



Summary :

The Goths were a Germanic people who, according to the historian Jordanes, migrated in the first century from Scandinavia to the Vistula valley. After the third century they were divided by the river Dniester into eastern (Visigoths) and western (Ostrogoths). The Visigoths advanced as far as Spain and founded a kingdom there with its capital at Toledo, while the Ostrogoths, led by Theodoric Amal, founded a kingdom in Italy with its capital at Ravenna, a kingdom destroyed by emperor Justinian I in 555.

Date

1st-16th century

1. The origins of the Goths

The Goths represent a group of people speaking an East Germanic language, known in Roman antiquity and throughout the High Middle Ages. According to a legend reported by the historian Jordanes (sixth century), the Goths originally came from Scandinavia. In fact, this legend is rather telling the story of the charismatic Amal dynasty. In the first century A.D. the Goths, according to the testimony of Tacitus, lived in Central Europe, where archaeologists have identified as Gothic the “Wielbark culture”, in the Vistula basin and the south Baltic Sea coast. Apart from Goths, this culture also included other East Germanic people, such as Gepids, Heruls etc.

2. Expansion of the Goths

During the second half of the second century/first half of the third century, the carriers of the “Wielbark culture” advanced along the Western Bug towards the territories of modern Belarus and the Ukraine. North of the Black Sea and in the Lower Danube the Germanic people come in contact with the local people, the Scytho-Sarmatians, Geta-Dacians, and to a lesser degree Slavs, finally forming a confederation of Germanic and non-Germanic tribes under Gothic leadership. Beginning in the 240s, these barbarians wage wars against the Roman Empire. Originally they attack the Greek cities north of the Black Sea, then they devastate the entire Black Sea basin and the Balkans, but around A.D. 275 the barbarian threat recedes.

3. The division between Ostrogoths and Visigoths

During the third century the Goths are settled on the territories of modern Ukraine, Moldova and Romania, adjacent to the Roman Empire. It was at that time that the Goths were divided into two branches, the Ostrogoths-Greuthungi, under the leadership of the Amal dynasty, and the Visigoths-Tervingi, led by their own chiefs, but probably subordinate to the Amals. The former occupy the eastern territory between the Dniester and the Donets, the latter the western lands, between the Dniester and the Danube. The civilization of the Gothic confederation, the so-called “Cherniakhov culture” (or “Sîntana de Mureş culture”, according to the terminology of Romanian archaeologists), shows a very high level of Romanization among the Goths.

4. Visigoths

In 375-376 the Goths face an invasion by the [Huns](#). The Visigoths are pushed south of the Danube, while the Ostrogoths remain in the Ukraine, under Hunnic domination. The Visigoths, by now in Roman territory, rebel against imperial administration and in 378 inflict a grave defeat on the Roman army near Adrianople. The new emperor, Theodosius, arrives to contain the Visigoths and drive them away from Constantinople. However, after his death the Visigoths cross over to Italy and in 410 they sack Rome. In 412 the Visigoths settle in Aquitaine and conquer the territory between Narbonne, Toulouse and Bordeaux. This marks the appearance of the Visigothic kingdom, which will survive in southern Gaul until the region is occupied by the Franks, who crush the Visigoths at the battle of Vouillé. The Visigoths retreat into Spain, where they form a kingdom with its capital at Toledo. This kingdom survived until the Arab invasion of 712. A series of necropoleis such as Duraton, Castiltierra or Madrona reflects the Visigothic civilization in Spain. This civilization testifies to the progressive integration of the Germanic population in the Western Mediterranean area, to such a



degree that by the last third of the sixth century Germanic elements are no longer visible in the culture of the Visigothic kingdom in Spain.

5. Ostrogoths

After the death of Attila and the defeat of his sons at the battle of Nedao in 454 or 455 between the Huns and the rebellious Germanic peoples, the Ostrogoths cast off Hunnic domination. After Nedao the Ostrogoths move towards Pannonia and later, after a sojourn in the Balkans, they conquer Italy in 494-495, led by king Theodoric Amal. The Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy, with its capital at Ravenna, was one of the most powerful and influential Romano-Germanic kingdoms. In 535-555 the Eastern Roman Empire, under Justinian, fought a long war against the Ostrogoths, a war that ended with the fall of the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy, followed by the deportation of the Goths.

6. Other groups of Goths

A further three groups of Goths were settled around the Black Sea region during the High Middle Ages. The so-called *Gothi minores* ("little Goths") occupied the area south of the Danube; they were undoubtedly the descendants of Gothic *foederati* of the earlier period. According to Byzantine sources, they were a people of peaceful farmers; however, these Goths also performed military service and indeed were used as shock troops in certain sixth-century military operations. The presence of a group of Goths, clients of the empire, is attested for the southwestern [Crimea](#), the [territory of Doros](#), during the reign of [Justinian](#). The remnants of this Gothic population survived until the fifteenth - sixteenth centuries, after which they were assimilated by the Greeks of the Black Sea and the Crimean Tatars. Finally, another group of Goths, the Tetraxites, inhabited the eastern part of the Crimea until the mid-fifth century. After that, roused by the Huns, they crossed over to the Caucasus coast of the Black Sea and settled in the area of the modern city of Novorossiysk. This Orthodox Christian group maintained contacts with Byzantium until at least the middle of the sixth century. The archaeological material coming from the Gothic necropolis of Djurso attests to their progressive assimilation by the Adyghe people (Circassians) of the Caucasus in the 6th - 8th centuries.

Bibliography :

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Glossary :

	Wielbark culture
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The Wielbark culture appears during the 1st century, after the Oksywie culture, and according to archaeologists identified with the Goths and specifically by moving from Scandinavia to the region of the river Vistula, as mentioned by the historian Jordanes.

Sources

Jordanes, *De origine actibusque Getarum*, Mommsen, T. (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, auctores antiquissimi, V.I, Iordanis Romana et Getica* (1882; repr. 1982)

Procopius of Caesarea, *De bellis*, Haury, J. (ed.) – Wirth, G. (rev.), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*, vol. 1-2 (Leipzig, 1:1962, 2: 1963).

Procopius of Caesarea, *De aedificiis* III 7.13, Haury, J. (ed.) – Wirth, G. (rev.), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia* 4 (Leipzig 1964).

Quotations

A presentation of the Goths and their history by Procopius:

Γοτθικὰ ἔθνη πολλὰ μὲν καὶ ἄλλα πρότερόν τε ἦν καὶ τανῦν ἔστι, τὰ δὲ δὴ πάντων μέγιστά τε καὶ ἀξιολογώτατα Γότθοι τέ εἰσι καὶ Βανδίλοι καὶ Οὐισίγοτθοι καὶ Γήπαιδες. Πάλαι μέντοι Σαυρομάται καὶ Μελάγχαινοι ὠνομάζοντο· εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ καὶ Γετικὰ ἔθνη ταῦτ' ἐκάλουν. Οὗτοι ἅπαντες ὀνόμασι μὲν ἀλλήλων διαφέρουσιν, ὥσπερ εἴρηται, ἄλλω δὲ τῶν πάντων οὐδενὶ διαλλάσσουσι. Λευκοὶ τε γὰρ ἅπαντες τὰ σώματά εἰσι καὶ τὰς κόμας ξανθοὶ, εὐμήκεις τε καὶ ἀγαθοὶ τὰς ὄψεις, καὶ νόμοις μὲν τοῖς αὐτοῖς χρῶνται, ὁμοίως δὲ τὰ ἐς τὸν θεὸν αὐτοῖς ἡσκηται. Τῆς γὰρ Ἀρείου δόξης εἰσὶν ἅπαντες, φωνὴ τε αὐτοῖς ἔστι μία, Γοτθικὴ λεγομένη· καὶ μοι δοκοῦν ἐξ ἑνὸς μὲν εἶναι ἅπαντες τὸ παλαιὸν ἔθνος, ὀνόμασι δὲ ὕστερον τῶν ἐκάστοις ἡγησαμένων διακεκρίσθαι. οὗτος ὁ λεῶς ὑπὲρ ποταμῶν Ἰστρου ἐκ παλαιοῦ ᾤκουν. ἔπειτα Γήπαιδες μὲν τὰ ἀμφὶ Σιγγιδόνον τε καὶ Σιόμιον χωρία ἔσχον, ἐντὸς τε καὶ ἐκτὸς ποταμοῦ Ἰστρου, ἔνθα δὴ καὶ ἐς ἐμὲ ἴδρυνται. Τῶν δὲ δὴ ἄλλων Οὐισίγοτθοι μὲν ἐνθὲνδε ἀναστάντες τὰ μὲν πρῶτα ἐς Ξυμμαχίαν Ἀρκαδίου βασιλέως ἀφίκοντο, χρόνῳ δὲ ὕστερον (οὐ γὰρ οἶδε βαρβάρους ἐνδαιτᾶσθαι ἢ ἐς Ῥωμαίους πίσις), ἡγουμένου αὐτοῖς Ἀλαρίχου, ἐς ἐπιβουλήν ἑκατέρω βασιλέως ἐτράποντο ἐκ Θράκης τε ἀρξάμενοι Ξυμπάση Εὐρώπῃ ὡς πολεμίᾳ ἐχρήσαντο.

Προκόπιος, *ὑπὲρ τῶν πολέμων* III 2.1-8, Haury, J. – Wirth, G. (eds), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia* 1 (Leipzig 1962).

The Goths resident in the Doros (Dory), according to Procopius:

ἔστι δὲ τις ἐνταῦθα χώρα κατὰ τὴν παραλίαν, Δόρου ὄνομα, ἵνα δὴ ἐκ παλαιοῦ Γότθοι ᾤκηνται, οἱ Θεουδερίχῳ ἐς Ἰταλίαν ἰόντι οὐκ ἐπισπόμενοι, ἀλλ' ἐθελοῦσιοι αὐτοῦ μείναντες, Ῥωμαίων καὶ εἰς ἐμὲ εἰσὶν ἔνσπονδοι Ξυστροατεύουσί τε αὐτοῖς ἐπὶ πολεμίους τοὺς σφετέρους ἰοῦσιν, ἠνίκα ἂν βασιλεῖ βουλομένῳ εἴη. ἐξικνῶνται δὲ ἐς τρισχιλίους, καὶ τὰ τε πολέμια ἔργα εἰσὶν ἄριστοί τε ἐς τὴν γεωργίαν αὐτουργοὶ δεξιοί, καὶ φιλοξενώτατοι δὲ εἰσὶν ἀνθρώπων ἀπάντων.



Προκόπιος, *Περί κτισμάτων* III 7.13, Haury, J. – Wirth, G. (eds), *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia* 4 (Leipzig 1964).

Chronological Table

first c.: The Goths move from Scandinavia in to the valley of the Vistula river.

second - third c.: The Goths expand north of the Black Sea and in the Lower Danube.

240: Wars against the Roman Empire.

third c.: Division into Visigoths and Ostrogoths.

378: Battle of Adrianople. The army of Valens is defeated.

410: Alaric sacks the city of Rome.

454/455: Battle of Nedao between the Huns and the insurgent Germanic peoples.

494/495: Foundation of the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy by Theodoric Amal.

555: Destruction of the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy by Justinian.

712: Destruction of the Visigothic kingdom of Spain by the Arabs.