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# Roman or Barbarian? Ethnicity in Ostrogothic Italy

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## ABSTRACT

After the fall of the Roman Empire, a ‘barbarian’ group called the Goths took control of Italy (489-554 A.D.). This study uses theoretic frameworks and concepts from anthropology and sociology to gain insight into the relations between the Romans and Goths within this new kingdom. Primary sources are analysed, specifically Procopius’ *Gothic War* and the chancellery documents of Cassiodorus’ *Variae*. This study aims to defend a middle ground within the historiographical debate. Ethnic identity is fluid and situational; there was no clear distinction between Roman and Goth, but that does not mean there was no Gothic identity at all.

## Keywords

(ancient) history, late antiquity, ethnicity, Ostrogoth, Italy, identity, barbarian

## INTRODUCTION

Late Antiquity (ca. 300-700 A.D.) is often seen as a period of great decline. The splendour of the Roman Empire withered, until invasions by barbarian hordes caused the fall of the Empire and finally ushered in ‘The Dark Ages’. Many scholars now propose a more positive view ~~few~~, modern research emphasises that the period is more complicated (and interesting) than this bleak image. The year 476 A.D. (traditionally the date of the ‘fall of the Roman Empire’) is no longer seen as a watershed mark: the period was as much characterised by political and cultural innovation as by decline [1].

Either way, the role of ‘barbarians’ is integral to a deeper understanding of the period. The fact remains that the political map of Europe and the Mediterranean radically changed, from a cosmopolitan empire to smaller states bearing the ethnic names of the invaders (‘The Franks’, ‘The English,’ etc.). Italy became occupied by the ‘barbarian’ group, called the Ostrogoths. Theoderic the Great led his Gothic army from the Balkan to conquer Italy in 488-489 in name of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Emperor. By 493 he had defeated his rival Odoacer and settled in the capital, Ravenna. He and his successors ran Italy in a traditional Roman manner, building palaces and churches in Ravenna, restoring ancient Roman roads and repairing the monuments of Rome [2]. This makes one wonder whether the difference between Roman and barbarian was as considerable as is often believed. How were the Roman and Gothic groups related and how did they interact with one another? Did the group boundaries change during the catastrophic *Gothic War* (ca. 535-554) which finally brought down the

kingdom, and why (not)? To answer these questions, it is necessary to consider theories on ethnicity from the social sciences. These will then be used to analyse the modern historiographical debate. Theory and historiography will be tested by a thorough study of the ancient historian Procopius’ account of the Gothic war, and of the official documents written by the ‘chancellor’ of Ostrogothic Italy, Cassiodorus. Central historical figures in this study include less famous successors of king Theoderic. Using this method, I aim to give a balanced reflection on the historiographical debate and defend a middle ground position.

## ETHNICITY

### Boundaries and boundary maintenance

Traditionally, anthropologists assumed that the human race was divisible in clearly distinct units of cultural groups equalling ethnic groups. Around the middle of the twentieth century, this assumption has turned out to be untenable. For example, two or more groups could share cultural traits, and still be considered of different ethnicity. Members of the same ethnic group can also differ culturally. Finally, cultural distinctions can be superficial. The well-known anthropologist Fredrik Barth consequently stated that what turns out to be essential in ethnic identity is that people *perceive* themselves to be different (instead of actually *being* different) — a process that he calls ethnic *ascription*. This way, Barth changes the focus from the cultural content of a group to the (social) boundaries between groups. Behaviour between ethnic groups is governed by a set of implicit rules Barth calls *boundary maintenance*, canalising interethnic social life in such a way that different ethnic groups continue to exist separately despite mutual contacts. Ways of doing boundary maintenance include stereotyping and ridiculing the other. Still, in real life ethnic boundaries turn out to be complicated. An individual could be divided between different ethnic identities, or a group could simultaneously belong to different larger ethnic groups [3].

### Ethnicity in the heart or the mind?

Controversy still exists on why people perform *ethnic ascription*. In other words, what makes people identify themselves with a certain group? Answers to this question can be roughly divided into two groups. The first, ‘primordialists’, see ethnic identity as a ‘primordial’ instinct, a feeling which cannot easily be abandoned (or, more accurately, a feeling which people *perceive* cannot easily be abandoned). In this model, the focus primarily lies on individuals and their psychology [4]. The opposing camp, the ‘instrumentalists’, see ethnic identity

as a means to an end. People ascribe themselves to an ethnic identity in order to socially engage with a group and in this way reach certain material or immaterial goals. This model puts the focus mostly on the group and on rational choice [5]. A middle ground is possible. The discussion lies on the surface of a greater debate within the social sciences: on whether focus should be on the individual or the group. The ‘theory of structuration’, however, sees social life as structured by both agency (the individual) and structure (the group as a whole). Applied to ethnic identity, this means there is a dialectical relationship between the primordialist and the instrumentalist aspect of identity. Therefore, ethnicity is both ‘in the heart’ and ‘in the mind’ [6].

### Defining ethnicity?

Giving a definition of ethnicity is difficult and controversial. For example, the question has been raised whether ethnicity is not merely an analytical construct, having meaning only for the researcher and not for the social actor. Such a deconstructive reading is insightful, but ultimately unfruitful here. Many people do group themselves in certain patterns, which might as well be called ethnic. In this study the following working definition shall be therefore be offered: ethnicity is a social construct, based on the *belief* in common descent and culture (*ascription*). Furthermore, ethnic identity is multi-layered, fluid, situational and the product of a dialectic between emotion and manipulation. It differs from the related term, *race*, in its focus on *social* characteristics and not *physical* differences. It also differs from *nationalism*, because this term focuses more on the political side and a drive to nationhood [7].

## ETHNICITY IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

### Ethnogenesis and frontier studies

Insights in twentieth century social science have had their impact on the fields of archaeology and history. Traditionally, the ‘Great Migration Age’ was envisaged as the moving of entire peoples all over Europe. Nowadays, this view has been moderated. For example, ethnogenesis theory supposes that groups of tribal leaders with their retinue travelled around Europe as armed bands, seeking employment within the Roman army. Whilst on the move, a variety of peoples joined in and others left. The people who stayed gradually started to identify themselves with the ethnicity of the group’s core (centred on the tribal leader or ‘king’). Once settled, the ethnic name of the core group expanded to encompass the entire kingdom (hence, the Gallo-Romans became the French, named after the ‘tribe’ of the ‘Franks’) [8].

A second theory that could complement the first concerns frontiers. The Roman borders were long seen as hard political, and also cultural boundaries (analogous to modern day boundaries between nation states), but a more nuanced view is possible. A great deal of cultural intermingling occurred despite the existence of a political frontier — even to such an extent, that often provincial ‘Romans’ living in the frontier region had more in common with their neighbours across the border than with the Roman heartland around the Mediterranean. In

many ways, the Late Antique army was part of this frontier, provincial culture [9].

### Ostrogothic Italy

The subject of ethnic identity in Ostrogothic Italy has been taken up by Patrick Amory. He argues that the names ‘Gothic’ and Roman’ were the product of official propaganda that hardly bore any relation to social reality. Building on the theories described above, he states that the boundary between Roman and Goth was not clearly defined at all. Furthermore, any existing differences were in the process of disappearing because of extensive acculturation going on. Goths took on Roman names, and Romans learned the Gothic language. In fact, Amory argues, the division goes back to a division between the army (Goths) and civilians (Romans). The Goths, as an army, were simply the product of the militarised but ethnically complicated frontier zone of the Balkan. The divide was therefore not ethnic, but primarily professional. Contra Amory argues Peter Heather, who sees a stable and clear Gothic ethnicity based around a large group of soldier-freemen. Most importantly, Heather sees the fact that the Goths offered a long and bloody resistance to the Byzantine invaders during the *Gothic Wars* as proof for a group solidarity that most probably should be considered ethnic [10]. In fact, despite their disagreements, both Amory and Heather share some fundamental theoretical ideas. Both see ethnic identity as a social construct and both authors use primordialist as well as instrumentalist approaches to ethnicity. However, Amory ultimately ends in a deconstructive interpretation, whereas Heather emphasises *ethnic ascription*.

Guy Halsall suggests the possibility of a middle ground, by acknowledging ethnicity as being fluid and multi-layered. An individual could be both Gothic and Roman, with the situation determining which of the two identities was more relevant. Furthermore, Roman identity had the potential to subsume other minor identities [11]. This is illustrated, for example, by the following inscription from the Balkan: ‘A Frank, am I, Roman citizen and armed soldier’ [12]. This Frankish soldier performs *ethnic ascription* by calling himself a Frank by birth (but also a Roman citizen!). Therefore, when analysing primary sources, *ethnic ascription* should be taken into account.

## IDEOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL-POLITICAL FIELD

### Cassiodorus and Procopius

Cassiodorus was a Roman aristocrat, working as a chancellor for the Ostrogothic regime in Italy. Around the end of this kingdom, he made a collection of the letters he wrote in name of the Gothic government (the *Variae*). This collection has survived in its entirety. It is sometimes difficult to discern fact from fiction in his letters. Clearly, royal propaganda influenced the letters’ contents, as well as Cassiodorus’ own thinking. The resulting collection speaks in positive terms about the Gothic overlords and praises the royal family. The *Variae* portray a specific ideology of Goths and Romans smoothly co-operating: ‘let the Roman live in peace, while the Gothic army fights.’ The Gothic kings are

praised for their ancient lineage, but acting ‘like a Trajan’ (one of the famous ‘five good emperors’) [13].

Procopius, in contrast, served the Eastern Roman or Byzantine court, with its capital in Constantinople (modern day Istanbul). In the sixth century, the famous Emperor Justinian dreamed of restoring the glory of the Roman Empire. He made a collection of Roman laws (the *Codex Justinianus*), constructed monumental buildings and waged war with his neighbours. In the Emperor’s eyes, the ‘barbarian’ kings in the West, who had before been seen as a sort of governors (in name) of the Empire, were usurpers who had to be removed. Procopius recorded Justinian’s wars in a classical historical narrative. While he does not always agree with his Emperor, and uses subtle ways to disagree with him, Byzantine ideology is nevertheless found throughout his work [14]. Cassiodorus and Procopius thus represent the two opposing sides, with two opposing views on what it means to be Roman or Goth.

### The Gothic War

In the years leading up to the Gothic War, the relations between Roman and Gothic had been growing tense in Italy due to the threat from the East. Theoderic’s last years had ended in the death of two famous Roman senators. His successors had to deal with the resulting heightened political tension. A fascinating case study forms the education of Theoderic’s grandson Athalaric, the ten-years-old king of Italy. According to Procopius, his mother sent him to Roman teachers to learn reading and writing. However, Athalaric would not pursue these lessons for long, because the Gothic aristocracy complained about the little king’s education. According to the complaining Goths, school was not meant for Gothic children, who should learn the way of the sword instead. Thereafter, Athalaric ceased his education and instead indulged in drunkenness and misbehaviour, only to die a few years later of disease. In this scene, Procopius plays up the divide between Roman and Gothic identity. His description of the behaviour of Athalaric and the Gothic nobility is displayed as antithetical to traditional Roman and Christian virtues. It is also improbable and biased, employing classical clichés of stereotyped barbarian behaviour, and so for a large extent the result of a Byzantine perspective. Nevertheless, there must be a grain of truth in Procopius’ story. How should we interpret this? Amory states we can see here the consequence of international friction, with a classical and military education now being increasingly more polarised [15]. However, there is no need to fully exclude the possibility of ethnic tension in this scenario. The changing social context (as a result of the pressure of war with the Eastern Roman Empire) entailed a changing role for ethnic identity, as political ideology increasingly forced a fixed ethnic boundary between Romans and Goths.

In 535 Justinian finally had a pretext for war, and attacked the Ostrogothic Kingdom. Within a few years, he had conquered major parts of Italy, including the city of Rome. However, Justinian could not count on the undying loyalty of his ‘Roman subjects’ in Italy. A

notable case study is the siege of Naples in 536. Approaching the city, the Byzantine general sent a messenger to the people of Naples, informing them that they had arrived to liberate them. After some deliberation, however, the Neapolitans decided to resist the Byzantine army, and reject ‘betrayal’ of their Gothic kings. Clearly, for the Romans of Italy, it was not necessarily straightforward to identify themselves with the Romans from the East. In a war that would become increasingly dreadful, local interests and saving one’s own skin became more important than an overarching ethnic identification [16]. Meanwhile, a new Ostrogothic king was elected by the Gothic army, Witiges, who stressed his military capacities in contrast to his predecessors, and connected his martial capabilities to his ethnic Gothic background. Having a capable commander would rekindle the ‘inborn valour’ of the ‘Gothic people’ [17]. This shows, therefore, that it became exceedingly more important for the Goths to identify themselves as such. The Goths were ideologically cornered by Byzantine propaganda, which conceptually placed them in opposition to the Roman identity of their subjects. The basis for further resistance to the opposing Byzantines was therefore to hold on to this Gothic identity.

### CONCLUSION

I have aimed to reflect upon the historiography concerning ethnicity in Ostrogothic Italy, using social-scientific theories and a careful reading of primary sources. Following Halsall, I have explored the possibility of a middle ground between Amory and Heather.

When studying the Gothic war, the dialectical nature of ethnic identity becomes clear. As the social situation changed, it became more (or less) useful for a group to ascribe to a certain ethnic identity, therefore also impacting individual choice. We see how ethnic identity was multi-layered (one could be both Roman and Goth) but how one was forced to make a choice between the two identities as tensions mounted and war broke out.

It also appears that notions of ethnic identity are open to manipulation, as evidenced by the different ways Gothic or Roman identity are used in the different ideologies and propaganda. That does not mean that there was no ethnic identity at all. Instead, the fact that the primary sources do talk about groups with shared descent and/or culture clearly shows that people performed *ethnic ascription*. As we have seen, it is not important that Gothic people really had a shared culture or descent, but only that they *perceived* it as such, or at least came to perceive it as such when tensions heightened. The sources clearly indicate that at least for some people the classification of Gothic or Roman made sense. It is important to keep in mind that *ethnic ascription* can also be forced upon the other, such as by the Romans on the Goths or vice versa.

By seeing ethnicity as fluid, situational and multi-layered it is possible to do full justice to this difficult period and problem. It also means that a ‘clash of civilisations’ is not tenable. Instead, it explains how Theoderic the Gothic king could promote a Roman culture in Italy. Gothic

identity was not merely a ‘facade’ for an underlying Roman identity. The two were not at all opposite, but could go hand-in-hand. As a case study, Ostrogothic Italy can teach us about the complicated role ethnicity plays in society and how it can be manipulated or shaped by discourse and social context.

Further research could be done on more specific questions. Why, for example, did Theoderic portray himself on a medallion with a ‘barbarian’ moustache [18]? Is this a sign of public ethnic identification? Or was this in fact not an ethnically marked statement? Either way, future research will have to take into account that (ethnic) identity cannot be sharply classified in simple ways. Instead, a nuanced view on the complexity of ethnic identity is more fruitful, and more interesting.

### ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Jip Barreveld wrote his BA thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA History at Leiden University, specialising in Ancient History. The thesis was written under the supervision of Dr. L.E. Tacoma. The subject was agreed on by both the student and the supervisor as an ideal focus for undergraduate research. The student wrote his thesis independently after a literature and source study and met frequently with the supervisor to discuss the results.

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