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THE INVASION OF RADAGAISUS (405–406 CE) AND THE SETTLEMENT OF THE CHERNIAKHIV CULTURE IN OLBIA

Abstract: The invasion of Italy by Radagaisus in 405 CE posed a significant challenge to the Western Roman Empire, culminating in his defeat by Stilicho at Faesulae in 406. This article reassesses the event within a broader political and archaeological framework, incorporating recent findings related to the Cherniakhiv culture in Olbia. By shifting the focus from traditional migrationist interpretations, the study examines internal Gothic political dynamics and their interactions with Rome. It argues that Radagaisus' campaign was not merely the result of Hunnic pressure but part of wider transformations within the Gothic world. The analysis challenges existing historiographical paradigms, highlighting the role of elite Gothic groups in shaping late antique geopolitical developments. The findings contribute to an evolving discourse on the complexities of late Roman–barbarian relations, offering new perspectives on the interconnected nature of migration, military conflict, and cultural change in the early fifth century.

Keywords: Radagaisus, Goths, Cherniakhiv culture, Olbia Pontica, Late Roman Empire, Migration Period

Introduction

Radagaisus' invasion of Italy in 405 CE posed a grave danger to the Western Roman Empire.¹ The campaign ended in 406 CE, when Stilicho annihilated the invading host near Faesulae (modern Fiesole).² Most modern reconstructions treat this defeat chiefly as a prelude to the rise of Alaric, culminating in the sack of Rome in 410 CE.³ Drawing upon recently published archaeological evidence from Olbia—particularly studies presented in a special issue of *Archaeologia Polona* (vol. 62, 2024)⁴—this article re-examines the episode and shifts attention from imperial policy to the internal politics of the Goths beyond the Roman frontier.

History of research

Beyond Edward Gibbon's "domino theory", set out at the end of the eighteenth century,⁵ one of the first systematic studies of the barbarian invasions was produced by John Bagnell Bury.⁶

¹ Orosius, VII.37.

² Zosimus, V.26.2-5; BURY 1928, pp. 75–84.

³ KULIKOWSKI 2018, pp. 143–159; WIJNENDAELE 2016, pp. 267–284.

⁴ TWARDECKI, BUISKYKH 2021, pp. 251–271; *Archaeologia Polona* 62, 2024.

⁵ GIBBON 1782.

⁶ BURY 1928.

Between these two landmarks, several other works also advanced understanding of the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Theodor Mommsen,⁷ for example, offered a detailed appraisal of Rome's political and military structures and highlighted the part played by external pressures in the empire's decline. Taken together, these studies shaped later debates on the significance of the barbarian incursions for the disintegration of Roman rule.

Migration theory

John Bagnall Bury located Radagaisus's incursion within the wider crisis of late-Roman warfare, arguing that the invasion followed directly from the empire's waning capacity to contain external threats.⁸ He further assumed that Radagaisus had already acted in concert with Alaric during the Italian raids of 401—raids Bury traced back to a point of origin somewhere in Pannonia—and treated the years 401–410 as one continuous sequence. In his reconstruction, Radagaisus's Ostrogoths, Alaric's Visigoths and the Germanic peoples massed along the Rhine formed interlocking elements of a single migratory movement, one that, as he put it, dealt Gaul "a blow from which it will never recover; the influence of Italy upon Gaul is reduced and will continue to diminish."⁹ Bury's reading laid the groundwork for later migrationist explanations.

Later research further developed the migration theory, proposing that Radagaisus's movement was part of broader population shifts triggered by the expansion of the Huns. In particular, Herwig Wolfram emphasised the role of migratory pressure in Germanic incursions into the Roman world, arguing that such pressures were a central factor in the destabilisation of the western provinces.¹⁰ Peter Heather formulated the hypothesis of a second wave of Hunnic invasion at the transition between the fourth and fifth centuries.¹¹ This view has been challenged by Michael Kulikowski, who refutes Heather's idea of a renewed Hunnic migration after c. 400 CE, arguing instead for the continuous presence of the Huns in Eastern Europe since the 370s. Kulikowski critiques the overinterpretation of the sources and maintains that there is no substantial evidence for a distinct second migratory wave.¹²

Political and strategic explanations

Alternative interpretations emphasise Rome's internal fragility rather than external pressures. In Russian-language scholarship, one of the earliest proponents of this view was Mark Shchukin, whose work had a profound influence on the formation of perspectives on the Goths and the Cherniakhiv Culture among Russian-speaking researchers. A key advantage of Shchukin's scholarship lies in his access to specialist literature discussing the results of excavations conducted at Cherniakhiv culture sites, primarily in Ukraine. Consequently, his work is the product of interdisciplinary research to a significantly greater extent than publications by Western scholars.

Nevertheless, Shchukin advocates the view that the Goths did not establish a single large state but rather a network of cooperating federations. Furthermore, he asserts that the Cherniakhiv culture disappeared shortly after the Hunnic invasion. However, he is a staunch opponent of any

⁷ MOMMSEN 1856.

⁸ BURY 1928, pp. 75–84.

⁹ BURY 1928, p. 83.

¹⁰ WOLFRAM 1988.

¹¹ HEATHER 2010.

¹² KULIKOWSKI 2018, pp. 89–103.

form of the “domino theory”, arguing instead that the period in question was characterised more by a gradual cultural interpenetration than by sudden and large-scale migrations.¹³

This approach was significantly developed by Mikhail Kazanskii, who proposed an important, albeit controversial, thesis. In his analysis, he explores the impact of Radagaisus’ invasion on the decline of the Cherniakhiv culture and, more broadly, on migration processes in both Eastern and Western Europe. He contends that Radagaisus was not merely the leader of a raid into Italy but rather a figurehead of a wider movement of peoples, linked to the collapse of Gothic structures around the Black Sea and their subsequent westward displacement. According to Kazanskii, the Cherniakhiv culture disappeared around 400 CE, a conclusion he bases on archaeological evidence.¹⁴

I disagree with the assertion that the Cherniakhiv culture disappeared so early in the Dnipro region, as this process in fact occurred approximately thirty years later. Nevertheless, his observation concerning the link between Radagaisus’ invasion and wider migratory movements is particularly noteworthy. Kazanskii rightly recognises that the defeat of Radagaisus did not bring these processes to a close but rather contributed to the continued movement of the Goths towards the imperial frontiers.

Another significant aspect of Kazanskii’s study is his emphasis on the archaeological evidence confirming the presence of so-called “Eastern Goths” in Italy during this period, which lends support to their involvement in the military and political transformations within the empire. He suggests that part of Radagaisus’ forces originated from these groups and may have been incorporated into the Roman army following his defeat.

Walter Goffart presents an interpretation broadly similar to that of Mark Shchukin. He critiques traditional accounts of the so-called barbarian invasions, arguing that contemporary narratives often place excessive emphasis on ideological factors.¹⁵ His approach has been gaining increasing recognition among specialists in the field. For instance, Jeroen Wijnendaele suggests that contemporary Roman sources exaggerated the scale of Radagaisus’ invasion in order to enhance Stilicho’s military prestige.¹⁶ Wijnendaele takes this argument further—similarly to Kazanskii—by proposing a closer, and potentially coordinated, connection between the Vandals’ incursions along the Rhine and Radagaisus’ advance from the middle Danube. This is a particularly intriguing observation which, in my view, merits further investigation. Among the most recent scholars supporting this perspective is Chris Doyle, who contends that Honorius’ weak administration and internal court conflicts played a decisive role in facilitating Radagaisus’ entry into Italy.¹⁷

Yves Modéran in his analysis of the role of the Vandals in the late Roman Empire, examines how barbarian incursions, including that of Radagaisus, fit within Rome’s broader challenges of integrating external groups into its military and political structures. He opposes Heather’s theory of the “second Hunnic wave” as the primary catalyst for the broader crisis in *barbaricum* between 375 and 404, instead advocating for a more complex interpretation of the factors driving instability in this period.¹⁸ Finally, Oto Mestek has recently presented a highly insightful and thorough analysis of the sources, formulating the hypothesis that certain Victohali, a subgroup of the Hasdingi Vandals, formed the core of Radagaisus’ army alongside the Alans. However, he situates their homeland in the vicinity of Pannonia. In his view, a form of unity among the Vandals, Taifals, and Suebi, as well as the Alans—who continued to migrate and intermingle between the middle Danube and the Rhine—cannot be ruled out.¹⁹

¹³ SHCHUKIN 2005, p. 253.

¹⁴ KAZANSKII 2011.

¹⁵ GOFFART 2006.

¹⁶ WIJNENDAELE 2016.

¹⁷ DOYLE 2018.

¹⁸ MODÉRAN 2014.

¹⁹ MESTEK 2024.

Religious and ideological aspects

Another interpretation suggests that the invasion had, at least in part, a religious dimension. The most prominent proponent of this view was Orosius, who, writing in the early fifth century, portrays Radagaisus as a pagan bent on destroying Christian Rome.²⁰ Modern scholarship has largely disputed this claim. Jeroen Wijnendaele, for instance, rejects the idea of a religious war, maintaining that Radagaisus' expedition was primarily a strategic military operation rather than an ideological crusade.²¹ Mikhail Kazanskii concedes that Radagaisus' forces may have contained groups resistant to the Empire's advancing Christianisation, yet he finds no direct evidence for a religious programme.²² Such caution accords with broader debates on the nexus between religion and politics in late antiquity, most clearly articulated by Hervé Inglebert.²³ I therefore concur that, even if religious considerations played any role, they were secondary. Neither the Gothic allies of openly pagan figures such as Julian the Apostate, Procopius, or (later) Arbogast and Eugenius, nor the much-debated persecution of Gothic Christians under Athanaric, reveal a consistent ideological agenda; political expediency appears to have prevailed. The same pragmatic reading underpins the latest scholarship—for example, Oto Mestek's recent study.²⁴

Primary Sources

Ancient testimony concerning Radagaisus is sparse. A concise synopsis can be found in *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*.²⁵ The fullest recent collection of passages is offered by Oto Mestek.²⁶ Drawing on this evidence, Mestek arranges the sources in three broad strands.²⁷

The first, a Latin Christian theological tradition, casts Radagaisus as a pagan barbarian and emblem of Christianity's victory (Orosius; Augustine; Jerome). The second, a Latin chronicle tradition, provides terse yet often inaccurate notices—mis-dating events and styling him “king of the Goths” (Ammianus Marcellinus; Prosper; Eutropius; Marcellinus Comes; Cassiodorus; *Chronica Gallica*; Jordanes, who records Radagaisus in the *Romana* rather than the *Getica*). The third, Greek classicising historiography, aspires to analytical breadth but is hardly free of error: Eunapius, Olympiodorus and Zosimus supply a wider canvas yet little reliable military detail. Mestek argues that this consistent labelling of Radagaisus as a Goth fits a post-410 Roman narrative that portrayed the Goths as the Empire's primary antagonists.²⁸

I would like to draw attention first and foremost to two key witnesses: Orosius, *Historia adversus paganos* 7.37, and the fragment of Olympiodorus preserved by Photius in *Bibliotheca* cod. 80. Orosius' description of Radagaisus as *paganus et Scythia* is, in my view, fundamental for reconstructing the invader's background. The label plausibly points to a Gothic group that retained its ancestral religion. Current research indicates that pagan cult-centres were still active in the early fifth century around Olbia and Tyras, lending archaeological support to such an identification.²⁹ Photius' wording, meanwhile, requires a close philological examination, which I undertake below.

²⁰ Orosius 7, 37.

²¹ WIJNENDAELE 2016, pp. 267–284.

²² KAZANSKII 2011.

²³ INGLEBERT 2001.

²⁴ MESTEK 2024, p. 487.

²⁵ *PLRE* 2, 934.

²⁶ MESTEK 2024, p. 477 n. 2.

²⁷ MESTEK 2024, pp. 486–488.

²⁸ MESTEK 2024, p. 488.

²⁹ TWARDCKI 2024a; SAVELIEV 2024; SHEIKO 2024.

Archaeological sources

Archaeological evidence that can be unequivocally linked to Radagaisus' campaign is extremely limited. Kazanskii's detailed survey lists only a small group of objects from Italy that can, on stylistic grounds, be ascribed to East-Gothic groups.³⁰

By contrast, the results of the Polish-Ukrainian excavations at Olbia carried out in 2016–2021, together with the studies collected in the special issue *Archaeologia Polona* 62, place the discussion in a different light.³¹ The post-Roman strata at the site now emerge as a substantial settlement that belongs unmistakably to the Cherniakhiv cultural horizon. Although definitive confirmation must await the resumption of fieldwork, current evidence strongly suggests that Olbia served as an important centre of trade and craft production.

Borys Magomedov was the first to suggest that the settlement functioned as a local seat of political power,³² an interpretation reinforced by the new discoveries.³³ It is argued here that its importance probably exceeded a purely regional role and that Olbia may in fact represent the principal stronghold of the Greuthungi (Fig. 1).³⁴

Regardless, it is necessary to reassess Shchukin's argument that the apparent absence of large-scale "princely" residences proves the Goths never developed a more hierarchical political organisation—a conclusion that reflected the state of research when he wrote. Beyond Olbia, a second plausible political and economic hub is Komariv on the middle Dnister, where excavations have revealed both a glass-working installation and a hypocaust-heated structure. The settlement is exceptionally extensive: its confirmed area covers ca. 12 ha and the most conservative estimate places its total size at no less than 20 ha.³⁵ Its position at the head of navigation on the Dnister placed it on the main corridor linking the Black Sea with the Baltic, while simultaneously furnishing an ideal base from which to launch operations into Pannonia.

I would also underline the strategic, though often underestimated, importance of the Vistula–Dnister waterway, which acted as a vital conduit between the Wielbark-culture heartland and the Santana de Mureş – Cherniakhiv complex. Wielbark artefacts discovered in the northern Pontic zone—including Olbia itself—demonstrate active contact throughout the third to fifth centuries.³⁶ Conversely, Cherniakhiv influence is equally visible in Wielbark settlement areas. The Masłomęcz group in south-eastern Poland offers perhaps the clearest illustration: both archaeological data and a DNA analysis indicate that these communities comprise Goths who left the Black Sea region in the late second century and resettled in the Wielbark zone.³⁷ A further striking case is the exceptionally affluent Wielbark cemetery at Weklisce on the Baltic coast.³⁸ Taken together, the material implies that trade—and therefore regular communication—between the two regions was far denser than hitherto assumed. Indeed, the Vistula–Dnister route³⁹ has attracted human interest from prehistory to modern times (Fig. 2).

Archaeological evidence likewise clarifies the character of Gothic–Hunnic interaction east of the Danube and the Rhine. The richly furnished Hunnic grave from Jakuszowice in southern Poland—distinguished above all by the deposition of a "gold bow"—offers the clearest illustration.⁴⁰ The emblematic significance of such weaponry had been recognised long before the detailed

³⁰ KAZANSKII 2011, p. 30.

³¹ TWARDECKI, BUISKYKH 2021; *Archaeologia Polona* 62 (2024).

³² MAGOMEDOV 2020.

³³ MAGOMEDOV 2024a.

³⁴ TWARDECKI 2024a.

³⁵ PETRAUSKAS, SHYSHKIN 2024.

³⁶ TWARDECKI, BUISKYKH 2021.

³⁷ WOŁĄGIEWICZ 1993.

³⁸ NATUNIEWICZ-SEKUŁA, OKULICZ-KOZARYN 2011; NATUNIEWICZ-SEKUŁA, BACZEWSKI 2023.

³⁹ KONOPKA 1938.

⁴⁰ ŻUROWSKI 1921; NOSEK 1959; GODŁOWSKI 1991; RODZIŃSKA-NOWAK 2022; PRZYBYŁA and NAGLIK 2024.

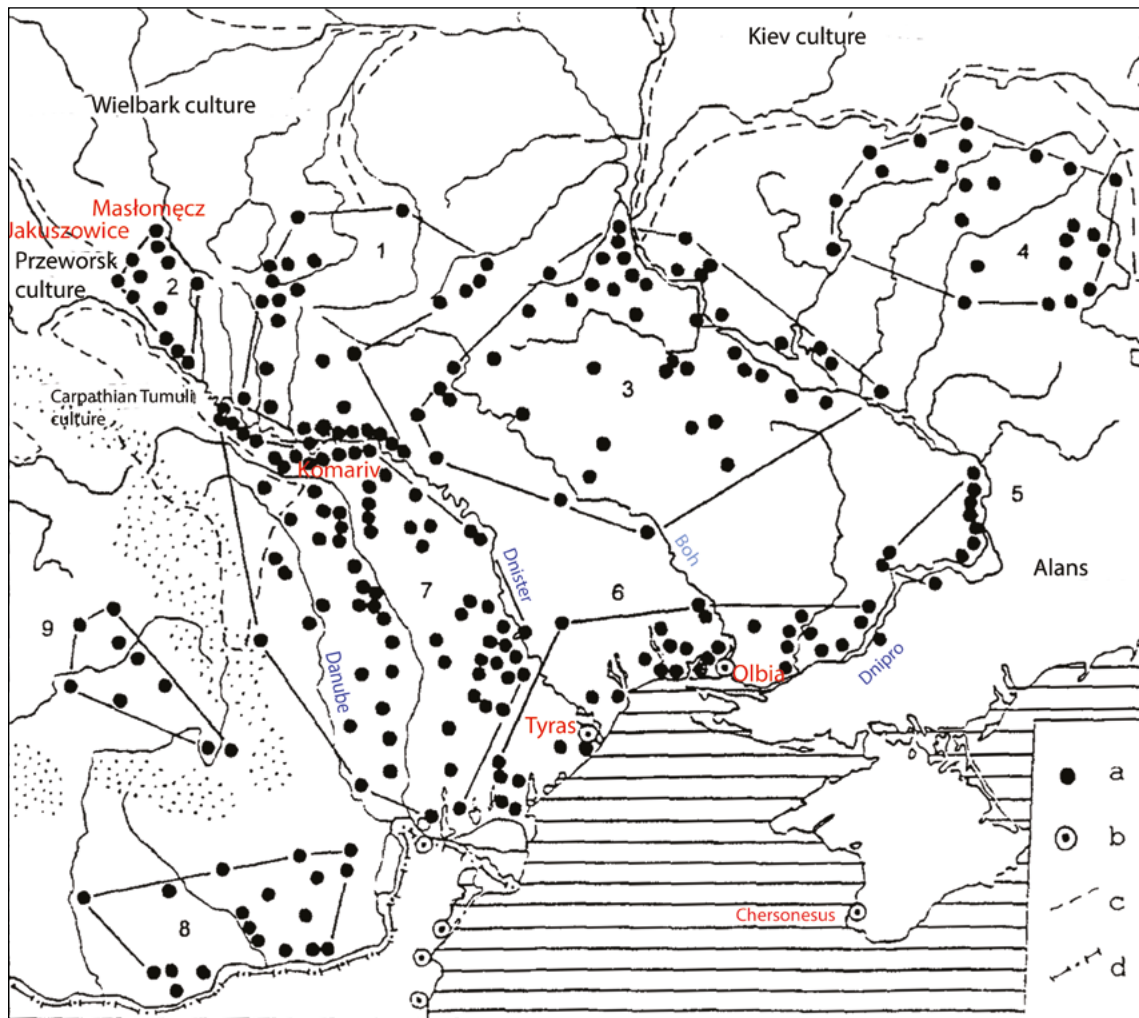


Fig. 1. Map of the distribution of the Cherniakhiv culture according to Borys Magomedov's classification. Numbers indicate the regions within the Cherniakhiv Culture: 1 – Western Ukraine; 2 – Upper Dnister; 3 – Central Ukraine; 4 – Eastern Ukraine; 5 – Lower Dniro; 6 – Northern Black Sea Coast; 7 – Moldova; 8 – Muntenia; 9 – Transylvania.
 Legend: a – major Cherniakhiv archaeological sites; b – ancient cities; c – cultural boundaries; d – Roman Empire's border in the fourth century CE (elaborated by A. Twardecki).

analyses of Hyun Jin Kim,⁴¹ and has consistently been interpreted as indicating a proto-feudal relationship binding local élites to Hunnic overlords—a view most recently reaffirmed.⁴²

Taken together, the material record forces us to reconsider the likelihood that structures of political dependency did not first arise under Hunnic domination—an assumption rarely questioned—but may already have begun to crystallise in the generations preceding the Hunnic incursion, perhaps during the semi-legendary reign of Hermanaric.⁴³

⁴¹ KIM 2013; KIM 2015; KIM 2017.

⁴³ Jordanes, pp. 116, 121.

⁴² HARMATTA 1951; LÁSZLÓ 1951; RODZIŃSKA-NOWAK 2021.

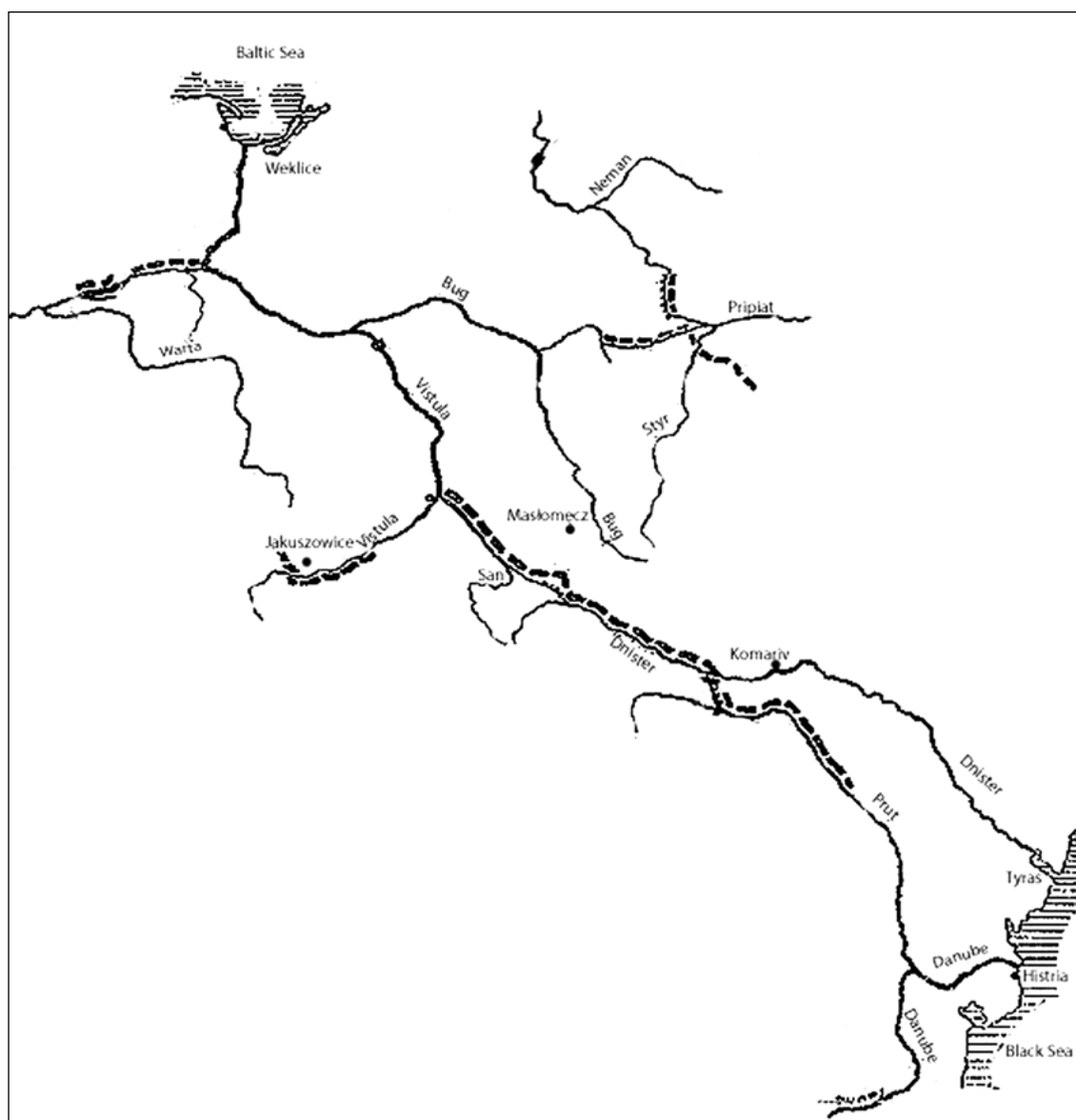


Fig. 2. Map illustrating possible waterway connections via the Vistula, San, Dniester, Prut, and Danube rivers between the Baltic and Black Seas (elaborated by A. Twardecki, based on the 1927 drawing by A. Matakiewicz).

Germanic Sagas

Early Germanic sagas also offer a valuable contextual framework in this regard. I have previously examined their potential significance in enhancing our understanding of the role of the Gothic settlement in Olbia in greater detail. Here, however, I wish to briefly restate my proposal to identify *Árheimar á Danparstœðum* with Olbia and its surrounding area, as well as with the mythical Oium described by Jordanes, who, in this instance, was undoubtedly drawing upon Gothic oral traditions.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Twardecki 2024a; Twardecki 2024b.

At the same time, other sagas also refer to Reiðgotaland and the Reiðgotar—possibly signifying “the land of the mounted Goths”—which, according to some sources, begins south of Poland, approximately in the vicinity of the Gothic settlement at Komariv in present-day Podolia.⁴⁵ I would also like to emphasise the inherently fluid nature of myths, including early Germanic traditions, and our primary source, *Hlöðskviða*, which serves as the foundation of this argument as a source. Nevertheless, while these accounts should not be treated as strictly factual, they may at the very least lend support to the hypothesis that a centre of the Reiðgotar existed on the lower Dnipro. In this context, Wolfram’s longstanding observation that the Greutungi became horsemen remains particularly relevant.⁴⁶ I can only add that over time, I have become even more convinced of this identification. The vision of the “Land of the Mounted Goths” strongly resembles the condition of the Greeks whom Dio Chrysostom encountered in Olbia at the end of the first century CE in Oration 36.⁴⁷ This represents a new factor, and consequently, my interpretation of Radagaisus’ invasion diverges from those presented to date.

Finally, the very content of *Hlöðskviða* indicates that the central conflict arises between half-brothers over their father’s inheritance. One of them is the offspring of a union with a Hunnic princess and is, therefore, half-Goth, half-Hun. As a result, he gains the support of the ruler of the Huns in this fundamentally internal Gothic war. Despite all the reservations regarding the mythological and epic nature of the narrative, it is worth noting that this account resonates in a striking manner with Kim’s latest interpretation and earlier conclusions drawn from the analysis of the Jakuszowice find concerning the proto-feudal nature of Hunnic rule. Such a system of governance does not preclude conflicts between vassals, a phenomenon frequently observed in the relations between different Gothic factions.

Of course, even under this assumption, the question remains regarding the role of Olbia and Tyras as such centres during the time of Radagaisus, as well as the potential connections between Radagaisus and the rulers residing in Árheimar á Danparstœðum. At this point, I would like to return to the previously mentioned analysis of the fragment of Olympiodorus as preserved by Photius.

Photius fragment

This passage is taken from *Bibliotheca* (Βιβλιοθήκη) by Photius, specifically from his summary of the Histories of Olympiodorus of Thebes, preserved in Codex 80. In this section Photius recounts the Gothic invasion of Italy under Radagaisus (405–406 CE) and their defeat by Stilicho. Of particular significance is his reference to the elite Gothic warriors called optimates, who numbered up to twelve thousand. After Radagaisus’ defeat, Stilicho incorporated these men into his army. It seems plausible to identify the optimates with the Reiðgotar of Old Germanic sagas or with the Greutungi of Greco-Roman authors.⁴⁸

Text

Ὅτι τῶν μετὰ Ῥοδογαῖσον Γόθων οἱ κεφαλαιῶται ὀπίματοι ἐκαλοῦντο, εἰς δώδεκα συντείνοντες χιλιάδας, οὓς καταπολεμήσας Στελίων Ῥοδογαῖσον προσηταιρίσατο.

There is no apparatus to this fragment.

⁴⁵ TOLKIEN 1960, p. XXII, note 1.

⁴⁶ WOLFRAM 1988, pp. 167–168.

⁴⁷ Dio Chrysostom 1940.

⁴⁸ WOLFRAM 1988, 167–168.

Translation:

Among the Goths who accompanied Radagaisus, the most distinguished were called *optimates* and numbered up to twelve thousand. After defeating Radagaisus, Stilicho incorporated these [warriors] into his forces.

Commentary

Philological notes

The Greek sentence preserved in Photius' *Bibliotheca* (Cod. 80) is a concise paraphrase of Olympiodorus' original wording, shaped by the linguistic preferences of later Byzantine Greek. Despite its compressed form, it is syntactically coherent and its meaning remains clear. Photius, summarising Olympiodorus, reports that the leading Goths who accompanied Radagaisus were called *optimates* and numbered up to twelve thousand. After Radagaisus' defeat, Stilicho enrolled these men in his own army. The phrase οἱ κεφαλαιῶται ὀπίματα ἐκαλοῦντο should therefore be understood as referring to the Gothic aristocracy—individuals of both social and military pre-eminence.

To substantiate this interpretation of the title, the papyrological record for κεφαλαιῶται in late-antique and early-Byzantine Egypt shows that its bearers perform three principal functions: fiscal, corporate and administrative. In fiscal documents they appear as financial overseers or tax officials,⁴⁹ in guild dossiers they manage collective funds,⁵⁰ and in administrative or legal texts they act as local officials or witnesses.⁵¹ Taken together, these sources demonstrate that κεφαλαιῶται held important positions within the fiscal, legal and administrative structures of Egypt and generally signified a form of local leadership.

Finally, the clause οὓς καταπολεμήσας Στελίχων Ῥοδογάϊσον προσηταιρίσατο may, at first glance, suggest that Stilicho defeated and incorporated Radagaisus himself into his forces. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the logical meaning of the sentence is rather: “those whom Stilicho, having defeated Radagaisus, incorporated into his own army”—that is, the *optimates* who had accompanied Radagaisus. The relative pronoun οὓς refers back to the Gothic elite, not to Radagaisus, and Ῥοδογάϊσον functions as the object of καταπολεμήσας, not of προσηταιρίσατο.

Historical context

Otto Mestek offers a concise and innovative reading of this passage, engaging earlier scholarship on Olympiodorus.⁵² His conclusions, however, concentrate on ethnic identification, linking Radagaisus with the Victohali and with Sarmatian groups. By contrast, I adopt a socio-political perspective: the phrase οἱ κεφαλαιῶται ὀπίματα ἐκαλοῦντο is best understood as designating a Gothic aristocracy originating in “Scythia” and still adhering to paganism.

Edward Gibbon, however, initiated an interpretative tradition in which the term referred to elite units of Gothic cavalry within the Roman army.⁵³ This understanding may have been shared even by Photius, as a reference to the *Gotho-Graeci optimatoi* appears in the works of the poet Georgios of Pisidia, who celebrated Emperor Heraclius' victory over the Sassanids

⁴⁹ P. Cair. Isid. 57; P. Oxy. 10.1330; P. Oxy. 83.5364; P. Münch. 3.1.69.

⁵⁰ P. Cair. Masp. 1.67090; P. Col. 7.150.

⁵¹ O. Heid. 443; P. Amh. 2.80–82.

⁵² MESTEK 2024, pp. 488–489.

⁵³ GIBBON 1845, col. 1182.

in 623 CE,⁵⁴ as well as in the *Strategikon* of Maurice.⁵⁵ Gibbon's anachronistic reading was already criticised in the nineteenth century,⁵⁶ and has been queried more recently,⁵⁷ yet it continues to colour modern accounts.

It is true that *optimatoi* later became the name of an elite cavalry force in the Byzantine period and of the military-administrative district (the *Thema Optimaton*) with which that force was associated. The widespread attestation of the term in Byzantine military manuals and narrative sources undoubtedly encouraged its retrojection into earlier history. Nonetheless, as noted above—and as the *Reiðgotar* of the Old Norse sagas likewise suggest—there are specific historical and comparative reasons to doubt that the word in Olympiodorus refers to cavalry as such. It is more plausible to regard *optimates* as members of the Gothic aristocracy whose standing was defined as much by lineage and political authority as by military function.

Historical context of Radagais invasion

Let us now examine the historical context of Radagaisus' invasion. After the death of Julian the Apostate in 363, the Goths attempted to renegotiate the *foedus* concluded with Rome, exploiting the political turbulence that followed. Procopius—claiming succession as Julian's closest male relative and heir to the Constantinian line—apparently courted Gothic support by promising to relax the treaty once he had overthrown Valens.⁵⁸ In seeking barbarian allies for an internal struggle, Procopius unwittingly set in motion developments later magnified by the arrival of the Huns.

According to Ammianus Marcellinus, Procopius' usurpation (26.5.15) coincided with an Alamannic incursion into Gaul, provoked—so the historian says—by affronts suffered at Valentinian's court. Concurrently, the Goths were gathering for a raid on imperial territory (26.6.11). There is no firm basis for assuming deliberate coordination between these movements; yet the overlap is striking, coming as it did during the final years of the broad political constellation traditionally associated with Hermanaric's hegemony—an entity that some scholars extend from the Baltic to the Black Sea and from the Danube to the Volga.⁵⁹ Archaeological indications of continuing contact among the Wielbark, Cherniakhiv and Santana de Mureş cultural zones strengthen the temptation to posit a concerted Germanic strategy.⁶⁰ For the present, however, decisive evidence is lacking, and the synchronism must remain an attractive but unproven hypothesis.

Zosimus supplies a fuller version of Procopius' preparations than Ammianus Marcellinus. While Ammianus confines himself to a terse notice of the usurper's period in hiding and praises his aptitude for intelligence-gathering,⁶¹ Zosimus relates how Procopius slipped away from an estate near Caesarea in Cappadocia and made his way by sea to Chersonesus in Taurica.⁶² That journey need not be read merely as a flight to safety: Chersonesus commanded the maritime routes that linked the Crimea with Olbia and Tyras, and thus offered an ideal base from which to maintain contact with Gothic groups on both shores of the Pontic steppe. Ammianus explicitly records that Athanaric furnished Procopius with auxiliary contingents,⁶³ a detail that presupposes functioning channels of communication across the region.

The analysis of late-antique ceramics from Olbia points to enduring connections with other Black Sea centres.⁶⁴ If, as recent work suggests, a sizeable Cherniakhiv settlement there served

⁵⁴ NEGIN, D'AMATO 2020, pp. 5, 12.

⁵⁵ Maurice, book 2, 6 ff.

⁵⁶ HERBERT 1838, p. 315 f.

⁵⁷ McMAHON 2014, pp. 66–67.

⁵⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus 26.20.3.

⁵⁹ WOLFRAM 1988, pp. 85–88, 117–119.

⁶⁰ TWARDECKI, BUISKYKH 2021, pp. 270–271; MAGOMEDOV, PETRAUSKAS 2024, p. 28; WOŁĄGIEWICZ 1993.

⁶¹ Ammianus Marcellinus 26.6.6–7.

⁶² Zosimus 4.4.13–16.

⁶³ Ammianus Marcellinus 31.3.4.

⁶⁴ DOMŻAŁSKI 2021, pp. 163, 176; DIDENKO 2024.

as a political hub of pagan Goths, Procopius' choice of Chersonesus as a base for negotiation was strategically sound: the city controlled the sea-routes linking the Crimea with both Olbia and Tyras. Zosimus claims that the venture prospered, asserting that Procopius enlisted ten thousand Gothic warriors for his campaign against Valens.⁶⁵ Ammianus, however, speaks of only three thousand auxiliaries⁶⁶ and mentions the usurper's correspondence with Gothic rulers.⁶⁷ If Zosimus' confused chronology is inverted, and Procopius' sojourn in Chersonesus is read in the light of his later dealings with the "king of the Scythians", the sequence of events becomes markedly more coherent.

Following Procopius' defeat, Valens launched a brutal persecution of the usurper's adherents and simultaneously inflamed relations with the Goths. Rejecting the explanations tendered by their rulers, he resolved to punish them by force.⁶⁸ In 367 he crossed the Danube and opened what proved to be a highly successful first campaign. The secondary literature on these operations is voluminous; here I cite only the syntheses of Heather and Kulikowski.⁶⁹ Of particular importance is the episode in the third campaigning season (369 CE), when Valens crossed the river near Noviodunum and, after an uninterrupted march, struck at the distant Greuthungi, "a notably warlike tribe".⁷⁰ This action implies that he traversed Thervingian territory, which lay nearer the frontier, and then crossed the Dnister, for the lands of the Greuthungi began beyond that river. Ammianus' narrative thus suggests that the chief objective of the expedition—conceived as retribution for Procopius' supporters—was directed specifically at the Greuthungi settled around Tyras and Olbia. The reading, in turn, buttresses the hypothesis that Procopius' earlier journey to Chersonesus was intended above all to establish contact with the Greuthungi (via the western Crimea and Olbia) and to secure their military assistance in his contest with Valens.

Procopius thereby drew the Greuthungi into Rome's civil strife, enlarging the horizons of their leaders and encouraging a more assertive political stance. After the Hunnic irruption and the catastrophe at Adrianople, Theodosius I restored a precarious equilibrium, settling substantial Gothic groups within the empire. Yet that arrangement barely outlived him: renewed tensions at Constantinople culminated in 399, when Gainas led an uprising against Arcadius.⁷¹

These events were no anomaly. In the ensuing decade Goths again exploited imperial rivalries—most dramatically during the conflict surrounding Stilicho and Alaric.

Another Goth, Fravitta, played a decisive role in suppressing the uprising, forcing Gainas to flee beyond the Danube, where he was ultimately killed by the Huns under Uldin's command in 401 CE. Gainas was most likely an Arian Christian, whereas Zosimus⁷² explicitly identifies Fravitta as a pagan. In recognition of his military and political service, Fravitta was honoured with the consulship in 401 CE; however, at an unspecified later date, he was executed as a result of court intrigues. If Fravitta was indeed connected to the pagan Greuthungi, his death may, in some way, be linked to Radagaisus' invasion of Italy in 405 CE.

Conclusion

It seems a hypothesis worth considering that in 405 CE, Radagais led the *Reiðgotar* in an invasion of Italy. According to the highly condensed version of Olympiodorus, as preserved by Photius, his army included a significant representation of the group most highly regarded by the Goths themselves as their most valiant branch—those inhabiting the territories east of the Dnister.

⁶⁵ Zosimus 4.7.2.

⁶⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus 26.10.3.

⁶⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus 27.5.1.

⁶⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus 27.5.2–3.

⁶⁹ HEATHER 1991; KULIKOWSKI 2006.

⁷⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus 27.5.9.

⁷¹ HEATHER 1991; KULIKOWSKI 2006; Zosimus 5.14–18.

⁷² Zosimus 5.20.1; HEATHER 1991, pp. 186–190.



Fig. 3. Map highlighting the key locations relevant to this paper (elaborated by A. Twardecki, based on Google Maps)

The most prominent centre of their domain was the settlement of *Árheimar á Danparstœðum*, the former Olbia, which was identified with the mythical Gothic Oium (Fig. 3).

Moreover, this invasion may have been merely another act in the ongoing drama between the Romans and the Greuthungi, a struggle that had been unfolding since at least the time of Procopius, who clearly illustrated that this was a double-edged sword. While the Romans could exploit internal divisions among the Goths, the reverse was also true. In this context, figures such as Fritigern and Gainas played pivotal roles, and following their deaths, Alaric increasingly became the central figure in these conflicts.

Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that, despite the replacement of Hermanaric's hegemony by Hunnic overlords, the near-simultaneous incursions along the Rhine frontier were, in some measure, consciously co-ordinated. As discussed above, Hunnic authority extended north of the Carpathians, embracing districts associated with the Przeworsk and Wielbark cultures.

Regardless of the precise nature of these power structures, it remains indisputable that pre-existing settlements not only persisted but, in many cases, continued to thrive under Hunnic rule.⁷³ This prosperity was doubtless preceded by a phase of harsh pacification, during which local populations were subjugated and elements of the native elite eliminated. Those who remained

⁷³ REIDA *et alii* 2024.

seem to have been drawn into a system of coexistence which, though restrictive, was nevertheless sustainable and broadly functional within the wider Hunnic imperial order.

Based on this evidence, it is reasonable to assume that, despite the flight of certain former elites and their supporters, life in Olbia remained largely unchanged. A crucial indicator of this continuity is the sizeable Gothic contingent that fought alongside Attila at the Catalaunian Plains (451) and the prominence of their leaders at the Hunnic court. Jordanes—our principal, if problematic, witness—notes their considerable strength.⁷⁴ Yet by that date most Cherniakhiv settlements along the Dnipro had disappeared, and the Gothic presence under Attila was probably smaller than under earlier Hunnic rulers.

Radagaisus' defeat appears to have hastened the decline of Cherniakhiv culture along the lower Dnipro, Olbia included. Yet the enrolment of his élite warriors into Alaric's following after Stilicho's death greatly enhanced the Visigothic leader's power, making him the chief beneficiary of the crises of 399–410 CE. The fall of Radagaisus and the Greuthungi in their former heartland temporarily weakened that branch of the Goths; at the same time, it accelerated a realignment that yielded the mature bipolar Gothic order of Visigoths and Ostrogoths. The latter required almost two generations after Attila's death in 453 CE fully to re-establish themselves, by which time no substantial pagan Gothic centre survived in this part of Europe and new cultural groupings—among them the Slavs—had emerged. Given the tenor of the extant Greek and Roman sources, it is scarcely surprising that the long-pagan Greuthungi have been sidelined in accounts of the Gothic wars with Rome. If the perspective sketched here is sustained by further enquiry, it would reinforce the thesis restated by Michael Kulikowski: that the Migration Period was driven principally by internal transformations within Roman and Gothic society, the Hunnic irruption being only one element in a broader process.

Abbreviations

PLRE *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, eds. A. H. M. JONES, J. R. MARTINDALE, and J. MORRIS, Cambridge.

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Ammianus Marcellinus	<i>Rerum Gestarum</i> . tr. J. C. ROLFE, Cambridge 1935–1940.
Dio Chrisostom	<i>Discourses</i> , tr. J. W. COHOON, H. LAMAR CROSBY, Cambridge 1940.
Jordanes	<i>Iordanis Romana et Getica</i> , ed. T. MOMMSEN, Berlin 1882.
Maurice	<i>Strategikon</i> , tr. G. T. DENNIS, Washington 1984.
Orosius	<i>Historiae Adversus Paganos Accedit Eiusdem Liber Apologeticus</i> (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum), ed. K. ZANGENMEISTER, reprint, Wien 2013.
Procopius	<i>De Bellis</i> , eds. J. VON HAURY, G. WIRTH, Leipzig 1962–1964 (revised 1976–1978).
Zosimus	<i>Zosime. Histoire nouvelle</i> , tr. F. PASCHOUD, Paris 1971–1986.

Papyri and Ostraca series

BGU	<i>Berliner Griechische Urkunden</i> . ed. C. WESSELY, Berlin 1895–.
O. Heid.	<i>Ostraca, Papyri und Pergamente der Heidelberger Papyrus-Sammlung</i> , ed. R. SEIDER, Heidelberg 1976.

⁷⁴ Jordanes, *Getica* 38.198–200.

- P. Amh.
P. Cair. Isid.
P. Cair. Masp.
P. Col.
P. Mich.
P. München
P. Oxy.
P. Oxy.
P. Princ.
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