Chapter 8

Germanic Language and Germanic Homoianism

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There is a strong and noteworthy correlation between Germanic barbarians[1] and Homoian believers[2] in the Late Antique world. When Germanic groups converted officially, they did so to Homoian Christianity, from the Goths in the late forth century until the late fifth when the Franks broke the pattern. Champions of Homoianism within the Roman Empire were often (and after a point exclusively) either Germanic themselves or patronized by Germanic individuals or groups. Homoianism became the state religion of important Germanic successor states, such as the Ostrogoths in Italy, the Visigoths in Gaul and Hispania, and the Vandals in Africa, and was promoted to a varying degree by these polities. Perhaps most significantly, long after Homoianism and other forms of non-Nicene Christianity had ceased to be a living issue among Romans, Germanic peoples and states remained Homoian officially and in practice. A correlation of this type requires an historical account. This chapter will consider possible means of accounting for this correlation, will suggest a new, linguistic possibility, and will explore the limits of linguistically-informed history and theology.

Paganism

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[1] Germanic barbarians are for the purposes of this article defined as speakers of an Indo-European language which has experienced Grimm's Law. Similarly the Goths may be defined absolutely as those speaking the language attested in the Gothic Version of the New Testament, and relatively as those who identified as Goths.

[2] Defined for the purposes of this article as those who believe that the statement "the Son is like the Father" best captures their relationship in divinity, including as expressed in the creedal formulations of e.g. Ariminium.

Since the question is why a certain group behaved more uniformly than another group, it is reasonable to consider whether the pre-existing state of the first group somehow conditioned their subsequent behaviour. In the case of a religious conversion, the pre-existing state is the abandoned belief system of the convert: For the Germanic peoples, this was paganism. Could Germanic pagan stories and practices have been a better *praeparatio* for the Homoian than for the Nicene *Evangelium*?

It is worth recalling that paganism was influential not only prior to conversion: Not only did not all *Germani* convert at once, but the culture created by paganism was not replaced overnight, even by new Christians. Cultural events such as Alaric's burial in the Busentus[3] continued to reflect pagan sensibilities for decades after a given group's Christianization.[4] If there is some resonance between Homoianism and paganism, it would have continued to be heard long after the first encounter with Christianity, with both elements reinforcing each other as one worldview.

E. A. Thompson, the distinguished historian of the Goths, tentatively made such an association: He echoes earlier authors in suggesting that pagan Visigothic society might have been attracted to the strict hierarchy of the Trinity, as reflected in Wulfila's creed, mirroring as it did their own command structures. Furthermore, he quotes the Victorian scholar Scott "an anthropomorphic conception of the deity would recommend itself […] as more nearly related to their own conception, wherein the full deity was only

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[3] Jordanes, *Getica* XXX 158 (p68 in Francesco Giunta & Antonino Grillone, *Iordanis De origine actibusque Getarum*, (Rome, 1991).

[4] Cf. Carole Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples* (London, 1998), p. 48; Christopher Dawson *The Making of* Europe (Washington, 2003), pp. 93f.

a step from the demi-god, and removed from the hero more by antiquity than by omnipotence, infinity, or incomprehensibility."[5]

Perhaps a simpler statement of this thesis is that, given a long tradition of stories of divine ancestry, a created, human Son of God was intuitively acceptable to the Germanic peoples. Unfortunately, all of the above points rest on misconceptions. It is not clear that a hierarchy of honour within the Trinity was an un-Nicene doctrine in this period, let alone a distinctive reason to prefer Homoianism. Meanwhile, Scott has confused Wulfila's beliefs with Arius'; Homoianism is anthropomorphic only in its insistence on the primacy of the language of paternity in describing the relation of the Father to the Son – and in any case the Romans had been pagans as well, to whom the same arguments would have applied. Similarly, the emphasis on hierarchy and obedience cannot possibly have been stronger in Germanic society than in the Late Roman Empire.

The link between the belief that the Son is 'like' the Father (rather than 'like-in-essence') and the riverbed burial of a barbarian king with his captive foes is thus difficult to detect.

Gothic Influence and Example

Although the conversion of the Goths is one of the most studied such episodes in history, many accounts continue to be offered as to why the Goths converted officially when they did, and why they did so to Homoianism. Many of these accounts present as incompatible causes what are in fact mutually reinforcing contributions. The conversion

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[5] E. A. Thompson, *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila* (London, 2009), p. 109; C. A. A. Scott, *Ulfilas, Apostle of the Goths* (Cambridge, 1885), pp. 50f.

of the trans-Danubian refugee Goths is historically over-determined; the question is not, why did Fritigern's Goths become converts as Homoians, but rather, why would we imagine them converting as anything else?

For now, all that is relevant is that a large group of Goths did become Homoians around the time of their migration into the Roman Empire in the year AD 376. Can the fact that these Goths had become Homoians be used to account for the general Germanic Homoian preference? There are a few possible ways in which such an account could be constructed.

According to Jordanes,[6] the Goths preached the Gospel to other Germanic peoples shortly after their conversion. It is noteworthy that we have Wulfila's (pre-Visigothic) translation of the New Testament through Ostrogothic transmission; indeed some scholars have claimed to find evidence of adaptation to different dialects in the text.[7] Some of the few words which we have of Vandalic are liturgical, and could just as easily be mistranscribed Gothic, leading some to argue that the Vandals used Gothic as a liturgical language, which would be excellent evidence that Christianity had come to the Vandals from the Goths.[8]

Meanwhile some German religious terms, particularly in southern dialects, are said to show evidence of borrowing from Gothic. The best-known example is perhaps NHG *taufen* 'to baptize' derived according to this theory from Gothic **daupjan** 'to

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[6] *Getica* XXV; p58 in Francesco Giunta & Antonino Grillone, *Iordanis De origine actibusque Getarum*, (Rome, 1991).

[7] Richard D'Alquen, *Gothic ai and au* (The Hague, 1974).

[8] Of course, it is more likely that the dialects of the two groups were simply indistinguishable, as claimed already by Procopius (*History of the Wars,* III.2.5), p10 in H. B. Dewing, *Procopius*, Volume II, Loeb Edition, (London, 1916).

baptize' (cf. English 'to dip').[9] Since no comparable Nicene missionaries were sent, the only form of Christianity to which the Germanic peoples were exposed was Homoianism.

However, such exclusiveness of contact is untenable in worlds as tightly interwoven as the Germanic and Roman; *Germani* who had served in the Roman army and returned to their lands of origin, traders, captured slaves, and any number of other points of contact must have existed to showcase 'the other side'. The putative linguistic links are meanwhile very thin.

Is it possible, however, that the Goths' example was enough for other Germanic groups? The Goths were a prestigious people, and remained so for hundreds of years. It was the group of Goths under Alaric that established a pattern for barbarian-Roman interaction later to be emulated.[10] Leaders may have gravitated to Homoianism to associate themselves with its most numerous and notable exponents.

Differentiation from Romans

This association with the Goths could have been invaluable to barbarian leaders who wished to maintain the integrity and cohesion of their groups (on whom they depended for power) by distinguishing them from the Romans onto whose soil they had moved. Homoianism, associated as it was with an important Germanic group, was reached for. Evidence of such a policy could be found in Victor of Vita, who records that in the Vandal kingdom of North Africa, people wearing Vandal garb were prevented from

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[9] The etymology is rejected with full citations and discussion in D. H. Green *Language and history in the early Germanic World* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 314-16.

[10] Michael Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars* (New York, 2007).

entering Nicene churches by soldiers posted for that purpose.[11] One may think also of the Ostrogothic nobility who insisted on a Gothic upbringing for the heir to the throne.[12]

On the other hand, it is unclear why groups such as the Vandals who often warred with the Goths would have wished to associate themselves with their enemies. Nor is there much evidence outside of North Africa for this type of differentiation, in laws or other state instruments. Since Victor of Vita deliberately elides confessional and political terminology, he may not be the best witness for this purpose.[13] Nor is it clear that leaders really determined their subjects' religion: In fact a leader could be highly constrained in his own religious choices by his people's beliefs, as was the case with the Burgundian king Gundobad, who believed he could not act on his personal preference for Nicene Christianity while king of a Homoian people.[14]

Thompson advances a slightly different version of the differentiation argument when he claims that joining the Nicene confession would have inevitably subsumed the Gothic church into the wider ecclesiastical world, which was a Roman state church. Homoianism was a local, un-Imperial phenomenon, Thompson avers. The work of Hanns Christof Brennecke on the Homoian Imperial church[15] has made it clear that Thompson's picture is inaccurate for the early conversions (notably the Goths), though it may be more relevant to later periods.

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[11] *Historia Persecutionis*, II, 8; p 125 in S. Lancel, *Histoire de la persécution vandale en Afrique*, (Paris 2002).

[12] Procopius, *History of the Wars,* V.2, pp15f in H. B. Denning, *Procopius*, Volume III, Loeb Edition, (London, 1919)

[13] One of the general conclusions of Tankred Howe, *Vandalen, Barbaren und Arianer bei Victor von Vita* (Frankfurt, 2007).

[14] Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751* (London, 1995), p. 45.

[15] Hanns Christof Brennecke, *Studien zur Geschichte der Homöer: der Osten bis zum Ende der homöischen Reichskirche* (Tübingen, 1988).

Language

There are many cases of linguistically conditioned theological disputes, perhaps most famously the Syriac-Coptic preference for Miaphysitism, often said to be related to the problematic translation of certain Greek terms into those languages. Late Antique Greek was, after all, a language with centuries of literary and specifically philosophical usage behind it. Almost any relevant term carried metaphysical baggage; it was difficult or impossible to speak in 'everyday' language about even the simplest questions of being, because even the simple selection of words implied adherence to a one philosophical position or another. A metaphysical tradition must exist in a language if mutually interacting but distinct concepts of being, personhood, nature, and essence are to be discussed. Gothic had no such tradition, and neither did any other Germanic language.

This paradigm may be applied to the Germanic peoples in a strong and a weak form. The weak form avoids making statements about the content of Homoian theology. The key concepts of Homoianism are simply easier to translate, since words for 'alike' exist in every language. Although to the Greek-speaking Homoian philosopher, *homoios* had a specialist meaning, no specialized philosophical language was required to provide a fair translation. Perhaps *homoousios* seemed affected or simply nonsensical to Gothic speakers. *Homoios*, on the other hand, has an easy Gothic translation. This claim does not have to imply that educated, intelligent Homoian theologians rejected philosophy and Greek terminological niceties, merely that their terms at least appeared less philosophical when translation was required.

The strong form of the argument meanwhile states: A clear rejection of philosophy is enunciated by the so-called Blasphemy of Sirmium of AD 357.[16] Homoian preachers to Germanic potential converts could thus have made much of the philosophical adherence implicitly required by homoousians – perhaps stereotyping it as Greek sophistry. One might imagine a Gepid or a Burgundian who has been convinced of the essential story of salvation in Christ, who is then told by his Nicene interlocutor that adherence to a particular, complex philosophical system is required to avoid falling into error. Meanwhile, the competing Homoian preacher can not only present his position as an uncomplicated commonplace, but can also mock the Nicene for his muddying of the pure water of the Gospel.

The overreliance of the homoousian position on philosophy was a general flaw in this period, though at least in Greek, the Nicene position could be sustained by some degree of beneficial ambiguity: *homoousios* could be interpreted in a variety of ways, and many laypeople must have spoken the Creed with an unphilosophical understanding of this term. This ambiguity cannot have translated well, especially in an environment where alternate translations could be offered by theological opponents.

Galeiks

The Gothic translation of homoios in the New Testament is galeiks. The Germanic word that gives this Gothic form and Modern English 'like, alike' is related to another word,

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[16] 'But as for the fact that some, or many, are concerned about substance (*substantia*), which is called *usia* in Greek, that is, to speak more explicitly, *homousion*, or *homoeusion* as it is called, there should be no mention of it whatever, nor should anyone preach it. And this is the cause and reason, that it is not included in the divine Scriptures, and it is beyond man's knowledge…' translated in R. P. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh, 1998) pp. 344f.

represented by Gothic **leik** and Modern English 'lich, lych', meaning 'body'.[17] The Gothic remained the standard word; the English is represented only in archaic compounds such as 'lichhouse', 'lychgate', 'lichbell'. To say something was 'like' something else, was to say metaphorically that it was 'bodied' as something else. Metaphors form an important part of human communication. They range from those still clearly metaphorical but clichéd ('Achilles' heel') and those whose analogy is generally ignored ('to break the ice'), to those embedded in languages as lexical items. 'To grasp a concept' uses a physical motion to describe an intellectual one, but 'grasp' would not be described by most English-speakers as a metaphor: It simply has the secondary meaning 'understand'. Some metaphors are completely dead and obscure, such as 'like, alike ~lich', as mentioned above, in modern English usage. Gothic, however, is quite another matter.

The derivation of **galeiks** from **leik** was still entirely transparent in Gothic, since **leik** was a common word, and the **ga-** prefix the most common derivational tool in Gothic (comparable and related to German *ge-* as in *gesungen* 'sung'). Is it possible therefore that the 'like' of Homoianism meant rather more to the Goths than the simple Greek form, or the English dead metaphor? The Gothic word was unlikely to have been understood as referencing actual bodies, but even with the reminder that God was spirit, the Gothic form still offered a concrete image of the interrelation of the Father and the Son.

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[17] It is disputed whether the 'like' or the 'lych' meaning is original and gave rise to the other, but in synchronic Biblical Gothic **galeiks** would seem unambiguously derived from **leik**. For the etymology, see A. Casaretto, *Nominale Wortbildung der Gotischen Sprache* (Heidelberg, 2004), p. 83f. and W. Lehman *A Gothic Etymological Dictionary* (Leiden, 1986), p. 142.

The only significant Gothic text to survive, apart from the New Testament translation, is a fragmentary commentary on the Gospel of John, to which scholars refer as the *Skeireins* (Gothic 'Explanation').[18] The surviving fragments never comment directly on the key distinctions concerning *ousia* and *hypostases* which divided Homoian and Nicene Christians, but one passage has often been discussed as though it did:

> þata qiþano: "ei allai sweraina sunu, swaswe swerand attan", ni <u>ibnon</u> ak <u>galeika</u> sweriþa usgiban uns laiseiþ. jah silba nasjands bi siponjans bidjands du attin qaþ: "ei frijos ins, swaswe frijos mik". ni <u>ibnaleika</u> frijaþwa ak <u>galeika</u> þairh þata ustaikneiþ.
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> *... the passage, 'that all may honour the Son as they honour the Father' teaches us to offer not the same but a similar honour, and the Saviour Himself praying for the disciples said to the Father 'that You love them even as You love Me'. Through that He designates not equal but similar love*

Although the underlined terms are fundamental to understanding the theological position of the commentary, their semantic relationships have proven very difficult to delineate, and cannot be treated here.[19] On the assumption that the metaphor implicit in the word was still living in the Gothic mind, two brief theological observations about **galeiks** may be offered instead: One, if something is 'bodied' as something else, even if the thing in question is not corporeal, a high degree of independence is suggested. This may have been a happy connotation for Homoian three-hypostases theologians. On the other hand, one of the major criticisms of the term *homoousios* was that it implied God had a physical body, or was at least made up of physical substance, since *ousia* was

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[18] The most comprehensive resource on the *Skeireins* is the website www.gotica.de/skeireins , which presents the various translations of leading scholars.

[19] The reader is referred to the summary by Knut Schäferdiek, 'Theologiegeschichtliche Bemerkungen zur Skeireins' in *Gotica Minora Prima* (Hanau, 2002), and the present author's 'The Skeireins: A Neglected Text' forthcoming in *Studia Patristica*.

often used of material things; any degree to which this accusation was recalled by **galeiks** would have been embarrassing to the Homoian Goths.

Conclusion

Among the various elements of an explanation for the overlap between Homoian believers and Germanic barbarians in Late Antiquity, the linguistic divide must be given important consideration. At a minimum, there are sound reasons for thinking Homoianism might have translated better into any language lacking a philosophical tradition. And, as the example of **galeiks** has shown, there is also scope for considering the particular aspects of the Germanic languages in question.