoths, deposed by Belisarius, lived in peace in Constantinople for the remaining of his life. Hence, if Jordanes depicts himself as a non-Roman, clarifying, in no ambiguous terms, his Gothic ethnicity would have strengthened his position of authority.

The reality of the *Getica* is, in fact, the opposite. It is almost as if Jordanes kept his ethnic affiliation ambiguous on purpose. Perhaps it is because his works were aimed at a restricted audience, people who would know Jordanes personally and be aware of his identity, but it is also possible that he kept it hidden because, in opposition to the Gothic one, a Herulean or another Germanic/Nomadic ethnicity could have been socially and culturally inconvenient: by 552, the Heruli had fought against the Ostrogoths in Italy, led by their general Filimuth (Steinacher, 2010: 349-356). The Ostrogoths were ruled by the warrior king Totila, whom Jordanes chose not to mention in the *Getica* altogether (and, in the *Romana*, talks about him in very gloomy

terms because his war efforts were stretching Justinian's campaign and bringing the Roman Empire close to its end).[17] Therefore, bringing up an identity group whose compatriots were still fighting in Italy would not work with Jordanes' envisioned closure to his *opus*, that is, the marriage between Ostrogoths and Byzantines. This is especially true given that, as well as Goths, Heruli were an easily recognizable ethnicity in Constantinople around this time (Goffart, 2010: 205-215). Procopius, in his narratives of the wars, has a long side-argument explaining the origin and the history of the kings of the Heruli, assigning the island of Thule as their *Urheimat.*[18] Thule is commonly identified as Scandinavia (Rix, 2015), which happens to be the same land of origin that Jordanes assign to the Goths and Gepids – and when he does so, he admits that there are other theories; he dismisses those, saying that they are old wives' tales and that his argument, that is, the Scandinavian origin, is the true story.[19] He never mentions that the Heruli come from the same place, but if this narrative was known through Procopius, then readers would connect the *Urheimat* of Goths with that of Heruli.[20] Culturally,

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[17] Qui et ipse vix anno expleto peremptus est et in regno. Malo Italiae Baduila [Totila] iuvenis nepus asciscitur Heldebadi. Jordanes, *Romana*, 379.

[18] Goffart has different views on this topic and claims that, for Procopius, the origin of the Heruli goes back to the Danube, cf. Goffart, 2010: 209. For an insightful overview of Herulean history and development, as well as theories of ethnicity, cf. Steinacher, 2010.

[19] (...) nec eorum fabulas alicubi repperimus scriptas, qui eos dicunt in Brittania vel in unaqualibet insularum in servitute redactos et in unius caballi praetio a quodam ereptos. Aut certe si quis eos aliter dixerit in nostro urbe, quam quod nos diximus, fuisse exortos, nobis aliquid obstrepebit: nos enim potius lectioni credimus quam fabulis anilibus consentimus. Jordanes, *Getica*, V, 38.

[20] Jordanes, in fact, says that the Heruli inhabited the area that is nowadays the Sea of Azov (Sed cum tantorum servitio clarus haberetur, non passus est nisi et gentem Herulorum, quibus praeerat Halaricus, magna ex parte

they seem to be almost identical anyway: similar language, similar names, close geographical activities, same war-like traditions. Historically, when the Huns decline and their vassal *gentes* start roaming through Eastern Europe, just like Gepids and Goths, Heruli are one of the major forces (Heather, 2014: 226; Steinacher, 2010: 334) and, being so, it would not be surprising if some of them end up in Moesia, where Alans and other people were settled – and where Jordanes used to be a *notarius*. His grandfather, after all, was known as the "wanderer", the "traveller".

Henceforth, although purely a speculation, we can postulate that a Gothic identity would have been useful for Jordanes, and since he never actively admits being a Goth, his affiliation remains open to interpretation: a Herul, all in all, would have been close enough to a Goth to still assert Jordanes' knowledge of their history and deeds, but would also be inimical to them, given that a segment of these people were fighting against the Ostrogoths in Italy. Naturally, our author does not claim to be a Herul, but we can speculate that doing so would undermine the ending of the *Getica*, of unity and tolerance towards the Goths – the same Goths who the Heruli were slaying in Italy at that very moment.

Now, Jordanes' life as a *notarius* and his treatment of the Huns in the *Getica* – which is, mostly, laudatory, or at least, respectful – might be, in themselves, hints of his Herulean/mixed

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trucidatam reliquam suae subegeret dicioni. Nam praedicta gens, Ablavio istorico referente, iuxta Meotida palude inhabitans in locis stagnantibus, quas Greci ele vocant, Eluri nominati sunt, gens quantum velox, eo amplius superbissima. Jordanes, *Getica*, XXIII, 117). It is also important to say that, when he mentions the *Urheimat* of the Heruli, he does so in a very important context: he attaches this narrative to the conquests of Ermanaric, the most glorious of the Gothic kings and a fundamental piece in the rhetoric of the *Getica*.

background and hence help us to compose a greater, wider picture of him as an author and as person, as we shall discuss next.

Jordanes, *notarius* of a fallen Confederacy

Beyond his immediate circle of readers, his family (and possible ethnicity) and his political/religious stance, Jordanes also tells us about his past activities, as mentioned before. He worked in the region of Moesia under the watch of a certain Ostrogoth called Gunthigis, also known as Baza. His position does not seem to be new in his family, as his grandfather (and, possibly, his father) worked for Alans and Goths in that region:

> Now when the Goths saw the Gepidae defending for themselves the territory of the Huns and the people of the Huns dwelling again in their ancient abodes, they preferred to ask for lands from the Roman Empire, rather than invade the lands of others with danger to themselves. So they received Pannonia, which stretches in a long plain, being bounded on the east by Upper Moesia, on the south by Dalmatia, on the west by Noricum and on the north by the Danube. (...) The Sciri, moreover, and the Sadagarii and certain of the Alani with their leader, Candac by name, received Scythia Minor and Lower Moesia. Paria, the father of my father Alanoviiamuth (that is to say, my grandfather), was secretary to this Candac as long as he lived. To his sister's son Gunthigis, also called Baza, the Master of the Soldiery, who was the son of Andag the son of Andela, who was descended from the stock of the Amali, I also, Jordanes, although an unlearned man before my conversion, was secretary.[21]

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[21] Nam Gepidi Hunnorum sibi sedes viribus vindicantes totius Daciae fines velut victores potiti nihil aliud a Romano imperio, nisi pacem et annua sollemnia, ut strenui viri, amica pactione postulaverunt. Quod et libens tunc annuit imperator et usque nunc consuetum donum gens ipsa a Romano

This is a very revealing passage. Jordanes not only tells us about his work and family ties, but also demonstrates that, in his personal context, he had contact with a myriad of different groups and came to understand a variety of different identities. His boss, Gunthigis, is hinted to be an Ostrogoth, since he belongs to the stock of the Amali; he was the nephew of Candac, who appears to be an Alan (or, at least, at this moment was the leader of the Alani), making him half Alan, from the side of his mother, and half Ostrogoth from his father. Moreover, not only Gunthigis, a leader in Moesia, had mixed identity, but also the inhabitants of the regions appear to be of various definitions: Jordanes counts Sciri, Sadagarii and a group of Alani. We also have reasons to believe that he was just being economic with the ethnonyms, and many more social and ethnic groups were roaming the regions that once belonged to the Confederacy of Attila (Mänchen-Helfen, 1973: 166-168). This can be assumed because this passage comes right after the demise of the sons of Attila, that is, the destructuration of the Hunnic hegemony over Eastern Europe.

According to Jordanes, after Attila died, his three eldest sons, Ellak, Ernak and Dengzich, decided to divide the *gentes* that once

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suscipit principe. Gothi vero cernentes Gepidas Hunnorum sedes sibi defendere Hunnorumque populum suis antiquis sedibus occupare, maluerunt a Romano regno terras petere quam cum discrimine suo invadere alienas, accipientesque Pannoniam; quae in longo porrecta planitiae habet ab oriente Moesiam superiorem, a meridie Dalmatiam, ab occasu Noricum, a septentrione Danubium (...) Scyri vero et Sadagarii et certi Alanorum cum duce suo nomine Candac Scythiam minorem inferioremque Moesiam acceperunt. Cuius Candacis Alanoviiamuthis patris mei genitor Paria, id est meus avus, notarius; quousque Candac ipse viveret, fuit, eiusque germanae filio Gunthicis, qui et Baza dicebatur, mag. mil., filio Andages fili Andele de prosapia Amalorum descendente, ego item quamvis agramatus Iordannis ante conversionem meam notarius fui. Jordanes, *Getica*, L, 264-266.

bowed to their father as if they were slaves.[22] This conceit enraged the king of the Gepids and closest ally and general of Attila, Ardaric, who saw an opportunity to rise against Hunnic overlordship and achieve new levels of independence and authority, given that Gepids, alongside Ostrogoths, had been servants of the Huns for a few decades already. His uprising brought together many other vassal groups, such as a few Ostrogoths, Rugi, Alani, Gepids, Suevi and Heruli. They all clashed with the Huns at the so-called Battle of Nedao, leaving thousands of men dead in both sides, including the elder son of Attila, Ellak, who according to Jordanes was the most beloved of his children, loved above anyone else in his kingdom. Ernak and Dengzich fled to the East, thus putting an end to the Hunnic Confederacy and power.[23]

With the fall of a hegemonic, uniting institution in that region, all the *gentes* who were under Hunnic rule got scattered, looking for lands to dwell. This is the context in which Jordanes was born and grew up: a context of instability in Eastern Europe

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[22] Nam fili Attilae, quorum per licentiam libidinis pene populus fuit, gentes sibi dividi aequa sorte poscebant, ut ad instar familiae bellicosi reges cum populis mitterentur in sortem. Quod ut Gepidarum rex conperit Ardarichus, indignatus de tot gentibus velut vilissimorum mancipiorum condicione tractari, contra filios Attilae primus insurgit inlatumque serviendi pudore secuta felicitate detersit, nec solum suam gentem, sed et ceteras qui pariter praemebantur sua discessione absolvit, quia facile omnes adpetunt, quod pro cunctorum utilitate temptatur. In mutuum igitur armantur exitium bellumque committitur in Pannonia iuxta flumen, cui nomen est Nedao. Jordanes, *Getica*, L, 259-260.

[23] Although the Battle of Nedao is accepted as a historically accurate passage, I see reasons to think that it is an invention of Jordanes. Not only he is our sole testimony for this battle, but he also has conflicting accounts of the fate of Attila's sons if compared to Priscus and Marcellinus Comes – two sources that he used widely in the *Getica*. Reasoning for this argument will be present in my forthcoming PhD thesis.

after the disappearance of a Hunnic central power. In this sense, it is not surprising that he was working for an Alan/Goth in a region populated by many other tribes – including many non-named nomadic groups that were serving under Attila (Scirii and Sadagari being only some of the nomadic tribes that Jordanes chose to mention).

Among these recently-freed *gentes*, the Heruli achieved certain notoriety. In-between the death of Attila and their defeat by the Lombards, in the first half of the sixth century, Peter Heather affirms that they were able to gather a huge number of soldiers and were one of the most powerful groups that were clashing over power in the Eastern regions (Heather, 2014: 226). Therefore, it would not be impossible for a group of Heruli to be living in Moesia alongside Goths, Alans, Scirii and others. Jordanes' family could have easily originated in this context.

Conclusion

We can understand Jordanes, then, through three different aspects: a man of *otium*, a man of Eastern Germanic ascendency and a man who had first-hand experience with a myriad of identities and *gentes*.

His stance towards religion is not that of a theologian, but of a person who drew knowledge and understanding from contemplation. Both his *Getica* and his *Romana* are more or less "secular" works, that is, they are not based on dogmatic grounds nor conveyed religious lessons. They analysed politics and historical developments within the Roman Empire and the *Barbaricum* of the East. When Jordanes affirms that he went

through a conversion, we should not see it as a statement of orthodoxy or monasticism, but as an abandonment of a previous active, administrative life: he ceased to be a *notarius* and left his days of *Negotium* behind. The effect of this religious, contemplative canvas is a pessimistic, almost eschatological take on the world: this is obvious in the *Romana*, but more subtle in the *Getica* – in spite of the "happy ending".

More interesting is Jordanes' ethnicity and his experience with many barbarian nations. If we assume that he was not a Goth, the scope of the *Getica* can change: it does not necessarily covers the history of the Goths, but it does narrate the history of East Germanic groups under the umbrella of the "Getae": Jordanes creates historical and cultural links between Gepids, Huns, Alani, Heruli, etc. and uses the Goths as a rhetorical tool to discuss these matters. The Goths, indeed, are a contextual contingency: they were at war with the Romans, and this conflict awakened the curiosity of people like Castalius, who wanted to learn more about this people. Jordanes used the opportunity to tell the story he wanted. His agency runs through the text in a way that is not always assumed. Being a Heruli or an Alan is not important – what is important is that historical and cultural identity, in Jordanes, are plural. By speculating about a possible non-Gothic identity, we can see how the postulation that he *was* a Goth narrating the history of his own people is flimsy at best. Hence, by questioning his identity, we can also question his goals and his agenda.

What is the meaning of these ideas to current scholarship on Jordanes? Understanding the *persona* of the author under a different light certainly changes our perception of his goals and his agenda. We commonly see Jordanes as a Goth who was trying to summarise Cassiodorus, or as a Goth who was trying to write

about the history and the current state of his own people. If Jordanes stops being a Goth and is retroactively assigned to a more generic East Germanic ethnicity – be it a Heruli or not –, we can already cast doubts on his interest to just convey a history of the Goths. Moreover, if we also analyse him under the background of a *notarius* who lived in a post-Hunnic world of chaos and had witnessed the political debacle of various barbarian nations in the Balkans, we can start looking at the *Getica* as a wider text, one that springs from this very political and cultural experience; a text that deals with more than Goths and Romans. It considers the development and vicissitudes of a region and its many people. Goths were main actors, but were tied together to the fate of Gepids, Huns and many others. Giving Jordanes the benefit of a new and ample scrutiny changes the way we view author and work, and with fresh arguments, we can bring the *Getica* to a new and updated debate on Late Antique and Early Medieval politics, identities and cultures.

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