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Svealand, Götaland and the Rise of the East-Slavic Kingdom – Response to Piotr Murzionak (Comparative Civilizations Review, No. 73 Fall 2015)

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Introduction

There are traditionally four lands of Sweden:

- Scania (Skane, “Land of the Scansians”) is the southernmost land with provinces conquered by Sweden from Denmark in 1658.
- Götaland (*Gothia*, "Land of the Götar") is between Scania and Svealand. Traditionally the Goths are seen as having emigrated from Gothia.
- Svealand (*Svealand*, "Land of the Swedes") is the central core part of Sweden. It is named after the Svear (Swedes). After the Swedes had conquered the Götar, Sweden has since the Middle Ages been administered and ruled from Stockholm in Svealand. Rurik is believed to have left the Roslagen area north of Stockholm to go to Rus with his Varangians.
- Norrland (literally "Northlands") is the northern part of Sweden. It is territorially the largest of the four lands, covering 60 percent of the total Swedish territory.

For the past 260 years, scholars have been interested in the rise of the East-Slavic kingdom. The Normanists and Anti-Normanists have confronted each other.

Interestingly enough, there is also a Gothic theory, suggested by Friedrich Heinrich Strube de Pymont in 1785 and by Roger Latham (1812 – 1888) in 1863. This hypothesis is based on the view that the East Slavic kingdom was founded by the Goths. It could actually be a plausible explanation.

The Swedish scholar Dr. Stefan Söderlind (1911 – 2003) developed this thesis into what he called the Red-Blond-People hypothesis. It is based on the Old Russian forms *Rus* and *Rud* derived from the Proto-Slavic stems *rusu* and *rudu*, which began to spread in the period 150 – 350 AD. In the palatinized form *rusu* the form *rus* was according to Söderlind borrowed directly into Arabic as *Rus*.

In 370 AD the Goths in what is now Ukraine were defeated by the Huns and migrated westwards. Many Goths, however, remained in what is today southern Ukraine. After the Huns were defeated a new Gothic kingdom was formed in 450 AD. In the *Nestor Chronicle* there is a passage, which has not yet been deciphered in which Khagan Svjatoslav (d. 972) says:

I do not care to remain in Kyiv, but I should prefer to live in Pereyaslavets on the Danube since that is the center of my realm.

Rus later became the common Slavic term for all Varangians and Kolbjazi and was used for all peoples living in the new kingdom.

Wherever the Goths migrated they demonstrated one specific trait: an extraordinary military and organizational capacity together with a high ability to absorb cultural development that was higher than their own. Historically their states did not last long. Gothic states fell apart in Italy rather quickly. As late as the eleventh century a major Gothic element was still discernable where the Goths had lived (Gothia on the Crimean Peninsula) but later the cultural process of Slavization prevailed. The endless internal conflicts in the short-lived Gothic states also contributed to the downfall of the second Gothic kingdom. Modern Gothic studies after the Second World War have concluded that the Goths inhabited the Lower Vistula around the Birth of Christ. In the beginning of the third century they lived in the Black Sea area, founding the first Gothic kingdom.

The kingdom of the Rus reached its peak power and influence between 700 and 1050 AD. Rus was by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson still called "Sweden the Great and the Cold (Heimskringla 4.9). The Normanists claim that the great military and commercial activities of the Scandinavian Vikings lead to the foundation of the East Slavic Kingdom. They were, however, few and their influence of limited nature. In the view of Dr. Soederlind the creation of Rus was only possible within the framework of the Gothic kingdom of the Rus, which existed long before the Swedish Vikings arrived in Russia.

A few words on the origin of the Goths and their migration from what today is southern Sweden seems to be in order.

The Origin

One of the great controversies in European barbarian history is the question of the origin of the Goths. The notes presented here are mainly based on A. Bell-Fialkoff's work *The Role of Migration in the History of the Eurasian Steppe*.

Bell-Fialkoff and others have placed the original home of the Gothic people (or tribe) in southern Scandinavia in the late Bronze Age, an area where no pre-Germanic linguistic substratum has been found. From there some Germanic tribes spread along the Baltic coast, toward the River Oder in Germania. Others followed the coast of the North Sea, toward the River Weser. By 1000 BC, according to Musset, Germanic habitat stretched from the River Ems to central Pomerania. French scientist Demougeot dated their appearance in Pomerania much later, from 400 BC. If we follow Musset, by 800 BC Germans reached Westphalia in the West and Vistula in the East. And 300 years later they could be found on the lower Rhine, in Thuringia and Lower Silesia.

Both Lucien Musset, *Les invasions: les vagues germanique* (1965) and Emilienne Demougeot, *Le formation de L'Europe et les invasions barbares* (1969-1974) are important concerning this theory of the origin of the Goths and other East Germanic tribes.

Bell-Fialkoff argues for the existence of the Gotho-Gepidian culture in Pomerania and the lower Vistula region in what is now Poland at this time (the so-called Wielbark culture) and links it to seven specific elements. Only one of these elements can be archaeologically traced to Scandinavia. Even more significant is the fact that the Wielbark culture had already acquired its distinctiveness by the time of the putative Gothic migration from Scandinavia. These considerations make some scholars doubt the veracity of the Gothic tradition.

And yet, there are several factors that support the traditional version. First, East Germanic languages (of which Gothic was one) were closer to North Germanic (i.e., Scandinavian) tongues than to West Germanic ones. Such affinity implies a close relationship, if not direct derivation. The toponymics of the island of Gotland, as well as the modern Swedish provinces of Öster- and Västergötland, where the Goths had supposedly originated, also show linguistic affinity. Secondly Count Oxenstierna excavated incineration burials in Öster- and Västergötland that, numerous in the second and first centuries BC, suddenly became rare after about 50 BC. This would suggest a disappearance of a significant portion of the previous population. Of interest here are Carlo Alberto Mastrelli in Volker Bierbauer et al, *I Goti*, (1994) and Graf E.C. Oxenstierna, *Die Urheimat der Goten*. Leipzig, Mannus-Buecherei 73, 1945 (later printed in 1948).

The Exodus

There have been many variations of a number of theories that explain the reason for the Gothic exodus. No doubt there was no pressure from non-Germanic groups. An outright famine due to deteriorating climatic conditions is presented in Bell-Fialkoff as the most likely reason, and I must say I concur. There was likely a limited migration of a few aristocratic clans. They might then in turn have organized the local population and given their name to it. But the disappearance of incineration burials, so Bell-Fialkoff argues, makes it more probable that all population strata were affected in the South Swedish region Götaland (comprising a number of provinces including Östergötland and Västergötland). The local provenance of the Wielbark culture in Poland may be caused by rapid assimilation of the Goths. This can be compared to a similar evolution in Normandy and Rus.

Why did the Goths migrate to the southern coast of the Baltic? One possible reason presented by Bell-Fialkoff is that the migrators followed the traditional Amber Way, the old trade route linking southern Scandinavia with the eastern Mediterranean as early as 1800 BC (see on this Demougeot, p. 20, referred to earlier).

As others before him Bell-Fialkoff also points to the fact that Sweden historically "looked" east and south, not west (which was the way Norwegians "looked," for instance). The other side of the Baltic was the traditional area of interest. The natural thing, which is so obvious that it is not mentioned by Bell-Fialkoff, is that if you want to go southeast from Götaland you end up in the Vistula delta and the surrounding area. The following ethnogenesis occurred between the rivers Oder and Vistula.

Arrival in the Area North of the Black Sea

In the pathbreaking work edited by Bell-Fialkoff it is concluded: "They were equally effective on the sea. They had probably learned their maritime skills on the Baltic for it would be impossible for a land-borne people to adapt to maritime warfare so fast." (p.124.) The reference here is to the Barbarians' naval activities in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean (see below):

The Gothic name is etymologically derived from the same root as Swedish götar and gutar from Västergötland, Östergötland and the Island of Gotland (Thorsten Andersson, *Götar, goter, gutar in Namn och Bygd - Tidskrift för nordisk Ortnamnsforskning*, Vol. 84, 1996, pp. 1 - 21 with an extensive bibliography). At the beginning of the First Century AD the Goths migrated from the area of the lower Vistula to north of the Black Sea (Russia and Ukraine) and created the First Gothic Kingdom. (This is described in Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* (1908, p. 8) as taking place under Gothic King Filimer "he decided that the army of the Goths with their families should move...In search of suitable homes and pleasant places they came to the land of Scythia, called Oium in that tongue. Here they were delighted with the great richness of the country..."). Jordanes described Scythia, mentioning the Greek colonies on the Black Sea coast ("it is [the Black Sea] dotted with towns of no mean fame: - Borysthenis, Olbia, Callipolis, Cherson, Theodosia, Careon, Myrmicion and Trapezus. These towns the wild Scythian tribes allowed the Greeks to build to afford them means of trade." (Jordanes, p. 10).

The Ostrogothic kingdom reached its greatest extension under King Ermanarik. It was destroyed between 370 and 380 A.D. in battles with the Huns. During 250 to 500 AD the Gothic peoples became separated and some moved to the West. Others remained in the East. They initiated the Second Gothic Kingdom in Oium after the fall of the Huns. The Slavic neighbours called the Goths by a common name: the rus, 'The Red-Blond People.' From 150 to 350 AD the Slavic name for the Goths was formed in two variants from Proto-Slavic stems *Rusu and *Rudi, 'the Red-Blond People.' Later around 450 AD the palatalized Proto-Slavic forms *Rus and *Rud became a common name among the Slavs for the Goths and the Eruli, irrespective of the ethnic origin of the latter two. The Proto-Slavic name *Rus corresponds to the western denotation of the Goths (Ostrogoths, Visigoths), but it is different from the latter in that it is of Slavic origin.

A Short Chronology of the Goths and their (H)erulian Allies 253 – 277 AD

253 AD

The Goths became masters of the Crimea, having captured the Bosporan fleet and the capital of the Bosporan kingdom, Panticapaeum, although the kingdom is said to have lasted until 343 AD.

255-57 AD

Major sea-raids in the Black Sea area.

256 AD

The Goths push into Greece. Their confederates, the Eruli, sack Athens in 267 AD.

268 AD

A huge sea-borne expedition of the Goths and their allies spilled into the Aegean. They were robbing and looting at will.

271 AD

A Gothic defeat by the Romans.

276-77 AD

Raids reach as far as Galatia and Cilicia in spite of the 271 defeat.

Further Reading

Stefan Söderlind, "The Realm of the Rus: a Contribution to the Problem of the Rise of the East Slavic Kingdom." *Scandinavian Language Contacts* (eds. S. Ureland and I. Clarksson). Cambridge, United Kingdom 1984.

Robert G. Latham, *The Nationalities of Europe*, W.H. Allen & Co., London 1863.