

The Gothic Palimpsest of Bologna

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Abstract:

In 2013, a newly discovered addition to the very limited corpus of the Gothic language was published. This fragmentary manuscript, the *scriptio inferior* of a palimpsest, contains fragments of theological writing with extensive citation of the Old and New Testaments, likely one or two sermons. The *editio princeps*, a subsequent reading, and further analysis have concentrated on the identification of the cited passages, comparison to the Gothic Bible as we have it, the significance for textual criticism, and the presence of new linguistic forms. This paper evaluates what can be said about the theological content of the document(s), with special reference to the ‘Homoianism’ of the Goths.

In 2013, the *editio princeps* appeared of a fragmentary document in the Gothic language, the first to be discovered in the 21st century. It is a palimpsest, written over by a half-uncial *De civitate Dei*, and was discovered in a church archive in Bologna. The first edition was prepared by two Italian scholars, and was published in the journal of their university, *Aevum*.ⁱ It contained a transcription of the Gothic, a translation into Italian, the identification of sources, and other observations about the manuscript. Professors Finazzi and Tornaghi, the initial investigators, made widely available their high quality photographs of the parchment folios for others to examine. It was however further autoptic examination by Professor Falluomini which resulted in improved readings. These were published in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*ⁱⁱ in 2014, along with a translation into German. Given the paucity of sources for the Gothic language, the new find was immediately the object of study in centres of historic linguistics such as Oxford and Leiden, and the focus of all publications has been philological. The present treatment will consider the relevance of the find to historical theology.

The text, referred to as ‘The Bologna Fragments’ or the *Gotica Bononiensa*, is difficult to characterize. Its four folio sides contain extensive but fragmentary citations of the Gothic Bible, reading both the Old and New Testaments in a Christian way. The document thus declares itself to be unquestionably Christian. In their fragmentary state, however, they do not convey their status as exhortation or argumentation, let alone their position (if any) within theological disputation. The quotations are sometimes introduced by statements like ‘As the prophet said’, or by rhetorical questions. They touch on faith, the sin of pride, and unbelief. When they apostrophize, it is God who is addressed, but there is a human audience strongly implied. Indeed, the first folio of the text calls upon God to save the author and his hearers, making his own the words of the psalmists, prophets, and Apostle Paul. The theme is developed towards God’s unique ability to save, and His interventions on behalf of Noah, Lot, the Children of Israel, the young men in the fiery furnace, and culminating in Peter addressing Jesus, walking on the water.

The second folio, which could of course represent an entirely different text in the same mysterious genre, talks of Satan, and his pride. Unbelief in God is then denounced, and rejected as incompatible with a selection of Divine actions in the Scriptures. Those who do not believe are analogized to wolves in sheep's clothing, such as Cain, Pharaoh, or Nebuchadnezzar.

The text may represent a sermon, though the virtuoso deployment of Scriptural texts with only occasional citations would surely have gone over the heads of normal people. It could be a draft, assembling quotations for a more detailed, lost text, though the use of expensive parchment makes this somewhat unlikely in a world where papyrus and slate were widely available. There is occasionally a stream-of-consciousness quality to the argumentation, as when after mentioning Peter's cry 'Save me' (1V23), the author digresses to say that of Peter Luke also related 'Send to Joppa and call Simon who is called Peter' (1V25-6)– a passage with no relevance to the theme as far as we can discern it.

An important section of the text begins with a quotation of Psalm 14 **qap unfrops in hairtin seinamma`nist gup** 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"' (2R18-19). The speaker is said to be the same as the 'wicked man' of Psalm 36:2, and in turn the 'enemy' of Matthew 13:28, and ultimately identified as the devil. The fool's negative declaration is then transformed into a protasis, **jabai nist gup...**, which can be translated 'if there is no God...', but also perhaps 'if it was not God...' A catena of rhetorical questions is thus introduced: 'If there is no God, who told you that name?' (It is unclear whether it is the name of God or the devil that is meant). 'If there is no God, of whom [is written] "God made man"?...of whom did Isaiah say, "Behold a virgin shall conceive..."' *etc.*

While these verses appear to be directed against Satan, one may assume they were meant to be primarily relevant to other hearers or readers. Indeed, the New Testament does not portray demons or the devil as ignorant of God (most clearly at James 2:19). Nor it is likely that Scriptural citations were deployed to convince an unbeliever, real or imaginary, of God's reality. Some of the selected texts could be arguing against a Jewish reading of the Scriptures, most notably the association of 'Emmanuel' from Isaiah with undisputed divine action. There were certainly Jews in the Ostrogothic kingdom, and they were occasionally the object of state policy,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as pressure to convert.^{iv} A document in Gothic cannot have been intended directly for a Jewish audience, however.

Any question of Gothic theology makes us think automatically of the 'Homoianism' with which Gothic polities and churchmen were historically associated. The Bologna Fragments contain no direct treatment of Trinitarian issues, which would be the only sure ground for discerning Homoianism. In the Bologna Fragments, moreover, any distinction among the Persons of the Trinity is elided or avoided.

When considering Divine actions the Scriptures (especially the Old Testament) ascribe generically to God, a Trinitarian theologian can either attempt to distinguish among the operations of the Persons, or treat them as having worked co-operatively. The Bologna Fragments may at first glance appear to opt for the latter course. At 1 Verso 7-9, the author

prays to God, who saved Noah: **nasei mik f(rauj)a þuei nauel us swaleikamma midja sweipainais watin g[a]nasides** ‘Save me, O Lord, Thou Who saved Noah out of such water of the deluge.’ At 2 Recto 25-26, the author refers to the culmination of the Creation: **jabai nist g(u)þ bi huana .[.]þn../s../þ. gatawida g(u)þ þana mannan**, ‘If it is not God, of whom “God made man”?’

However, even in Scriptural passages where the Second Person of the Trinity is clearly indicated, the Bologna Fragments often refer generically to ‘God’. The actions of the incarnate Christ are thus described: 1 Verso 21-23: ... **þuei ja[h p]aitr[u] sagqanana standandan in marein ganasides...** ‘...Thou Who saved sinking Peter standing in the sea...’ Indeed, the Incarnation itself is treated thus, in a passage previously mentioned: 2 Verso 6-9: **jabai nist g(u)þ bi huana qap esaeias sai magapþ in kilþein ganimiþ jah gabairiþ sunu jah haitan<d> namo is inmanuel þatei ist gaskeiriþ miþ unsis g(u)þ** ‘If it is not God, of whom quoth Isaiah, ‘See, a maiden conceives in womb and bears a son; and they call his name Emmanuel, which is interpreted “God-with-us”?’

It may be suggested that all of the references be held primarily to refer to the Second Person. After all, it is through Him that all things are made in both John’s Gospel and the Nicene Creed. Indeed, the statement in the deathbed creed of the greatest of Gothic churchmen, Wulfila, is stronger still: *Credo... in unigenitum filium eius, dominum et deum nostrum, opificem et factorem universe creature* ‘I believe ... in His only-begotten Son, our Lord and God, creator and maker of all things.’⁹ No doubt related to this is Wulfila’s further statement that the Father is the ‘God of our God’. God the Father is beyond all human or material doings; the Son creates and rules the world.

This interpretation of the Bologna Fragment is not unproblematic, however. Consider 1 Recto 11-13 **ufar þuk f(rauj)a nih airus nih agg[i]lus nih andbahts nih ahma ak silba f(rauj)a qam du nasjan unsis** ‘Above thee, O Lord, [is] neither messenger nor angel nor servant [i.e. prophet] nor spirit; but the Lord Himself came to save us.’ Evidently, this passage expands upon the Septuagint version of Isaiah 63:9 (οὐ πρέσβυς οὐδὲ ἄγγελος ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς κύριος ἔσωσεν αὐτοὺς, ‘not a messenger nor an angel but the Lord himself saved them’. To speak of the Lord Himself coming to save is, in a Christian context, to speak of the Incarnation, and therefore of the Second Person of the Trinity. How then to reconcile to this the **ufar þuk**? Is God the Father not spirit / **ahma** (John 4:24), which the author has added to the passage? In the context of a hierarchical Trinity, this complicates identification of the Son with all citations of God. Even if **ahma** was used in a sense that did not include the Father, such usage does not suggest a careful guarding against misinterpretation. Trinitarian theology seems to have been far from the author’s mind.

Thus, definite Homoian theological indices are not likely to be found in the Bologna Fragments, though further attention may yield further clues. Furthermore, even when a sustained argument can be detected, as in the **jabai nist guþ** example, the significance and intended interlocutors remain unclear. One important conclusion may be drawn, however: the author’s inattention to the theology of the Trinity suggests distance from controversy on the subject. Such distance could arise in either a Homoian or a Nicene context, but is

noteworthy to find in Gothic in either case. The Bologna Fragments may offer a window into Gothic Christianity as it was practiced away from the headline disputes for which scholarship remembers it.

ⁱ R. B. Finazzi and P. Tornaghi, 'Gothica Bononiensia: Analisi linguistica e filologica di un nuovo documento', *Aevum*, 87 fasc. 1 (2013), 113-155.

ⁱⁱ C. Falluomini, 'Zum gotischen Fragment aus Bologna', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 143 (2014), 281-305.

ⁱⁱⁱ See J. Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy*, (Oxford, 1992), 97-100 and P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy*, (Cambridge, 1997), 59-60.

^{iv} See, for example, B. Brennan, 'The Conversion of the Jews of Clermont in AD 576', *JTS* 36, (1985), 320-37.

^v Latin in R. Gryson, *Scolies ariennes sur le Concile d'Aquilée*. Sources Chrétiennes, 267 (Paris, 1980), p250;

English translation by James Marchand. *Auxentius on Wulfila*:

<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/auxentius.trans.html> Accessed December 2015. Another version is presented in P. Heather & J. Matthews, *The Goths in the Fourth Century*. (Liverpool, 1991).