Wulfila's Fourth Century Gothic Bible Translation

John Frauzel

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Frauzel, John (1984) "Wulfila's Fourth Century Gothic Bible Translation," Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 11. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol10/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Gothic is the chief known language of the Eastern branch of the Germanic languages. This latter group itself is one of about twelve main dialects of Indo-European. The Gothic with which we are familiar dates from the fourth century A.D. and was spoken by a group of Goths living in and around the area covered by modern day Romania. They had migrated there, according to their native historian, Jordanes, who wrote in the middle of the 6th century A.D., from their earlier homeland which comprised Southern Scandinavia, the Baltic coast of modern Germany and Poland, and the islands between. These Goths had by the 4th century been converted to the Arian sect of Christianity. Their bishop and chief religious figure was Wulfila. The exact date of his Bible translation is uncertain, but it was in any case completed before his death in A.D. 381.

Some time after Wulfila's death the Goths were pushed westward by the Huns and other eastern invaders. This chaotic era in European history, the Völkerwanderungenzeit or age of tribal migrations saw the sacking of Rome in 410 by the Visigoths, who later moved still further west to Spain where they were important until the Moslem conquest. The East Goths, with whom we are more particularly concerned, established a kingdom in Italy in 439. The manuscripts of the Gothic Bible translation which have survived to our day, comprising about one half the New Testament and several chapters of the Old Testament, are copies of Wulfila's original made in Italy around 500 A.D.

The literary remains of Gothic are thus both considerable and of early date. In fact, the only other Germanic linguistic evidence of equal or greater antiquity is scanty indeed when compared to Gothic. A helmet has been discovered with the two-word Runic inscription harigasti teiwai, probably 'to the god Harigast', and dating from the second or third century B.C. These two words convey a surprising amount of evidence to the scholar of early Germanic, but one might nevertheless wish for somewhat more extended material. Another, more famous inscription on a golden drinking horn from Denmark reads ek blewagastir.
holtingaR horna tawido, 'I Hlewegast of the Holtings made the horn.' This inscription, showing certain traits of North Germanic, the ancestor of the modern Scandinavian languages, was made very near the time when Wulfila was translating the Bible into Gothic at the other end of Europe. Although it too provides much of interest, and is in some ways more archaic than the Gothic of Wulfila's translation, it is almost as laconic as the first example.

It is not until five centuries later that literary documents of any considerable size emerged in the other Germanic languages -- at least documents which have been preserved to modern times. Along with the familiar secular texts such as the Old English Beowulf, the Old High German Hildebrandlslied and Ludwigslied and the Old Norse saga literature dating from several centuries later, there is also a fair amount of material comparable to Wulfila's New Testament translation. The Old High German Heliand, for example, is essentially a retelling of the Bible story in an epic-Germanic style comparable to Beowulf: it uses the alliterative verse form with four accents per line and each line divided into two halves, a verse form known in German as Stabreim. The Old Saxon Genesis is a similar account in a language close to Old English. There are also several literal translations, such as the Old High German Tatian.

The source of all of these translations and reworkings was the Latin Vulgate Bible. Thus they were to begin with one step further removed from the text of the New Testament than Wulfila's translation, for Wulfila translated the New Testament into Gothic from Greek manuscripts, and in fact from fairly early sources. The same cannot be said of the Old Testament; it was not translated from a Hebrew original, but instead from a Latin translation. Although the later translations all relied on the Vulgate, Wulfila almost certainly did not use the Hebrew text, and may have relied quite heavily on an earlier Latin version of the Old Testament, the Vetus Latinus -- Jerome's Vulgate was still to be written in Wulfila's day. He may also have used the Septuagint. It is more difficult to determine the source of the Old Testament as only about three pages of it survive.

Furthermore, one may safely say that Wulfila's skill as a translator surpassed that of any of the later archaic Germanic translators. He is rather to be compared with the tradition of the other early translations of the Bible, Syriac, Coptic and Pre-Vulgate Latin. In fact, it is surprising to note that these are the only translations of the New Testament to precede Wulfila. The Vulgate, Ethiopic, Armenian and Old Church Slavonic follow Wulfila's translation by from 100 to 500 years.

How did such a literary and scholarly masterpiece come to be written among the Goths? It should be noted that
Wulfila's ancestry was mixed. He was probably half Goth and half Cappadocian; his Greek-speaking and Christian grandfather had been taken prisoner by the Goths fifty years before his birth. His training in the church which led to his position as bishop of course made him thoroughly fluent in the Greek language and no doubt well acquainted with Greek learning.

Scholars believe they have identified the manuscript tradition underlying Wulfila's translation. The text he is believed to have used is a manuscript known as the Antiochene-Byzantine recension of Lucian the Martyr. In terms of the New Testament Apparatus familiar to readers of standard Greek New Testaments, the Gothic translation most often follows the traditions reflected by Manuscripts D and K. (Its composition precedes the redaction of both of these manuscripts.)

Wulfila's translation is thus of very great interest simply as a New Testament manuscript. It is one of the first translations of the New Testament, the translation itself is as skillful and as great a literary achievement as the other translation of that time or for a thousand years to come, and it is older than many manuscripts considered invaluable in establishing the original text of the New Testament. Its chief value however has usually been seen in another of its aspects, one to which we have already alluded, and that is that it is by far the largest body of evidence for early Germanic currently known to us, preceding the other early Germanic documents mentioned above by 500 years or more.

Since Gothic occupies such an eminent position in the corpus of early Germanic materials, the question naturally arises, what is the precise nature of the linguistic evidence it affords, and to what extent is it a reliable reflection of early Germanic? We shall briefly consider this problem as it applies to several major linguistic areas: syntax, morphology, including paradigmatic formations, and lexicology, examining in each case to what extent the Gothic materials are reflective of Gothic or of early Germanic (not necessarily the same thing), to what extent they are derivative of the Greek Vorlage or underlying text, and to what extent Wulfila himself was innovative.

Syntax

The most obvious aspect of Wulfila's translation for the considerations at hand is its syntax. There are many ways in which the translation departs from typical early Germanic syntactic patterns, at the same time following a typically Greek syntactic pattern, thus allowing us to conclude that the text reflects the structure of its Vorlage more closely than that of standard Gothic of the period. We shall consider two such cases. A third case is more difficult to determine.
and may in fact reflect a Gothic reflex of an early Germanic construction which was lost by the other Germanic languages but was also shared in common with Greek.

Greek is a language very rich in particles. Although the Germanic languages are also somewhat fond of particles, Gothic uses sentence particles much more often than one would expect (in comparison to Old High German, Old English or Old Norse) and these particles almost always match a Greek particle, often matching its very idiomatic position in the sentence. Thus Greek διαλέγεται is usually translated by ak or akei (John 14:31, 15:25; 16: 4, 6, 7). The Gothic word, like the Greek, is inevitably sentence or clause initial. Gothic ἡβ may represent Greek δε or ὧν. In either case the Greek word is never sentence-initial, whereas the Gothic ἡβ is always sentence or clause initial. (John 7: 10, 14, 31, 37; 12:3, 17:13; ). The Greek verse initial καί, 'and', on the other hand, which is itself generally of Semitic origin in the Greek New Testament is always jah.

If Gothic shows an overabundance of particles, it uses less of another typical Germanic construction, the Verb plus adverb, often with a redundant verbal prefix. This expression is particularly marked in North Germanic, in such common expressions as gængja ut 'to go out' or, with redundant verbal prefix utgængja ut. In addition, many common verbs can be combined with adverbs to form new semantic complexes, with the meaning not always predictable from the components. The same is true of both Old and Modern English. We could name hundreds of expressions such as go out, turn back, get up, as well as others with altered meanings such as turn into or come around (two meanings each). Modern German also uses many such expressions, often with the redundant (separable) verb particle: aus dem Haus hinaus 'out of the house'; mit mir mitkommen 'come with me'.

It is apparent that Gothic had such expressions, for they do occur, as at Math 26:75 jah uggagands ut gaigrot baitraba 'And going out, he wept bitterly'. This construction is only used, however, when the Greek uses an identical construction, as it does here: διαλέγεται ὧν ἔκρω. This construction is however much less common in Greek than in the Germanic languages, and so what we usually find in the Gothic New Testament is an expression of the type adverb plus verb for Greek verbal prefix plus verb. Thus Inn gaggag bairh aggju dáur 'Go in through the narrow door' (for Greek εἰσέλθα εἰς τὸ δόμον). Biblical Gothic even allows particles and adverbs to pile up before the verb as in mib anakumbidedun 'they sat down with' Math. 9:10. Here again the word is an exact imitation of Greek, even to the point of attempting to equate prefixes in the two languages-- the Greek is συνάνακείντο.

The syntax of the participle in Gothic also shows heavy reliance on Greek, perhaps with one interesting exception.
Expressions of the type participle plus main verb are frequently used in Greek to describe two closely related actions, for example 'He stopped and looked', 'he got up and returned'. Germanic languages use two finite verbs in these examples where Greek would use a participle and a main verb 'having stopped, he looked', 'getting up, he returned'. In Gothic, however, expressions of the Greek type abound: \textit{Ik gimbands gahailja ina} 'I will come and heal him' (Math 8:7) \textit{Jan atateigands in skip ufarlaib} 'And entering the ship he crossed over' In each case, the Greek original has a participle plus a verb.

A more idiomatic use of the participle in Greek is the Genitive Absolute. A participle is declined in the genitive case, a nominal phrase agrees with it in case, and it modifies the sentence from an absolute point of reference, usually with a meaning of time, manner, cause, condition, etc. This expression, virtually lacking in the Germanic languages, is frequent in Gothic, but usually as a Dative Absolute, occasionally as an Accusative Absolute, never as a Genitive. An example is at Math. 8: 16 \textit{At andanahtia ban vaurbanamma} 'And when it was night' (for Greek \textit{Ὁψίας \\ Τέσσαραίης}). Is the Gothic Dative Absolute a non-native construction derived from Greek or is it a Germanic construction which Gothic alone maintained, and which Wulfila used to translate the Greek Genitive Absolute? The fact that the expression is dative, not genitive argues that it may have been native Germanic, although perhaps archaic even to Wulfila, for why would he have chosen a different case if he were simply imitating a Greek expression?

**Morphology**

The origin of the Gothic alphabet has been widely discussed. For our purposes, we may simply note several difficulties involved in reconstructing the primitive Germanic phonemic system on the basis of Gothic evidence. The proto Germanic diphthong \textit{ei}, from Indo-European \textit{ei} was lost very early in Germanic dialects, merging with long \textit{i}. In the early runic inscriptions above, Germanic \textit{ei} remains, but it has become \textit{i} in Old High German, Old English, and Old Norse. Gothic uses \textit{ei} in words reflecting Germanic, but we cannot conclude that the phoneme was retained by Gothic.

The Greek diphthong had come to be pronounced /iː/ by koine times, the pronunciation it has in modern Greek. Thus to Wulfila, familiar with the Greek pronunciation of his day, the natural way to represent /iː/ was with the letters \textit{ei}. Ample evidence for this view is seen in the representation of Biblical names in Gothic. David, for example is spelled in Gothic \textit{Daveid}, even though the koine spelling is usually \textit{Δαυίς}.
The grammatical paradigms of Gothic are the aspect of the language which is least likely to be affected in a translation from a Greek original. There is in fact little or no Greek influence on grammatical forms. Several archaic features of the Gothic paradigm system might nevertheless be mentioned quickly. The verbs of the seventh strong class in Gothic, for example are reflective of an earlier stage of Germanic than are the corresponding verbs in the West and North Germanic languages. Gothic tends to form the preterite of these verbs by means of reduplication, whereas the other Germanic languages, while retaining traces of this much earlier tense formation, use ablaut as in the other six classes. Thus beside Gothic haïhalt 'he called', from haïtan, Old English and Old High German have héit and hiaez, and Old Norse héit.

Gothic is also somewhat less fixed in its usage of weak and strong adjectival declensions than are the other early Germanic dialects. This twofold adjective declension system is a Germanic innovation, and Gothic may perhaps reflect an earlier stage of Germanic during which time the later pattern was not yet fully established. In addition, Gothic retains some verbal uses not found in other Germanic languages, such as what is apparently a reflex of the Indo-European subjunctive seen in ni ogs, 'fear not' (what is commonly called subjunctive in Gothic is the Indo-European optative). The deliberative subjunctives occasionally found, on the other hand, such as by is sa qimanda anbarizuh beidaíma? 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we await another?' -- are almost surely copied from Greek usage.

Lexicology

Wulfila shows greatest innovation in the area of lexicology, that is in his selection of existing and invention of new Gothic words to render those of the Greek text. Although koine Greek is much more restricted in its vocabulary than classical Greek, its range of words was clearly much larger than Gothic. Wulfila was thus often forced to coin words. These words are often straightforward calques or translations of the Greek. For ἐνδοξοπροφήτης 'false prophet' (Math. 7:15) Wulfila has liugnapraufetus and elsewhere galiegapraufetus. 'Do not be wordy' (Greek μὴ βατωρογγείτε in Math 6:7 is ni tiliuaurdjaip. Even where Greek does not use a compound word, the Gothic may tend to express a syntactic complex in a single word, reminiscent of the compounding tendencies of later Germanic languages, especially German. Thus although 'pure in heart' is expressed by two nouns in Greek, καθαρόι τὴ γαρνίκ, with the second noun a dative of respect, Gothic has a compound noun, hraínjaháirtans, and this in spite of the fact that Wulfila felt no difficulty with the dative of respect construction elsewhere -- although the parallel 'poor in spirit' is lost.
from this particular passage in Matthew 5 (the chapter begins
in Gothic with verse 8), the corresponding Lucan passage is
intact, and here Wulfila uses unledans ahmin, with spirit,
ahma in the dative case, for poor in spirit.

Occasionally an idiomatic expression is obviously
carried over from Greek into Gothic. For example the common
Greek idiom of adverb plus ἔχω (the verb to have) to express
what we would say in English with 'to be' plus predicate
adjective, as in 'be sick', is literally translated from
Greek into Gothic. Thus at Math. 9:12, Ni ḟaurbun hafla
lekeis, ak ḟai umhaflj habandans 'the well do not need a
doctor, but the sick'.

Wulfila interestingly avoids one literalism which some
other early translations do not. The notion conveyed by
English put was often expressed in koine Greek with the verb
'to throw', βαλλω. The familiar passage in Matthew 9 which
speaks of putting new wine in old bottles, or, rather
wineskins, is in Greek οὔτε βαλλος ὁδον νέον εἰς ἀσκος
παλαιος, literally 'throw'. Wulfila here uses an entirely
different word guitand 'pour'. When the same Greek word is
used in the next chapter for 'think not that I have come to
bring peace to earth' (τοι οὐκ ἔγραψαν βαλεῖν εἰρηνην). Gothic uses
yet another word, lagjan 'lay, put'. In the Coptic
translation of the New Testament, on the other hand, made
about 100 - 150 years before the Gothic, Greek βαλλω is
invariable translated with ΝΟΥΕ (nouje) which means quite
literally in Coptic 'to throw'.

In conclusion, Wulfila's fourth century Bible
translation is remarkable, first simply as a translation. It
is one of the earliest, it is on a par linguistically and
stylistically with those that preceded it, and far in advance
of anything like it in the Germanic world. The syntax of the
translation shows heavy influence of Greek, but this is not
at all unusual for scriptural translation at that time, or
indeed for the next 1250 years until the time when Martin
Luther would ask in dismay before a verse rendered too
literally from the Vulgate 'Ist das deutsch geredet?' The
grammar and morphology of Gothic are archaic, perhaps not so
much as some have believed, but because it is so early and of
such quantity, it is probably the most important of the early
Germanic dialects in determining the characteristics of
proto-Germanic. It does contain gramatical features found
nowhere else among the Germanic languages. Lexically, Wulfila
was at times highly innovative, and less slavish in his
renderings than other biblical translations of the time.
Wulfila's Bible translation is fascinating both to the
student of the history of biblical texts and to the scholar
of early Germanic.
FOOTNOTES

1. Our present Greek text has only πτωχόν 'poor' in Luke 6:20. Wulfila's text may have read πτωχόν τοῦ πνεύματος, or he may have supplied 'spirit' on the analogy of Matthew 5.

2. Although this type of construction is not unknown in Germanic languages (cf. for example modern German. Er hat es eilig 'He is in a hurry'. The word for word correspondence with the Greek of the text in question make it very likely that we are dealing here with a forced, literal translation.