SCANDZA – 'THE WOMB OF NATIONS'

JORDANES, SCANDINAVIA & THE HISTORY OF THE GOTHS

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The title of this paper derives from a famous passage in Jordanes' *Getica*, which links the author's lengthy geographical excursus on Scandza with which he opens his work – clearly Scandinavia, understood by Jordanes, as by classical authors, to be an island – to the substantive attempt to write a history of the Goths which occupies the main body of his text. After some consideration, Jordanes comes to the conclusion that it is Scandza rather than any of the other northern European islands, including Britain (which is also discussed in this opening excursus), that provided the Goths (and other groups as well, particularly the Gepids) with their original home, before they crossed the Baltic Sea under the leadership of a certain Berig to open a new era in their history.[1]

When the more scientific study of the European past began in the nineteenth century, this passage – and indeed *Getica*'s general understanding of Gothic history – was generally accepted at face value. All the early treatments were based on the assumption that the Goths did indeed originate in Scandinavia before undertaking a series of major migrations, which eventually led them to the Danubian frontiers of the Roman Empire by the later third and early fourth centuries. At this point, more or less contemporary Greek and Roman writers took up the story – also recounted in outline by Jordanes – recording in greater detail how a further sequence of migrations led the descendants of the same Goths eventually to establish two of the major successor states to the Western Roman Empire: the Visigothic Kingdom of southern Gaul and Spain, and the Ostrogothic Kingdom centred on the Italian Peninsula. There was much disagreement about when the Goths might have left Scandinavia, where they might have landed, and the course and chronology of their wanderings between that point and Rome's Danube

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1   *Getica* IV. 25 with the broader geographical introduction to northern islands in II. 10- III. 24. Note that the latest translation of *Getica* (Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof 2020, 232) adopts – with explanation – a more military translation of Jordanes' Latin *vagina*. Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof 2020, 31-64 provide an excellent up- to-date introduction to the text and the complex historiographical controversies with which it has been entangled.

frontiers. But these were issues of detail and Jordanes' broad outline was simply accepted (e.g. Bradley 1888; Schmidt 1933).[2]

This had three key components. First, there was a Germanic-speaking group of people called 'Goths', who had a continuous history of development from their beginnings in Scandinavia up until the establishment of the Visigothic and Ostrogothic Kingdoms. Second, the history of this group was punctuated (and indeed given overall unity) by a series of major migratory moves. Third, the Goths' origins illustrate an important, more general, dimension of Scandinavia's relationship to the rest of Europe. Not only in the Roman era, but also in the Viking period and beyond, the region had a long history of exporting population groups to the Continental mainland.[3] The purpose of this paper is briefly to explore how scholarly understandings of all three of these elements have evolved since the nineteenth century, giving particular attention to the ways in which some major intellectual currents of mainstream European and North American scholarship have affected their discussion over the last couple of scholarly generations, since broadly the mid-1960s.

IDENTITY & THE GOTHS

When modern histories of the Goths began to be written in the nineteenth century, the idea of 'Goths', with a continuous Gothic identity preserved across several centuries and through a sequence of tumultuous events (such as large-scale migrations), was not viewed as remotely problematic. This was the height of Romantic European nationalism: an era which championed the view that a person's group identity was both normally and normatively singular. Unless something had interfered with the 'correct' order of things, individuals were born into one fixed identity and maintained it for the entirety of their lives: because both their biological descent and their clearly defined cultural inheritance separated them from neighbouring population groups. In the process of overthrowing a prevailing political order of multinational empires across much of central and eastern Europe, the emerging 'nations' of the European landscape claimed to be the most legitimate and correct way of organising the Continent's human population, because such national communities were in fact primordial. Nineteenth century nationalism, substantially inspired by recent research into the history and relationships of the Continent's different language groups, involved a quasi-religious belief that the original, and therefore the 'right', way to organise its populations was in culturally coherent nations, each equipped not only with its own language, but with specific folk costumes, folktales, folk dances and all the other cultural paraphernalia of national separateness. It was common, consequently, for contemporary political aspirations to be accompanied by cultural endeavours – often led by intellectuals – aimed at identifying and recovering the cultural specificities of the particular nation to which those intellectuals considered themselves to belong, and to display the results in national museums (Geary 2002; Heather 2018).

Groups like the Goths from the ancient past were obviously not a nation, but they were nonetheless held to be a significant part of the Germanic

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2 For reasons of space, it will not be possible here to explore the history of the Crimean and other Goths, who were not caught up in the trajectories of historical development which led to the establishment of Gothic successor states to the Western Roman Empire, but survived as an identifiable population group in south-eastern Europe after seemingly the majority of their peers moved west.

3 E.g. Svennung 1967; 1972, who refers to both the Viking period and 19th–20th century history to 'confirm' that Scandinavia generally supplied population to the rest of Europe.
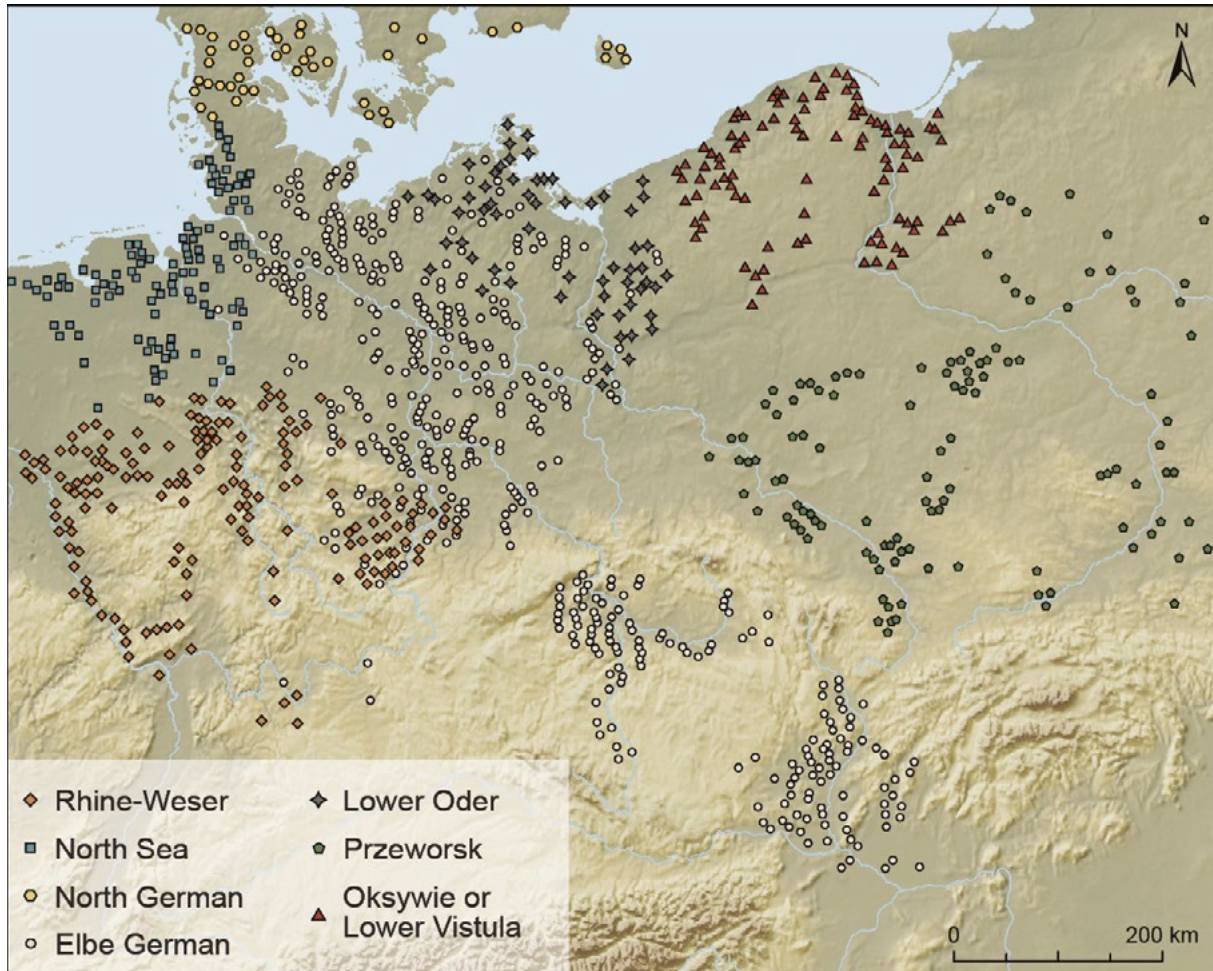
Figure 1. Traditional archaeological 'cultures' of the earlier Roman Iron Age. Illustration, Ingvild Tinglum Bøckman.

Völk, sharing many of its essentialist characteristics, and this prevailing Romantic nationalist vision of identity had important practical effects on narrative reconstruction. To start with, this was the fundamental reason why the existence of a continuous Gothic identity – despite the passage of centuries and major migratory convulsions – was not considered to be a problem. Goths were Goths and always had been, and the appearance of the same group name in many different geographical and political contexts did not require further comment.

More specifically, it provided a particular intellectual trajectory to the emerging discipline of scientific archaeology, which began to shed an entirely new light on European prehistory from the second half of the nineteenth century. As ever more holes were dug in the European landscape and relative chronologies began to be established, it rapidly became clear that find-types (to start with, this was mostly based on pottery) could (sometimes, at least) be grouped by geographical area (Figure 1). Given the contemporary nationalist *zeitgeist*, it was

more or less inevitable that these regional groupings were going to be identified as the material traces left behind by distinct ancient 'peoples' (like the Goths and others named in Roman-era sources). Hence, the natural tendency of archaeological investigation in this era – associated in particular with the Swedish scholar Montelius and his German counterpart Kossinna – was to look for the material cultural signatures of the 'Goths' (or Vandals, or whichever group a scholar was interested in) and attempt to trace them through time, working backwards through the available archaeological materials from their earliest confirmed reference in the historical sources. As investigative techniques and overall knowledge built up over time, this eventually tended to generate detailed chronological typologies of the diagnostic items: usually a mix of pottery, weaponry and personal ornamentation. These typologies were then often put together in illustrative charts designed to show not only how the material cultural signatures of each 'culture' (i.e. 'people') changed over time, but also to illustrate the differences between the various groupings, which confirmed that they were indeed quite separate from one another. These kinds of charts were being generated (with increasing sophistication and detail) from the nineteenth century onwards for every supposed Germanic grouping of the period, on the premise that distinct archaeological cultures were each the remains of an individual 'people' with a specific name which largely derived from the *Germania* of Tacitus (Renfrew and Bahn 2020, among many possibilities).

The assumptions behind this overall approach to the deep European past were eventually undermined, however, by a series of major intellectual challenges in the 1960s in particular. Practical anthropological fieldwork and sociological investigation directly challenged the idea that individuals 'normally' possess a single, clearly defined and unchanging group identity into which they

are born and which remains a defining feature of their existence throughout their lifetimes. Individuals often can and do change their group affiliations one or more times in the course of their lives; equally important, cultural specificities (linguistic and/or material) often provide no secure guide to an individual's group affiliation. Much of the revisionary work from an anthropological direction began with the practical observations that individuals with the same measurable cultural traits can, in practice, belong to separate larger groups, and that some larger groups encompass individuals with widely varying cultural traits. Moreover, given that it culminated in *lebensraum*, the death camps and the other horrors of the Nazi era, the phenomenon of classic-era Romantic European nationalism was also subject to close scrutiny, in the course of which it became become crystal clear that, rather than restoring lost national identities from the distant past, based on defining cultural specificities, the cultural and political processes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were actually creating them. Nationalism and indeed the nation as we understand it – a geographically large unit ascribing equal rights to the totality of its population – are both undocumented and in practical terms impossibilities under premodern conditions (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983).

Pressed to the extreme, these lines of enquiry led some theorists to argue that group identities should never be considered an important force with any kind of capacity to shape individual behaviour. Rather than being born into one fixed identity, individuals pick and choose between group identities during their lifetimes according to what choice will bring them maximum immediate benefit. Such arguments have had a particularly influential reception in the fields of Roman and Early Medieval Studies, which, of course, immediately and fundamentally problematises the human history behind the recur-

rence of a descriptive term like 'Goth' over many centuries and in widely separated geographical contexts. If individuals are constantly free to pick and choose their group identities according to immediate advantage, what meaning can it have to write about the history of the Goths as a collective entity?[4]

At the same time that one line of scholarship was documenting individuals exercising something close to a completely free choice over their group identities, however, another was identifying contrasting cases where individuals were clearly not so free, either because of factors internal to their own personal cultural formations or because of outside limits imposed upon their capacity to choose. Proponents of these alternative perspectives on identity have sometimes quarrelled fiercely, and the two approaches have also been dichotomised in more general reviews of the topic, but I (and I am not alone) would argue that they both tell us something important. Giving both their due weight, it seems to me it is possible to move towards more of a consensus. Quite clearly, the old nationalist vision – that an individual's identity is always 'normally' singular and fixed, because it is inherited from a culturally distinct ancestral group with its own separate ancient history – must be discarded once and for all. The nineteenth century Romantic take on national and individual identity is not sustainable. It is also the case that individuals will often make choices about their personal identity for different kinds of perceived advantages; since Brexit, for example, I have done this myself by exercising my rights to hold an Irish as well as a UK passport. All the same, it is patently not the case that all indi-

viduals everywhere have had in the past (any more than they do now) the right to exercise a completely free choice to hold whichever group identity they perceive as most advantageous to themselves; try telling that to all the 'illegal' immigrants who wish to enter either the EU, the UK or the USA.

After killing many brain cells en route, I have come to the conclusion that the principles underlying actual individual identities are the same everywhere and relatively simple in themselves. In all cases, the actual identity or identities held by any individual are best understood as the result of a negotiation between, on the one hand, the claim or claims that an individual wants to make and, on the other, the rules of the group or groups to which that individual wishes to belong. All the complexities – and indeed seeming contradictions that have been observed in practice – can be satisfactorily explained by the different outcomes that such negotiations will generate in practice, not least because individuals will make varied claims based on personal preference and their own life experiences, while different groups have different rules, some controlling membership more tightly, others allowing much greater access. Indeed, the same group will often change its own rules over time as its circumstances evolve: two well-documented phenomena being that conflict will often tighten rules of entry by drawing clearer lines between neighbouring populations, as will a growing perception among existing members of a group that it has important assets or advantages that it needs to protect from outsiders who wish to share in the bounty.[5]

If we return to Jordanes, Scandinavia and the Goths with these revised perspectives on the operation of individual and group identities in mind, then

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4   See e.g. Amory 1997; Kulikowski 2002; 2007; and many of the papers in Gillett 2002. Much of this literature is explicitly devoted to the idea that the Gothic label did not designate a historical entity which was substantial enough to be written about as a continuous collective.

5   My views on identity are explored in greater detail with fuller references to the relevant sociological and anthropological literatures in Heather 2008; 2009, 12-21.

– perhaps first and foremost – there should no longer be any preconceived expectation that holding a Gothic identity will have been a simple matter (from either direction): neither fixed and unchanging on the one hand, nor open necessarily to all-comers on the other. And this is certainly what the sources seem to be telling us about how Gothic identity worked when it is best documented in the late Roman period. On the one hand, and this was the subject of my doctoral thesis, the Visigoths and Ostrogoths who founded successor kingdoms to the Western Roman Empire were not ancient subdivisions of the Gothic world, but rather new and significantly larger confederations than anything that had existed previously, actually created on Roman soil as their constituent members responded both to the need to unite in larger groups to survive in the face of Roman military power and to best exploit the new opportunities that began to open up as the imperial system unravelled. This was a situation which put a premium on maximising military manpower, and there is considerable evidence that Visigoths and Ostrogoths were created not only by groups that were already (according to the labels employed by Roman commentators) 'Gothic' in some way banding together, but also by the recruitment of non-Goths, including both other Germanic speakers, such as the Rugi, and others (such as Huns and Alans) who were not Germanic-speakers at all (Heather 1991).

At the same time, the evidence makes it clear that not everyone recruited into these new confederations was incorporated as a full and equal member of the group with the same rights. Nineteenth-century nationalist discourse often referred to contemporary political processes as restoring the German *freiheit*, which had been the birth right (as emphasised by Tacitus) of their ancient ancestors. By the late Roman period at least, total *freiheit* (if it had ever existed, which frankly I doubt) was clearly long gone. Legal texts – supported by some of the more-detailed narrative sources of this period – demonstrate that Germanic confederations of this period had a complex internal structure encompassing three distinct status categories of member: unarmed slaves at the bottom, a permanent semi-free or freed lower warrior caste in the middle and an elite – also warrior – free class at the top. Freemen had the greatest rights and were fewer in number, as you might expect, compared to the freed (Heather 1996, 322–6; 2008).

This tripartite socio-legal structure – particularly the permanent heritable nature of the semi-free or freed status group – is certainly not Roman in origin and yet it is found in the immediate post-Roman period all the way from England to Spain. The smart money would suggest, therefore, that it must reflect the operating entry rules of the new confederations (Gothic and others) that emerged in the late Roman period and, in particular, how they policed their well-documented recruitment processes. These were clearly not a matter of completely free individual choice, in that presumably both Gothic slaves and Gothic freedmen would have much preferred to have been recruited into the higher status bracket of free warrior if that option had been available to them. Nor should this occasion too much surprise. In the premodern period, before the emergence of the modern concept of 'nation', it was entirely usual for different elements within the population of any given political unit to enjoy very different social and political rights, often linked to the amount of property they did or did not own (and, indeed, as contemporary migration processes unfold, we have become more used, again, to different population elements within Europe having very different rights, such as the largely Turkish *Gastarbeiter* in Germany). In the late Roman period, therefore, Gothic identity was neither completely fixed nor completely fluid. The extent to which we should read that overarching conclusion back into the more distant Gothic past largely depends on how we view the evidence for the

second dimension of historical enquiry raised in Jordanes' Scandza passage: the reality (or not) of ancient Gothic migration in and around the Baltic region.

MIGRATION & THE GOTHS

Prevailing understandings of human migration processes have become similarly more complex – and in part for intertwined reasons – since the first modern nineteenth-century attempts to write Gothic history. When dealing with less well-documented eras, prevailing understandings of the operation of group identities among any particular population group will also tend, in practice, to dictate visions of the likely nature of any migration processes in which that group is known or suspected to have participated. Nineteenth-century visions of a solid, unchanging Gothic group identity clearly indicated, for instance, that any Gothic migration process would be likely to encompass the mass transfer of more or less an entire population from one geographical region to another. Such conceptions were also greatly encouraged by Jordanes' narrative, which – at first sight, at least – reports two migration moments involving the whole Gothic 'people' moving together in a compact mass, under the leadership of a single king: the move across the Baltic led by Berig and a second move towards Rome's Danubian frontier led by King Filimer. In both cases, we have one king and one people making a single co-ordinated move, and a similar vision of ancient Germanic migratory processes can be found in some other early medieval accounts of the distant Germanic past, notably in the largely Carolingian-era tellings of ancient Lombardic history.[6]

As scientific archaeology developed in the later nineteenth century, moreover, this vision of ancient migration quickly found itself generalised into an overarching explanatory model which identified mass human mobility in the form of concentrated groups of culturally coherent human beings as the most important driver of change in the prehistoric European past. Once it had been decided that identifiable regional clusters of archaeological similarity – 'cultures' – were the remains of distinct ancient 'peoples', then the most logical way to explain any major observable archaeological discontinuity at the regional level was to suppose that one ancient 'people' must have been replaced by another. As a result, mass migration – in the form of a sequence of total population replacements – became the default explanation for *every* visible moment of major rupture in the emerging archaeological record of the European past, and *Getica*-type migrations – one king, one people and one co-ordinated move – came to be seen as underlying the different major phases of European pre-historical archaeology, such as the arrival of the so-called 'Beaker Folk' in the late Neolithic period. Indeed, the model continued to enjoy popularity in some contexts in more or less historical periods as well, with the Anglo-Saxon takeover of the southern British Isles being seen as a mass immigration from the Continent which drove indigenous British Celtic speakers westwards into Wales and Cornwall or across the Channel to Brittany.

Like prevailing understandings of group identity, however, all of this began to change from the 1960s (starting originally among Anglophone archaeologists) and, in part, for associated reasons. If an individual can change their group identity at will and group identities are not dictated by unchanging cultural specificities, then it becomes much easier to envisage that broader material cultural patterns might change for reasons other than the arrival via mass migration of a new 'people'. Other arguments were also in play. The first set of critiques levelled at the then-paradigmatic emphasis on migration as an agent of material cultural change – grouped together

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6   Getica IV 25-6, but see further note 8. On the Lombard materials, see Pohl and Erhart 2005.

subsequently as so-called 'processual' archaeology – focused on the significance of environmental adaptation and associated technological innovation as alternative and much more important drivers of archaeologically visible change than mass migration. From the 1980s and particularly the 1990s, so-called post-processual archaeology then added ideological change to the list of potential factors – other than migration – which might cause profound shifts in the archaeological record.

The overall effect of these revolutionary shifts in the basic theoretical toolkit with which archaeologists might approach any given problem was massively to downgrade the emphasis given to migration as an agent of change in the prehistoric past. Processual archaeology, in particular, saw the identification and debunking of phantom migrations created by the mistaken assumptions of so-called 'culture history' as central to its mission statement to such an extent that, in the 1970s and 1980s, influential schools of Anglophone archaeology in particular (again) were dedicated to the idea that finding an explanation for any major observable change other than 'mass migration' was always going to be an intellectually superior explanation for any observable moment of material cultural transformation. Migration did not disappear entirely from the discussion, but small-scale movements acting as a catalyst for changes with deeper local roots that had nothing to do with any migrants became a much more preferred type of explanation. In overall terms, mass migration was generally associated with a less sophisticated, more primitive era in the development of the discipline.[7]

This was the general state of affairs among my archaeological peers when I first began working on the Goths in the 1980s and 1990s, with the result that it was difficult to generate any serious interest in the topic of migration among many of those studying the history of first millennium AD Europe. The prevailing intellectual *zeitgeist* began to change again, however, in the 2010s. For one thing, post-processual archaeological thinking – now becoming predominant – was inherently less hostile to the idea that migration might *sometimes* generate large-scale material cultural change than its processual predecessor, which from the outset had defined itself against the migration-heavy explanatory paradigms of so-called 'culture history'. Equally important, the unfolding political crisis in Syria, which eventually generated a mass of refugees fleeing towards Europe, put migration firmly back on Western intellectual agendas. Since it erupted, I know of at least three major research projects into early medieval migration which have received substantial funding, whereas there had been none over several previous decades. This renewed interest in migration in general was then given extra emphasis by the evolution of exciting methods for the extraction and analysis of ancient DNA. These provided an entirely new set of tools for investigating ancient human migration patterns and, although their exploitation is ongoing, they have already offered one revolutionary insight into the ancient European past. The vast majority of modern humans of largely European descent, it has now become clear, draw their DNA from a mix of three distinct ancient population groups: the hunter gatherers who first resettled the Continent in significant numbers after the end of the last Ice Age, an influx of Near Eastern farmers who arrived from around 5 000 BC and then a later, further influx from the south-western Steppes (Lazaridis et al. 2014). This was a hugely significant result, because

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7   The literature on the developing discourses which surrounded the vexed topic of migration as the discipline of scientific archaeology is enormous, but good introductions are Renfrew and Bahn 2020; Halsall 1995; 2007; all with refs. Heather 2009, 12-35 lays out the foundations of my own thinking in more detail.

processual accounts of European prehistory had done their level best to argue that the third of these waves (which had figured in older, culture-historical accounts of the European past under the label of the 'Beaker Folk') was a classic case of phantom mass migration conjured into existence by the misplaced assumptions of culture history.

Where has all this more general debate – the anti-migrationist turn and more recent revisions to extreme processualist positions – left the subject of Jordanes and ancient Gothic migration? It seems fair to say that the deluge of new thinking means that the subject remains substantially in flux: very much in need of a comprehensive retreatment. But it is possible to offer some interim thoughts with a reasonable degree of confidence. To start with, Jordanes' simple mass migration model – one king, one people, one move – resulting in the complete expulsion of any indigenous population at the point of arrival, must be decisively rejected. Apart from the fact that he partly contradicts it himself – at other points in *Getica*'s narrative, Jordanes mentions stories which suggest that the migrations led by both Berig and Filimer involved fractures which separated the migrating Goths from some previous peers – such migration patterns have never been observed in better-documented eras.[8] Political crisis (as in the case of Syria) does sometimes set very large numbers of people moving at more or less the same moment, but never entire populations. Nor has mass migration ever been observed suddenly to drive out an entire indigenous population at the point of arrival. Even mass migration, in other words, always involves complicated encounters between immigrants and indigenes; therefore, rather than total population replacements, the fact

that the DNA of most modern humans of European descent comprises elements of *all three* of the prehistoric immigration waves confirms that this also held true in the deeper past.[9]

It is relatively easy to demonstrate the truth of this proposition, moreover, in relation to the major incidences of Gothic migration onto Roman soil in the fourth and fifth centuries. The Visigoths and Ostrogoths were new confederations constructed from a number of originally independent groups of migrants who had sometimes entered imperial territory on quite separate occasions. The Visigothic confederation was largely constructed from an alliance of those Tervingi and Greuthungi who had entered the Empire separately in 376 (and had had separate immediate political histories), and a further bout of recruitment in Italy in 408–9, which drew on other – possibly, but not necessarily – Gothic immigrants who had entered the Empire over twenty years later in 405. Theoderic's Ostrogothic confederation, likewise, was constructed in the 480s from one body of Goths who had been under Hunnic domination until the late 450s, another large group also called Goths who had been established on Constantinopolitan territory in the Balkans, probably since the 420s, and other assorted refugees from the chaotic collapse of Attila's empire in central Europe, including a body of Rugi who attached themselves only in 487–8 immediately prior to Theoderic's march into Italy (Heather 1991). None of these better-documented migration processes, although they eventually involved several tens of thousands of people and had major political consequences, followed a simple 'one king/one people/one move' model.

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8   Jordanes *Getica* XVII 94-5: the Berig move leads to a political split from which the Goth/Gepid distinction emerges; *Getica* IV 27: half of the Goths get left behind on the Filimer move when a bridge collapses.

9   The exact interrelations between the three ancient population groups which produced the modern pattern of highly intermixed DNA remain a completely open question.
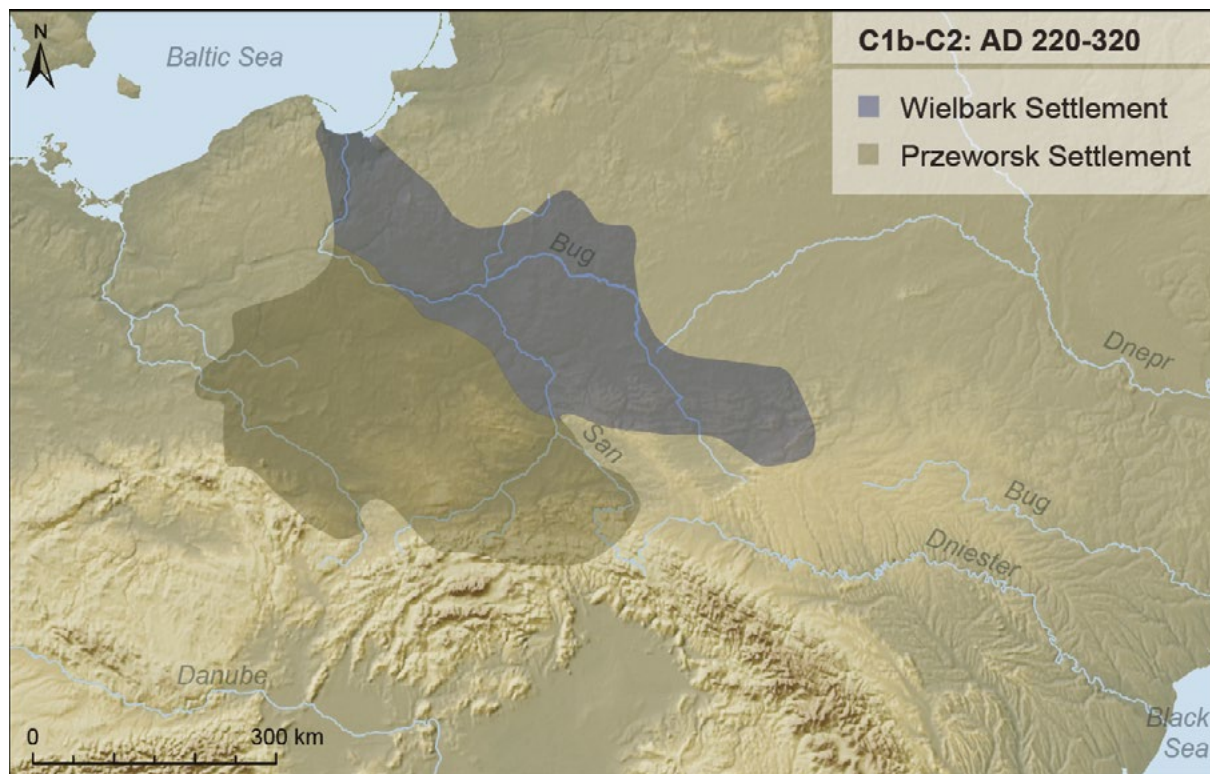
Figure 2. The chronological spread of the Wielbark and Przeworsk cultures. Illustration, Ingvild Tinglum Bøckman.

How far back into the deeper Gothic past should we import the expectation of much messier migration patterns than those ostensibly envisaged by Jordanes? There have been processual-inspired attempts to argue that there was no 'earlier' Gothic migration at all: that the explosion of groups called Goths into the Danubian fringes of the Roman world in the third century represented a rearrangement of the existing populations of the region rather than any kind of migration process (Kulikowski 2007). This is seriously unconvincing. The Goths were undoubtedly Germanic-speakers and there is no sign of Germanic-speakers exercising any kind of domination in and around the Carpathians in the first two centuries AD. There is also a strong archaeological trail of demonstrable

expansion on the part of certain population groups from northern Poland towards the Black Sea region in the later second and particularly the third centuries, a picture built up by the backbreaking and painstaking work of multiple generations of Polish and Russian archaeological colleagues (Figure 2).[10]

The human history underlying this visible material cultural expansion clearly did not take the form, however, of a coordinated move on the

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10 Because of the destruction of existing museum collections, study basically began again (eventually) after WWII, proceeding from detailed site excavations, such as Kmiecinski 1968 and Dabrowska 1978, to broader studies, such as Godlowski 1970 and the *Peregrinatio Gothica* volumes 1986; 1989; 1992. The best, most-recent study is Shchukin 2005.

part of one united Gothic 'people' under a single king. Other, more contemporary known Roman written sources than Jordanes (though admittedly limited in quantity and quality) always suggested that Gothic migration in the third century had taken the form of the separate arrival around the Carpathians of a number of independent migrant expeditions, each with their own leadership. And this suggestion has been greatly reinforced recently by the newly discovered fragments of Dexippus. That the third-century action comprised numerous independent groups of migrants is also indicated, moreover, by the fact that the larger Gothic entities which had emerged in the Danubian region by the fourth century were clearly confederative in form. The leader of the Gothic Tervingi, for instance, was a 'Judge' (*iudex*), with a series of subordinate but largely autonomous 'kings' under his overall control: the natural outcome of a political process of subsequent unification among migrant groupings who had originally arrived in the region separately. The arrival of Gothic migrants in the Danubian region clearly also did not result in any complete population replacement there (although the Romans did receive a substantial number of indigenous refugees across the frontier as the process gathered momentum), and the material culture of the immigrants themselves saw substantial transformation as the resulting political and cultural interactions played themselves out. While there is much continuity in the nature and styles of metalwork from the Polish Wielbark tradition in fourth century Danubian materials, for instance, the pottery – now produced on a wheel rather than handmade – is completely different.[11]

Whether the demonstrable messiness of third-, fourth- and fifth-century Gothic migration patterns also applied to a putative, earlier migration process which brought Goths from Scandza to northern Poland is much harder to say. There is no other historical documentation for such a move apart from Jordanes' Berig story, which has little or no evidential value and the archaeological evidence is much less compelling. The Wielbark cultural zone which emerged in northern Poland in the early centuries AD can mainly be distinguished from its near neighbours by the fact that its constituent populations – quite suddenly – stopped burying weapons with their male dead. The so-called *Oksywie* populations which occupied the same territory more or less up to the birth of Christ did bury males with weapons, as did the adjacent *Przeworsk* culture afterwards, but Wielbark populations did not.

Why not? Was this striking change brought about by the arrival of immigrants from north of the Baltic? Possibly, but no convincing modern discussion has made the case.[12] And, in the abstract, it is just as easy to envisage the new burial rite – in post-processual terms – as the emergence of new ideological/cultural priorities on the part of an existing population which evolved *in situ* in northern Poland without any immigrant contribution at all. Jordanes, it is also worth remembering, seems to have known only of fairly non-specific stories about Goths originating on some northern European island somewhere and made the Scandinavian identification himself (where others seem to have identified the island in question as Britain), so it really is not clear how much value can be attached to his testimony. Moreover, even if we do accept

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11 Amongst many possibilities, see Heather 1996, chapters 2-3; Shchukin et al. 2006; and Martin and Grusková (2014) for the recently discovered fragments of Dexippus.

12 None of the papers in the *Peregrinatio Gothica* volumes 1986; 1989; 1992, for instance, return to the issue of potential Scandinavian links in any great detail.

that there was an element of Scandinavian migration in the emergence of Wielbark cultural patterns, any Baltic crossings in this early era around the time of the birth of Christ would have been carried out in boats of broadly *Hjortspring* or *Nydam* types. Both could carry twenty or thirty odd people and a few hundred kilos of baggage on a one-way journey, and any maritime migration enacted via these types of vessels could – again – never have taken the form of the mass transfer of a total population. At the most, it would have been a case of multiple separate intrusions on the part of much smaller units. If a move from Scandinavia played any role in the Gothic story, therefore, its migratory patterns will have been absolutely as messy as later and better-documented Gothic moves: first towards the Black Sea and then across Rome's imperial frontiers.[13]

SCANDINAVIA & EUROPE

The lines of argument offered so far on the likely nature of evolving Gothic identity and its associated migration processes have immediate consequences for the third dimension of Jordanes' Scandza passage: that this 'island' was a womb of 'nations'. It still remains possible to maintain something of *Getica*'s vision of Scandinavia as a supplier of population to the rest of Europe, I think, but only in a highly modified form. Whole nations or peoples in the modern sense of the term clearly did not move en masse south across the Baltic at any point in the centuries around the birth of Christ. At most, an intrusive Gothic elite moving from Scandinavia – probably in many small, separate sub-groups – may have set in motion new socio-political processes in northern Poland. Neither the available transport technology nor the evidence for material cultu-

ral change suggest a mass demographic transfer. If Scandinavia was supplying Goths to Poland at some point in this period it was in a very different form to that imagined by Jordanes. It is also worth remembering that mobility on a local level was pretty much a constant fact of life among Wielbark populations and most of their neighbours. Wielbark settlements of this era were both small (no more than hamlets) and short-lived, because the populations which constructed them did not yet have the skills (or perhaps the need?) to maintain the fertility of their arable fields for more than a generation or two. Wielbark farming was a mix of pastoral and arable, but cropping methods quickly exhausted the latter and, as a result, regular local movement rather than permanent settlement was the natural outcome. For Wielbark populations, cemeteries were much more permanent sites, often remaining in use for a century or more and containing not just grave fields but also designated spaces (marked by stone circles) for a wider range of public activities. Part of the explanation for the later second- and third-century expansion of Wielbark populations south and eastwards towards the Black Sea (Figure 2), therefore, is that it occurred among populations for whom geographical relocation was a regular and recurring feature of life (Heather 1996; Shchukin 2005).

Gothic migration and Scandinavia's broader role in supplying (or not) population to the rest of Europe in this era also needs to be understood against another and much broader context. Gothic expansion south from Poland, south-eastwards towards the Black Sea in the later second and third centuries (and any earlier moves from Scandinavia) occurred as the Roman imperial system was rising towards its apogee, and the effects of this revolutionary development were not limited to regions under formal Roman military and political control. Not least, the emergence of the imperial system repre-

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13   Heather 1996, chapter 2; cf. the introduction and notes to Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof 2020 on Jordanes' account of Scandinavia.
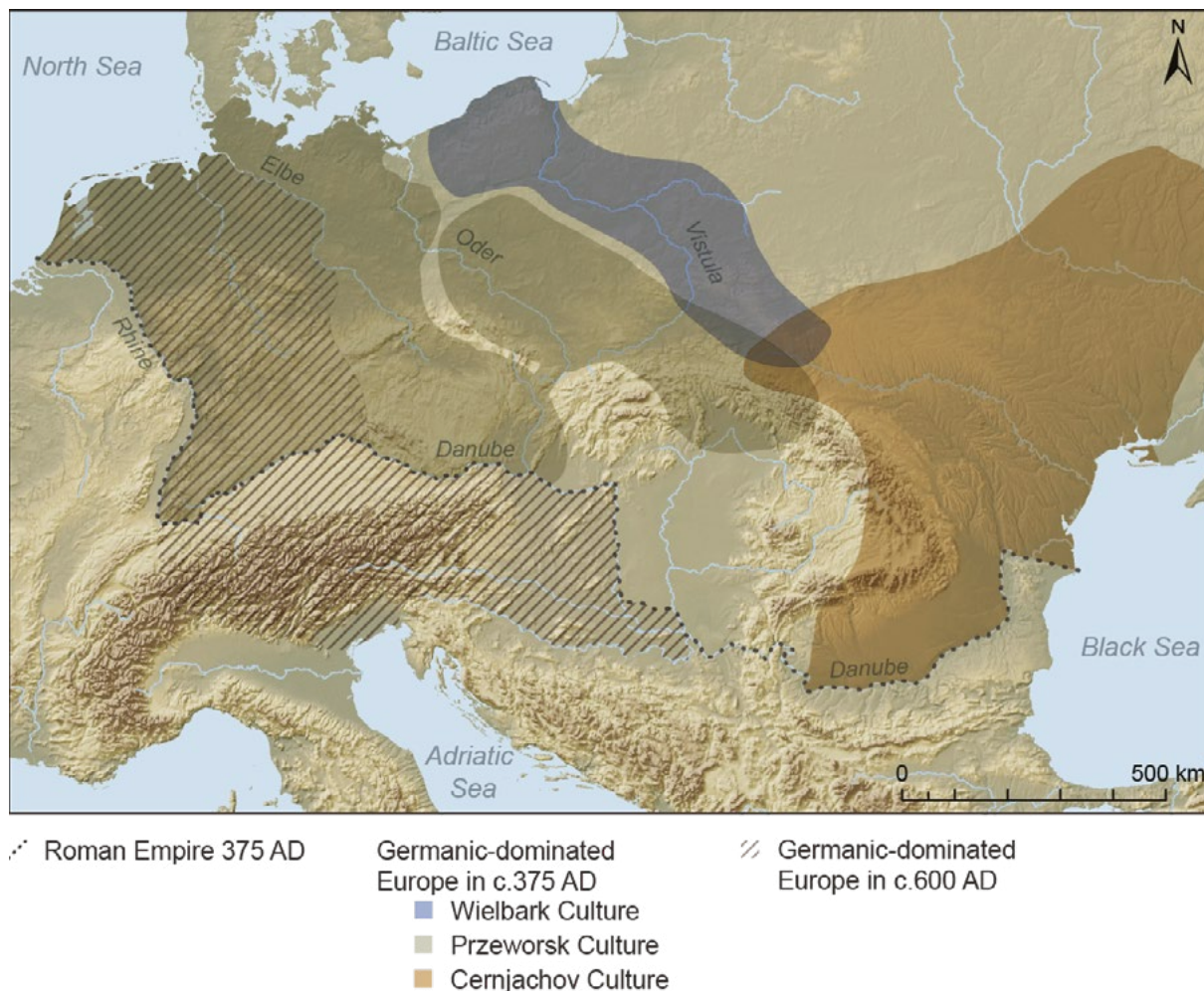
sented a huge source of new economic demand for European populations beyond its formal frontiers. In broad terms, groups closer to the frontier (a zone of up to about a hundred kilometres from the defended border) enjoyed enormous opportunities to supply everyday goods (such as foodstuffs, fodder, lumber, leather and other raw materials) to the many thousands of legionaries who came to be stationed nearby. Even beyond this inner frontier zone, and despite greater transport costs, the demand for higher value goods (amber, slaves and perhaps iron ore) was sufficiently strong to generate important trade links. Nor were the effects of the developing imperial system limited to economic demand. To protect its frontiers more effectively, the Roman imperial structure regularly interfered militarily and diplomatically beyond the border: mounting pre-emptive campaigns, sponsoring favoured local rulers with diplomatic subsidies and favourable trade terms, while its sometimes diplomatic 'partners' simultaneously and regularly raided across in the opposite direction, lured by the greater material wealth of the Roman world.

Over the first four centuries AD, this potent Roman combination of economic stimulus and military/diplomatic interference prompted some revolutionary effects in non-Roman north-central Europe. A major agricultural revolution is visible, particularly in its western and southern reaches, as local populations responded to the increase in economic demand by developing more productive agricultural economies (visible in the unprecedented size and permanence of the new settlements which emerged in this era) to generate the much larger surpluses which could be sold across the frontier. This combined with the diet of diplomatic subsidies, favourable trading terms and raiding profits to build up sufficient new wealth in particularly that inner region immediately beyond the frontier to generate socio-political transformation among

Rome's near neighbours. By the fourth century, the multiple small primary political units which are such a feature of Tacitus' *Germania* (and narrative sources covering the same era) had given way to a much smaller number of larger confederations (such as Alamanni and Franks, as well as Goths to the east), which were dominated by militarised elites who had pushed themselves to the fore by controlling much of the flow of new, Rome-derived wealth. A striking reflection of the nature of the process is that every term for political leadership employed across the Germanic language family by the late Roman period was derived from words that originally meant 'military commander'.[14]

Not only important in itself, this socio-political revolution – prompted by a whole sequence of more and much less peaceful engagements with the Roman imperial system – was a major driving force behind many of the migratory phenomena that also affected the Germanic-speaking populations of north central Europe in this era. Stepping back from the detail, the pattern in the third and early fourth centuries is straightforwardly one of expansion from exterior regions towards the inner frontier zone, where most of the new Rome-derived wealth was building up. Not only did Goths and other Germanic groups from around the Vistula move close to (and sometimes beyond) Rome's Danubian frontiers, but a similar pattern holds true further west. The Alamannic military elites who moved into the *Agri Decumates*, which Rome abandoned between the Upper Rhine and Upper Danube in the same era, likewise originated far outside the frontier zone: around the Lower Elbe. And although the available narrative sources are

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14 The relevant bibliography is enormous, but, for an introduction, see (with refs.) Hedeager 1987; 1988; Heather 2009, chapter 2; and Green 1998 on the language of leadership.

North Sea
Baltic Sea
Elbe
Oder
Vistula
Rhine
Danube
Danube
Black Sea
Adriatic Sea
N
0   500 km

Roman Empire 375 AD

Germanic-dominated
Europe in c.375 AD
■ Wielbark Culture
■ Przeworsk Culture
■ Cernjachov Culture

Germanic-dominated
Europe in c.600 AD

Figure 3. The strange death of Germanic Europe. Illustration, Ingvild Tinglum Bøckman.

(even) less reliable, the same kind of patterns hold true of what can be reconstructed of the convulsions of the second century, which underlay Rome's so-called Marcomannic wars. Here too, expansion towards the immediate frontier zone on the part of armed population groups from further north – in this case, of Lombards and Vandals at least – played a major role in destabilising Rome's nearer neighbours. None of this is likely to be the result of accident. Throughout the Roman imperial period,

the documented trajectory of known Germanic migration is broadly north to south, and this makes perfect sense in terms of the overwhelming pull factor being exercised by all the new wealth building up close to Rome's frontier lines (Heather 2009, chap. 3).

It is against this broader context provided by the revolutionary transformative effects – direct and indirect – of the development of the Roman imperial system upon Europe's Germanic-speaking

populations, that the history of particularly southern Scandinavia – and not least, the Sea Kings of Avaldsnes – needs to be written. The ways in which contemporary Scandinavian populations were (or were not) caught up in broader patterns of Roman-era development sweeping through their southern neighbours remains, it seems to me, an emerging subject area, which has only just started to attract the kind of scholarly attention it deserves. A few initial broad-brush observations, however, are perhaps worth making. In general terms, Scandinavian populations clearly belonged to the outer periphery of the Roman imperial system, rather than the inner periphery where most of the more transformative force of all the new Rome-derived wealth was concentrated. But they were certainly involved in some of the longer-distance trading networks – perhaps exporting iron ore and slaves, amongst other items – and, as the evidence from Gudme makes clear, receiving some Roman goods in return. It was a long way to go to raid rich Roman territories, but some Scandinavian groups, particularly Saxons from the Lower Elbe, did so with increasing frequency – it seems – over the Roman centuries, and they may have provided the empire with mercenary companies too. Scandinavian populations were also able to exploit some of the opportunities opened up by imperial collapse: not least, the Anglo-Saxon warbands that moved into southern and eastern Britain. All the same, geographical distance and, not least, the basic requirement to cross water in an era when naval technology was still limited to rowing boats (however well made) of limited size, clearly meant that especially northern Scandinavian populations were only marginally integrated into the different dimensions of the functioning of the Roman imperial system.[15]

This might in turn explain, finally, why they were so much less affected by the collapse of that system than the rest of the Germanic-speaking world further south. The point is sometimes missed, but it is one of great significance. The collapse of the western half of the Roman imperial system in the fourth and fifth century was accompanied by an extraordinary simultaneous reduction in the extent of the European landscape dominated by Germanic speakers. The vast swathes of central and eastern Europe controlled by Goths and so many others in the fourth century had given way by the start of the sixth century to a much more restricted zone, which now spread little further east than the River Elbe (Figure 3).[16] It was this collapse which in turn created the necessary conditions for the subsequent Slavicisation of much of central and eastern Europe. But that, as they say, is another story. The point for present purposes is that, potentially, it was Scandinavia's relatively marginal engagement with the Roman imperial system which insulated it from the kind of astonishing collapse that affected most of the rest of the Germanic-speaking world.

CONCLUSIONS

What overall conclusions can be drawn, then, about Jordanes' account of the Goths' connections to Scandinavia? On the one hand, it is no longer credible to think about the Goths as a specific 'people' in nineteenth-century terms, marked out by a distinctive cultural profile (part material, part non-material) from the distant past into the better-recorded Roman period, which survived essentially unchanged through a series of equally unified mass migrations. On the other hand, attempts to deny the existence of any kind of substantial Gothic

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15   For some introduction, see (with refs.) Hedeager 1992 (on southern Scandinavia); Skre 2020 (further north).

16   Cf. Heather 2009, 371-7; see Price 2020, chapter 2 (with refs.) for a review of the evidence that profound change followed even in the north in the sixth century.

group identity at all and the historical reality of occasional Gothic migration events in better-recorded periods, which sometimes involved several tens of thousands of individuals, are, I would argue, equally unconvincing. From the arrival of Goths on the northern littoral of the Black Sea in the third century onwards, a strong run of contemporary evidence indicates that Gothic identity was primarily the preserve of an elite freeman warrior caste who gathered other population elements around themselves in subordinate social positions and political relationships: a less-privileged secondary warrior class (called 'freedmen' in later sources) and unarmed slaves. Correspondingly, it was the decision to move and then to unite with other similar groups, sometimes on Roman soil, on the part of this same elite group which provided a core of unity to subsequent Gothic history, notwithstanding plentiful evidence that they also recruited many non-Gothic outsiders, down to the foundation of the two Gothic successor kingdoms on former Roman territory.

Many important questions remain, some of which may be resolved in due course by genetic analysis. In particular, to what extent was elite free warrior status transmitted by descent: through either male or female lines, or indeed both? Such research would also have important implications for the extent to which migratory Gothic units included women and children as well as warrior males. How easy, or otherwise, was it for second-class freed warriors or indeed slaves to move up the social ladder into the Gothic elite? This is currently largely an open question, the answer to which would again substantially transform our overall understanding of how Gothic identity actually worked in practice.

Equally interesting questions surround both the Goths' original relationship with Scandinavia and the probably substantially varied relationships of different Scandinavian populations to the rise and fall of the Roman imperial world system in the early centuries AD. The transformative power exercised by the operations of this system on Continental Germanic-speakers is beyond doubt, up to and including the inhabitants of southern Scandinavia in what would eventually become Denmark. The range of its effects upon other Scandinavian populations north of the Baltic is now the subject of increasingly intense investigation, and I feel confident that, amongst other things, this will eventually provide much more insight into the historical realities behind Jordanes' attempt to locate in Scandinavia both the starting point of the Berig migration story and the Goths' original home. Here, too, nineteenth-century visions of a Gothic people making a unified move across the Baltic Sea will have to be abandoned, but even Jordanes saw this migration as the source of an important political divide in a previously united group, and it is not impossible that *Getica*'s dim and distant, sixth-century memories of Berig contain an important grain of truth.

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