

The Christian Goths at the Bosphorus in the 4th and 5th Centuries AD

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the barbarian Christian community that existed in Late Antiquity and is known as the Tetraxite (Trapezite) Goths in the Russian literature. The history of these barbarians still continues to be debatable. The main objective of the study is to determine the exact location of the Christian Goths and the specifics of their religion. Using the method of source analysis and the comparative-historical method, the authors have determined the distinctive features of the organization of episcopal cathedrae in the 4th-5th centuries AD, both in the border territory of the Roman Empire and in a barbarous environment. Based on a careful analysis of written sources and the latest archaeological material, the authors give new arguments allowing pinning down the location of the Gothic Diocese in the territory of the European Bosphorus. At the same time, the authors argue that the transformation of pagan rituals into Christian formal dinners was the main distinguishing feature of their spiritual practice. It is for this reason that the term "Trapezite Goths" appeared; the Goths could receive it from their new neighbors, the Bosphorans, in this case, playing around with the famous Greek word. The authors also believe that not all Goths left Eastern Crimea in the 5th century AD. It was the Christian Goths and their descendants who remained in the area of the ancient settlement "Belinskoye" that provided a high level of Christianization of the population living here in the Middle Ages, which in its active devotion of Christ contrasted sharply with the inhabitants of neighboring similar settlements openly practicing pagan rites. In this connection, there is no doubt about the importance of the results obtained for further studies of the early Christian communities in the territory of the Bosphorus and throughout the Black Sea region since the authors' conclusions highlight the special role of the Tetraxite (Trapezite) Goths in the Christianization of the northern periphery of the Greco-Roman world.

Keywords: John Chrysostom; Roman empire; Bosphorus kingdom; Goths Gothic diocese; Christianity; Arianism.



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1. Introduction

1.1. The Problem of the Location of the Goths

History of those who lived in the 4th-6th centuries in the Black Sea region, the Tetraxite (Trapezite) Goths of the Christian faith, is still highly questionable. In this case, if the location of these barbarians in the 5th-6th centuries AD in the area of the Eastern Black Sea Region does not cause any special objections (Dmitriev, 1979a), then their stay in the 4th century AD in the territory of the Crimean Peninsula continues to be the topic of endless discussions. This community, known from the work of Procopius of Caesarea (Procop. Bell. Got., VIII, IV, 4-5, 18-20) (in different editions called Tetraxites or Trapezites), was previously linked to 4 groups of the Goths (Pioro, 1990), to the city of Trebizond (Greek Trapezous) of different localization (Pioro, 1990); (Nikolaeva, 1984); (Katyushin, 2005), and even to a mountain of the same name (Vasiliev, 1921); (Golenko, 2006). Sometimes, taking into account a reference in the source to the bay in the form a "half-moon" where these goths lived, they were placed on the Isthmus of Perekop (Pioro, 1990) or Ak-Monay (Vasiliev, 1921), on the coast of the Kazantip Bay (Maslennikov, 2003); (Ermolin, 2006), on the ledge in the north-eastern part of the Kerch Peninsula (Weimarn, 1971) and even in the area crossing the Cimmerian Bosphorus (Katyushin, 2005). In the latter case, the Goths had to withdraw to the Kerch Strait from their homes – the Crimean Sea of Azov.

1.2. The Problem of the Time of Appearance of the Tetraxite (Trapezite) Goths at the Bosphorus

In historiography, there is still no clear opinion about the time of the appearance of the Tetraxite (Trapezite) Goths at the Bosphorus. The archaeological remains also do not give an unambiguous answer to this question. Apparently, their first appearance at the Bosphorus must be attributed to the time after the Roman-Gothic Treaty in 369, when hostages from the Thervingi went to Constantinople (Amm. Marc., XXVII, 5.8), and the hostages from the Greuthungi, most likely, to the Bosphorus. After all, it is impossible to imagine that in such a matter of concern Emperor Valente forgot about the Goths-Greuthungi, the most active participants in the Roman-Gothic conflict. From this time forward, rich things of the European origin appear in the burials of the nobles in Kerch

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(Yartsev *et al.*, 2015). The resettlement of the majority of the Goths to the territory of the Bosphorus (from revived Tanais to the Crimean Sea of Azov) should be connected with the consequence of the Hunnic outrages of 376. As some scholars believe (Bolgov and Ryabtseva, 2013), it better corresponds to the prevailing military and political situation in the region.

1.3. The Problem of the Religion of the Tetraxite (Trapezite) Goths

Despite the rather definite written evidence pointing to Christianity of the Goths, there were no archaeological remains confirming this information up to the present time. Nevertheless, one should remember here that often the cost of barbarians' resettling to the territory of the ancient state was a complete loss of migrants' ethnic identity (Budanova, 2013). This is why the Goths, who found themselves in the Roman Empire, en masse, accepted Arianism, which in fact turned into an important element of the ethnic self-consciousness of the Germans (Volfram, 2003); (Zakharov, 2011). Consequently, the Goths could not stay away from this process as well. However, what the specificity of their religion was, whether they were Arians like their western counterparts, is still unknown.

2. Methods

In this study, the authors tried, as far as possible, to adhere to the principle of objectivity relying on the facts obtained after a careful analysis of historical sources. The choice of specific methods was determined by the peculiarities and features of the sources used. The main written source was the letter of the deported archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom to the deaconess Olympias. Among the archaeological sources, a special place in the study was occupied by the sacral complex of the 4th-5th centuries AD excavated by the authors in the Belinskoye site of ancient settlement in the territory of the European Bosphorus. The leading method of the research was the method of the source analysis. It involved not only the selection but also a careful study of all the features of the source that were important for identifying and decoding information about the past. This was the information about the origin, motive, time of creation of the source, the degree of credibility of the obtained information. In the course of work on the historical facts revealed in this way, some general-purpose methods of analysis and synthesis were widely used.

The use of the comparative historical method made it possible to reveal not only distinctive features but also important features in the organization of the episcopal departments of Catholic religion located along the Danube limes and the Gothic episcopate, the institution of which similarly had a territorial character but differed sharply from the prevailing by that time in the Danube region barbarous system of "tribal" bishops.

3. Results

The information obtained after careful analysis of the sources, and first of all, a comprehensive study of the text of the letter of John Chrysostom to the deaconess Olympias, allows localizing the Gothic Diocese in the territory of the European Bosphorus. Probably, it appeared after the defeat of the Goths by the Huns in 376. Here, in the north-eastern periphery of the Greek-Roman world, with the aim of preserving their ethnic identity, the barbarians first tended to Arianism, which transformed into an important element of the general German spiritual culture. However, due to the efforts of the Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, by the end of the 4th century AD the Bosporan Goths had refused from the heretical trend and became active followers of the Catholic (Nicene) faith. Moreover, the transformation of pagan rituals to Christian love feasts of these barbarians, judging from the evidence of the latest archeological material, has become the main distinguishing feature of their spiritual practice. Most likely, this circumstance explains the appeared term "Trapezites", which the Goths could receive from their new neighbors, the Bosporans, in this case, playing around with the famous Greek word. At the same time, the part of the Bosphorus territory could be called "Gothia" from the end of the 4th century AD. There is every likelihood that after the establishment of the Hunnic hegemony in the Northern Black Sea region, the name Gothia was preserved only for the areas settled by the Goths who, for a number of reasons, were not defeated by the Huns and retained relative independence from the latter. In other words, the question is about the territories of the Roman Empire and the Bosphorus Kingdom.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Analysis of the Accuracy of Georeferences in the Letter of Constantinople Archbishop John Chrysostom to the Deaconess Olympias

One of the most important sources confirming the spread of Christianity among the Goths at that time is the letter of Constantinople Archbishop John Chrysostom to the deaconess Olympias. It was written by him in 404, i.e. when the Holy Father was in the last exile in his life. The part of this document that quite definitely indicates the existence of a large community of the Christian Goths somewhere outside the empire is of particular interest: "The Marsian [Constantinopolitan – authors' note] and Gothic monks where the Bishop Serapion had constantly been concealed informed me that Moduarius the deacon had come bringing word that Unilas, that excellent bishop whom I lately ordained and sent into Gothia, had been laid to rest, after achieving many great exploits. And the deacon was the bearer of a letter from the king of the Goths begging that a bishop might be sent to them. Since then I see no other means of meeting the threatened catastrophe with a view to its correction save delay and postponement (as it is impossible for them to sail into the Bosphorus or into those parts at the present time), take measures to put them off

for a time on account of the winter season; and do not by any means neglect this: for it is a matter of the greatest importance" (Joannis Chrysostomi, Epist., 14).

Unfortunately, the absence in the text of a clear geographic localization of Gothia, the mention of the Bosphorus along with some other countries, caused dispute about the interpretation of the Christian Goths of John Chrysostom. Therefore, if some scientists unequivocally linked these barbarians with the Bosphorus (Vasilevsky, 1909); (Kulakovsky, 1914); (Berthier-Delagard, 1920); (Vasilev, 1936), others noticed that there was no specific information in the text that allowed drawing certain conclusions (Aybabin, 1999).

Nevertheless, the exact names of people, the existence of a serious problem and specific actions to resolve it, do not allow one to agree with the opinion that the text written by the priest's hand does not imply the accuracy of georeferences (Mogarichev, 2014). Of course, on the one hand, the term "Gothia", which in respect to Crimea began to be used several centuries later (Mogarichev, 2012), strongly embarrasses; however, on the other hand, one cannot ignore the fact that the Danube Arian Goths could not ask John Chrysostom to send a bishop because he was known for his active struggle against Arianism (Kazenina-Pristanskova, 2003). The activities of Orthodox Bishop Unilas look incredible; he committed "many grand actions" among the Arian Goths, if one (as, for example, Tomashek) considers the latter as the Danube Goths (Tomaschek, 1881). In fact, at that time the Danube Arian Goths had long had their own Arian bishop Sigisarius (Zakharov, 2011), who became famous for the fact that, by order of King Alaric (395-410 AD) baptized the usurper Attal in 409 in Italy (Sozom. Hist. eccl., IX, 9, 1). By reason of this spiritual choice, some Omi bishops who retained their influence in the Balkan-Danube region at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries (McLynn, 1994); (Zakharov, 2014) willingly engaged with the Arian Goths (Zakharov, 2014).

4.2. Comparative Analysis of the Specifics and Character of the Episcopal Departments of the Catholic (Nicene) Faith in the Border Regions of the Empire and the Barbarians

Of course, in the Roman territory, especially in the border cities of the empire along the Danube limes, there were many episcopal cathedrae of the Catholic (Nicene) faith. For example, one of them in Tomis, in the mouth of the Danube, was headed by Theotimus, a friend of John Chrysostom (Meyendorff, 2012); Bishop Nicetas preached to the Goths in the city of Remesiana near Naissus (today, the city of Niš in Serbia) (Zakharov, 2014). It is necessary to note that John Chrysostom himself did not overlook this region and actively took part in the Christianization of local peoples. According to Theodoret of Cyrus, when John learned of the desire of some "nomadic Scythians" to receive holy salvation, he immediately sent people to them who had successfully baptized barbarians (Theod., V, 31). Although, Theodoret further wrote about the subsequent strange loss of the archbishop's interest in "baptized" Scythians, if it was again about the same group of barbarians. John Chrysostom asked Bishop Leontius of Ancyra to take up this matter himself and "send people" to the said barbarians for the church leadership (Theod., V, 31). Taking into account John's special scrupulousness in the choice of faith of the Goths, it has to be noted that "nomadic Scythians" could not have a direct relationship to this people. Nevertheless, even in the event of the transition of some small Gothic groups to Nicene Orthodoxy, a mass transition of the Goths to Catholic communities in the region was impossible. The fact is that such unorthodoxy would have been immediately noticed by the king of the Goths and inevitably punished since it looked like a confrontation organized by the Danubian Goths to the Arian enlightenment of their congeners. It will be remembered that the Goths were deliberately tended to worship before the Arian false doctrine (Iord. Get., 133).

There are other features of the letter of John Chrysostom to the deaconess of Olympias indicating the impossibility of the Danube localization of the mysterious Gothic diocese. The fact is that the text of the letter quite definitely ties this ecclesiastical administrative-territorial unit to the territory of Gothia itself, or even directly to the city (Bosphorus?), and to John Chrysostom as well, who actually nominated bishops among the Goths who lived in their province. This territorial character of the institution of this Gothic episcopate corresponds well to the imperial organization of the Catholic Church but it contradicts the barbaric system of "tribal" bishops developed by that time. As is known, in the Balkan-Danube region, such men of the cloth were detached from specific cities and territories and moved long distances with the Goths (Zakharov, 2014).

Everybody knows that before the Hunnic invasion, Gothia was called the territory of political formations of the Thervingi (Budanova, 2001), as well as Greuthungi since Obadiah, exiled to Scythia by Emperor Constantius (337-361), moving farther from the Danube, eventually managed to get "into the very interior of Gothia" (Epiph. Advers. haer., 70). It can certainly be assumed that after the Hun invasion this territory continued to be called the former name. However, nothing is known about the existence of Christian communities among the Goths, who fell under the rule of the Huns. Moreover, at that dangerous time and, especially towards the beginning of the 5th century, a critical situation had arisen in Barbaricum, which unambiguously assumed not only a military-political but also a spiritual crisis of the tribal world, because the Goths, Vandals, and other refugees, fleeing from the Huns, threw their homes and moved west to the Roman borders (Heather, 2016). The culmination moment of this flight was in 405/406, when Radagaisus "collected about 400 thousand Gauls and Germans from all over Danubia and the Rhine and began to capture Italy" (Zosim., V, 26, 3). It is believed that as part of his army, there were many people from the Northern Black Sea region, carriers of Chernyakhov culture (Shchukin, 2005). The more noteworthy is the fact that Radagaisus, according to Augustine, constantly performed pagan sacrifices to the gods (Aug. Civ. Dei, 5, 23), which apparently fully corresponded to the ideological ideas of his soldiers. There is every likelihood that after the establishment of the Hunnic hegemony in the Northern Black Sea region, the name Gothia was preserved only for the areas settled by the Goths who, for a number of reasons, were not defeated by the Huns and retained relative independence from the latter. In other words, the question is about the territories of the Roman Empire and the Bosphorus Kingdom. However, the authors do not know anything about the name of the Roman provinces of the

Balkan-Danube region as a new ethnic term – Gothia. The existence of a similar area in South-Western Crimea in the Middle Ages is beyond any doubt. Consequently, some areas of the Bosphorus, especially the Lower Don and other border areas where the bearers of the Chernyakhov culture were recorded could have received the name Gothia, even at the earliest stage of the relocation of barbarians.

Let us also note that because of the winter there was no possibility to sail that place where it was impossible to reach another way by reason of the establishment of the Hunnic hegemony in the steppes of the Northern Black Sea Region. These were primarily Chersonese and the land of Bosphorus, which were preserved as independent states. It was quite possible to get by land to the territory of the Danube region, as well as further to areas north of the limes. If the path to Gothia was in this direction, there was no need to complain about the impossibility of sending a new bishop to the Goths before the end of winter and the opening of the sea navigation.

4.3. Analysis of the Complex Religious and Political Situation on the Periphery of the Empire in the Days of John Chrysostom

In the text of the letter, it is not accidental that the Bosphorus is mentioned. Most likely, John Chrysostom was well aware of the complex religious and political situation prevailing in the border areas of the Roman world. Apparently, if the Goths of Danube, staying in the territory of the empire, accepted massively Arianism, this could have a negative impact on their Bosphoran tribesmen and therefore required urgent measures to counteract this phenomenon. Moreover, there is direct evidence that the Danube Goths at that time forcibly "inclined all the tribes of their language to the recognition of this sect" (Iord. Get., 133). It is because of the impossibility of an urgent dispatch of a new bishop to the Goths that the current situation seemed to the Archbishop of Constantinople to be very important: "there are two things which would specially distress me if they were to happen, which God forbid: one is that a bishop should be appointed by these men who have wrought such great wickedness, and who have no right to appoint, and the other is that any one should be made without consideration. For you know yourself that they are not anxious to create some worthy man bishop, and if this should take place, which heaven forbid, you are aware what will follow. Use all diligence therefore to prevent either of these things happening: but if it were possible for Moduarius quietly and secretly to hasten out to me it would be of the greatest advantage" (Joannis Chrysostomi, Epist., 14). It must be said that all this agrees well with the specific character of the struggle of John Chrysostom with the Arian heresy, which included besides sermons and writing of accusatory homilies, active support of the representatives of Nicene Orthodoxy including their nomination of the best clergy in their Catholic communities. This is the way one can interpret John's request for Olympias concerning the arrangement of the meeting with Moduarius, the main mediator between the capital's Gothic community and the distant Gothic diocese.

It is curious, but shortly before the Holy Father's exile, the bloody events of the capital rebellion of the Arian Goths led by Gainas in 400-401 contributed to the intensification of this struggle. It was that time when the bishop did not come to terms with the categorical demands of Gainas – to give the Arian Goths a separate church inside Constantinople (the Arians had churches behind it), but he took care that the Goths of the Nicene Creed should not suffer from anything. He even passed to them the church next to the imperial palace and ordained a priest who knew the Gothic language (Kazenina-Pristanskova, 2003). Moreover, "he quite often went there to talk using the interpreter's understanding of both languages, and even those who could speak in the Gothic manner urged them to do the same. Making all this in the city, he caught many deceived and showed them the truth of the apostolic preaching" (Theod., 5, 30).

Nevertheless, migrating to the territory of the Bosphorus, the Greuthungi, apparently, as well as their Western relatives, the Thervingi-Arians, had to take action to preserve their ethnic identity. Some late evidence on this subject is given by Procopius. On the one hand, he argues that the Goths did not think about the peculiarities of their Christian faith, but on the other hand, the author testifies that the barbarians were not only Arians but honored their faith with special "spiritual simplicity and great resignation" (Procop. Bell. Got., VIII, IV, 4). The authors have quite definite evidence of the existence of a specific nature in the Christian cult among these Goths.

Of course, Eastern Goths' retreat from Arianism is a merit of the Fathers of the Church, and John Chrysostom, for whom even the short absence of the bishop from these barbarians, as already mentioned, was a serious problem. But if in the time of John Chrysostom the Bosphoran Goths were adherents of the Catholic Nicene Orthodoxy, what then was the specificity of their faith manifested? Indeed, in an effort to preserve their ethnic identity, they could not simply merge with other Christian communities at the Bosphorus but should have had something to stand out from.

4.4. Analysis of the Latest Archaeological Remains from the Authors' Own Excavations

The answer to the question about the specifics of the faith of Bosphoran Goths can be found in the newly discovered sacral complex consisting of stone circles (including concentric circles) and a triangular altar pavement, revealed during the excavation of the Belinskoye site in the Crimean Pryazovia. By the time of origin in the 4th century AD, the features of topography, the presence of elements of the rite of libation of liquids (wine?) and in relation to Christianity, this complex is comparable with the stone circles of Ilurat. Obviously, in a barbaric environment on the western borders of the Bosphorus, in Late Antiquity, it was such sanctuaries that were best suited for the performance of Christian rites. This is indicated by a cross with a fish and a bird cut in the center of the circle in Ilurat, and in the Belinskoye site, carved in the center of a triangular altar pavement, a cross in a circle and a cross with an elongated vertical line (Yartsev *et al.*, 2015). Given the special importance of the cult of feasting and wine for the German aristocracy, especially for the ritual of sisterhood (quite common because of the polyethnic nature of this society), pagan rituals most likely were transformed by these barbarians into Christian agape meals, which became the main distinguishing feature of their spiritual practice (Yartsev *et al.*, 2015). Most likely, this

circumstance explains the appeared term "Trapezites", which the Goths could receive from their new neighbors, the Bosporans, in this case, playing around with the famous Greek word. However, now this term referred not to money changers – trapezites (from trapeza – a table) (Soročan, 2000) but to a barbarian community actively practicing Christian agape meals, which reminded them of a ritual feast or a traditional pagan triune.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study, which confirm the localization of the large Gothic Christian community at the Bosphorus in Late Antiquity, allow making the following conclusion. The presence of strong Christian traditions on the western borders of the Bosphorus can explain why it was here that in the Khazar period (9th-10th cc.), stone circles were restored and Christian rituals continued. The latter circumstance is indicated by a number of artifacts from the Belinskoye site of ancient settlement, the most interesting of which is a fragment of the Christian ceramic prosphora stamp for liturgical bread with a Greek inscription (Maiko *et al.*, 2016). In connection with the fact that such findings are unknown among the materials of the Saltovo-Mayaki culture, as well as stone circles, especially those that were not characteristic of the Turk Bulgars, it turns out that not all Goths left the Huns of the Crimean Pryazovia. In addition, back in the 6th century AD, scattered various groups of Eastern Germans could maintain close relations among themselves. Possibly, therefore, those who moved to the North-Eastern Black Sea Coast continued to have a cult of concentric circles, which was reflected, in particular, on bronze mirrors (Dmitriev, 1979b). In turn, it was the Christian Goths and their descendants who remained in the area of the ancient settlement "Belinskoye" that provided a high level of Christianization of the population living here in the Middle Ages, which in its active veneration of Christ contrasted sharply with the inhabitants of neighboring similar settlements openly practicing pagan rites (Maiko *et al.*, 2016). The authors should note that this conclusion opens serious prospects for further research on this topic because the origins and characteristics of the spread of Christianity among the population of this part of the Khazar Khaganate remain a terra incognita area.

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