

*A Companion to Ostrogothic Italy*, edited by Jonathan J. Arnold, M. Shane Bjornlie and Kristina Sessa, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, 551 pp., Brill's Companions to European History, vol. 9

Ostrogothic Italy — the term we usually apply to the state that emerged after the victory of Theoderic the Great over another barbarian king, Odoacer — has long attracted and continues to attract the interest of scholars. The edited volume reviewed here is yet another attempt made over the last thirty years to provide a comprehensive analysis of key problems associated with the history of the Ostrogoths. 2007 saw the publication of a — moderately successful — edited volume entitled *The Ostrogoths from the Migration Period to the Sixth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*.<sup>1</sup> Much earlier, in 1995, a very uneven — in terms of the quality of its articles — volume was published as *Teodorico e i Goti tra Oriente e Occidente*.<sup>2</sup> 1993 was marked by the publication of the best of all these volumes, *Teoderico il Grande e i Goti d'Italia: Atti del XIII Congresso internazionale di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Milano, 2-6 novembre, 1992*.<sup>3</sup> Do we, therefore, need a new edited volume — this time published by the prestigious Brill publishers in the Brill's Companions to European History series? The authors and the editors of the volume under review explain that they were prompted to embark on this ambitious venture by two considerations. The first was a lack of a systematizing and comprehensive study of the problems of Ostrogothic Italy. The second was the growing interest in the history of barbarian kingdoms, like the *regnum* ruled by the Gothic dynasty of Amali. Should we agree with them that such a volume was needed? And should we agree that the venture has been a success? Before I answer these questions, let me briefly discuss the articles included in the volume.

The collection begins with a short introduction explaining the structure of the volume and briefly discussing its contents. The first study — by Gerda Heydemann — is devoted to the political ideology of the Amali dynasty as well as the question of whether Ostrogothic Italy was, as a state, a continuation of Imperial Italy or, rather, a new entity, a Gothic *regnum* that was a barbarian kingdom in all respects. The article contributes little to the debate, although it was an excellent

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ostrogoths from the Migration Period to the Sixth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Sam J. Barnish and Federico Marazzi, Woodbridge, 2007, Studies in Historical Archaeoethnology.

<sup>2</sup> *Teodorico e i Goti tra Oriente e Occidente*, ed. Antonio Carile, Ravenna, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> *Teoderico il Grande e i Goti d'Italia: Atti del XIII Congresso internazionale di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Milano, 2-6 novembre, 1992*, Spoleto, 1993.

opportunity to say something new about Theoderic the Great's ideology of power and strategies employed to legitimize the rights of his successors.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the opportunity has been wasted.

M. Shane Bjornlie's overview is dedicated to the governmental administration of the Ostrogothic kingdom. It is part of the years-long debate over whether Theoderic's kingdom was a continuation of the Roman Empire or a completely new entity. Bjornlie believes that the administration of the Ostrogothic *regnum* was the same as the previous Roman administration, but operated on a much smaller scale and in very different conditions.

There is little new to be found in the contribution by Jonathan J. Arnold, who devotes his attention to the administration and political ideology of the Ostrogothic provinces. The provinces seized by Theoderic — for example Gaul and Pannonia Sirmiensis — were, in a way, reincorporated into the Roman *res publica*. Works by Cassiodorus provided a variety of reasons why these provinces should be incorporated into Italy. The author stressed, for example, their former existence as part of the Roman Empire, while the takeover of power over Gaul was justified by the fact that its seizure by Theoderic meant a restoration of *civilitas* (life according to the law) within its territory with a simultaneous rejection of savagery/barbarity (*saevitia/feritas*).

Federico Marazzi focuses on cities in Ostrogothic Italy. Using archaeological material, he claims — largely contrary to historians' vision of the early Middle Ages as a period characterized by a decline of urban areas — that cities were neither dead nor deserted, but were developing as they had in the fifth century. The cities — claims Marazzi — were used by Theoderic as a place where the process aimed at a peaceful coexistence of Goths and Romans, a process he controlled, was going on.

Christine Radtki discusses the role of the Roman Senate in the politics of the Ostrogothic kingdom. Following earlier findings, she believes that Theoderic used the Senate elite primarily in his negotiations with the Eastern Roman Empire over recognition of his rule and legitimization of Eutharic's succession. Apart from that, its role in the *res publica* ruled by Theoderic was slight — the Senate played no major part in the governance of the state.

In his study of the law in Amal Italy, Sean Lafferty sides with those scholars who claim that Theoderic kept the legal institutions and procedures of the late

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<sup>4</sup> The ongoing research on Jordanes' *Getica* continues to provide new research questions. Let us take the problem of legitimization of Eutharic Cilliga's succession (which ultimately did not happen). The fragment describing this Amal reads as follows: 'prudencia et virtute corporisque integritate pollentem' — Iordanes, *De origine atribusque Getarum*, c. 298, in *Iordanis Romana et Getica*, ed. Theodorus Mommsen, Berlin, 1882, MGH Auctores antiquissimi, vol. 5, part 1, p. 135. It is worth reflecting on whether these three qualities do not correspond to the components of Georges Dumézil's tripartite model — wisdom, valour and beauty, which, according to this scholar, was a prerequisite for any candidate to ascend the throne, see idem, *Mythe et Épopée*, vol. 2: *Types épiques indo-européens: un héros, un sorcier, un roi*, Paris, 1998, p. 338.

imperial administration. When it comes to the law itself, Lafferty suggests that it was an amalgam of various traditions and customs, the objective of which was to simplify and popularize the classic Roman legal system.

Guy Halsall's article — contrary to its title, 'The Ostrogothic Military' — deals with various issues which sometimes have little to do with the military matters of the Ostrogoths — the ethnicity, economy and politics of Justinian. To some extent it is a continuation of the sharp and fierce discussion with Walter Goffart about the installation of Theoderic's warriors in Italy. We do not learn much about the weapons, logistics and tactics of the Ostrogothic army, as a result of which the title, frankly speaking, does not really match the content of the article.

Brian Swain writes about the most frequently discussed problem when it comes to the Ostrogoths — the Gothic identity. He presents the debate between the advocates of an instrumental (situational) nature of Gothic ethnicity (for example, Patrick Amory) and the adherents of primordial ethnicity (for example, Peter Heather), without siding clearly with any of them. However, he does agree with the former that the identity of the Gothic army was not ethnic but merely social.

Deborah M. Deliyannis focuses on questions associated with urban life and culture. According to this scholar, Theoderic construction policy, consisting in erecting new buildings and renovating old ones, was intended to generate enthusiasm for the Roman urban life and culture in the heterogenic (in ethnic terms) population of his kingdom.

Cam Grey discusses the problem of agriculture and rural estates. He calls into question the thesis that the Ostrogoths came to Italy during a period of transformation of the late Roman world from one dominated by cities and rural estates into one in which the main role was played by villages. In doing so, he demonstrates how new interpretations of archaeological evidence undermine this thesis.

Kate Cooper analyses Procopius of Caesarea's account concerning Theoderic's daughter Amalasuetha. In trying to unveil the past reality hidden by Procopius' colourful description, she adds interesting arguments supporting Daniel Frankforter's thesis that Amalasuetha wanted to save Italy from Justinian's imperialist designs, and that her conflict with Theodahad, which ultimately led to the death of the Gothic queen, was a result of intrigue by the emperor's wife, Theodora.<sup>5</sup>

Natalia Lozovsky focuses her attention on the culture and literature of Theoderic's state. Her article is, in fact, a brief discussion of the most important authors active in Ostrogothic Italy, including Cassiodorus, Symmachus, Ennodius and Boethius.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Frankforter, 'Amalasuetha, Procopius, and a Woman's Place', *Journal of Women's History*, 8, 1996, 2, pp. 41–57.

Mark J. Johnson's article is an overview of the problems of art and architecture in Ostrogothic Italy, generally continuing the theses formulated in a much earlier study by the same author.<sup>6</sup> Johnson claims and that construction during the reign of the Amali dynasty was based on two pillars which he calls antiquarism and revivalism. Thanks to his building programme Theoderic wanted to put himself on a par with the ancients and restore everything to its original state. The propaganda message behind these ventures was to demonstrate that the Amali were worthy successors to the Roman emperors.

Paolo Squatriti tackles issues that are extremely original in medieval studies — environment and spatial development in Ostrogothic Italy. He discusses actions taken by the rulers of the kingdom to use the resources provided by the lands of the Italian Peninsula as best as possible.

Kristina Sessa examines the role of the Catholic Church in the Amal state. Her observations indicate that previous studies devoted to the topic are characterized by a surprising number of theses with no real grounding in the sources.

Two articles by Rita Lizzi Testa are also devoted to the history of the Catholic Church during the reign of the Amals. In the first of these she discusses the role of Catholic bishops in the political life of the Ostrogothic state. In the second she examines the territorial organization of the Catholic Church in Italy. The value of the study lies in the fact that the author has corrected many of the previous findings concerning the dates of the founding of some dioceses.

The last study, by Samuel Cohen, is devoted to the religious make-up of Theoderic's state. When discussing Theoderic's attitude to the Jews, the scholar points out that the Amal ruler's policy with regard to this minority was not dictated by tolerance — as it often thought — but, above all, by his desire to maintain social order in line with the ideal of *civilitas*. When it comes to Arianism, Cohen argues that authors like Cassiodorus or Pope Gelasius I made a distinction in their writings between the Arian heresy and the Ostrogothic religion, and believed that only the former deserved to be condemned. What constitutes the article's weakness is its author's uncritical approach to *Anonymus Valesianus*; for example, when Cohen is convinced of the veracity of the information about corporal punishments for every Roman who was unable to financially support the rebuilding of Jewish synagogues destroyed during anti-Jewish riots.

The volume as a whole raises considerable doubts in many respects. Reservations must be voiced regarding the use of the literature on the subject. We will not find here any references to important studies dealing with the history of the Goths by Ludwig Schmidt, John Michael Wallace-Hadrill and Gerd Kamper. The literature on Procopius of Caesarea is especially limited; for example, there are no Berthold Rubin's studies. The same can be said about the literature on Jordanes. We can also have considerable reservations about the articles tackling the problem of ethnicity because of their rather feeble use of eth-

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<sup>6</sup> Mark J. Johnson, 'Toward a History of Theoderic's Building Program', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 42, 1988, pp. 73–96.

nological literature. For example, there is no room for the basic works on the subject by Steve Fenton and Marcus Banks. In addition, the authors fail to see that the polarization of views between the primordialists and the instrumentalists with regard to the very nature of ethnicity is no longer as clear as it was a decade ago, with many scholars adopting positions somewhere in between.

The book is not free from basic errors either. On page 85 we learn that Gesalec died in 514. Yet, in fact, no certain date of his death is known. On page 296 we are informed that Amalasuetha was Theoderic's only daughter, although in reality the Gothic king had (at least) two more daughters — Ostrogotho and Thiudigotho. On page 297 it is said that in 519 Eutharic held the consulship with Theoderic, while in fact the other consul that year was Emperor Justin I. On the same page we read that Athalaric was born in 519. However, the young Gothic king was born either in 516 or in 518. On the following page we learn that Amalaberga and Theodahad were the children of the King of the Vandals Thrasamund, although it is known that both came from Amalafrika's first marriage to a man whose name we do not know. When his father Eutharic died (522/523), Athalaric was apparently eight years old (p. 31). This is not correct, because, according to Procopius, when Theoderic died (in 526) Athalaric was eight years old; Jordanes claims that he was ten at the time. Moreover, the wedding of Eutharic and Amalasuetha took place in 515, so it is easy to calculate that Athalaric could not have been eight years old in 522. Such serious errors should not be found in a book that purports to be the basic compendium of the history of Ostrogothic Italy.

There are also strange comments and assertions in the book. For example, when considering the identity of the Skiri (only three of whom are known by name — Edecon, Odoacer and Onoulphus), G. Halsall wonders (p. 174) whether it was ethnic or familial in nature. Does the very existence of the Skirian *gens* not automatically determine the existence of the Skirian ethnic identity? Atilla's polyethnic subjects apparently had several levels of ethnic identity in addition to their main identity — that of the Huns (p. 173). Does the author believe then that the Ostrogoths of King Valamir had two identities — Gothic and Hunnic, with the latter being more important? Even stranger assertions can be found in the article by P. Squatriti, who refers to the 'specifically Ostrogothic ecology' without, however, explaining what the term is supposed to mean (p. 390). On page 487 we read about the 'Ostrogothic Church', although the author means here the Catholic Church in Italy.

The book is marked by a considerable lack of precision, which culminates in Heydemann's article. The author claims (p. 28) that the Goths, according to the *Variae epistolae* (III, 23, 3), were apparently capable of combining military power with Roman culture and law, but what the source actually says is just that the Goths inherited the valour/manliness (*virtus*) of the barbarian peoples (*gentes*) and acquired the prudence (*prudentia*) of the Romans. Alaric II apparently died at Vouillé (p. 29). Yet the location of the battle between the King of the Visigoths and the Franks is not certain, and the author should mention that or use source

names like Campus Vogladensis, Boglada or Voglada. When depriving Gesalec of power, Theoderic the Great apparently acted in favour of his grandson Amalaric (p. 29). Yet given the fact that Theoderic himself seized the Visigothic throne and ruled the Visigoths until his death, it could be said that Amalaric did not play any major part in his plans. During Theoderic's reign Spain was apparently part of the Ostrogothic kingdom (p. 29–30). However, we have no information about the incorporation of Visigothic Spain into Theoderic's *res publica*, unless the author means that both Italy and *Regnum Visigotharum* had the same ruler, Theoderic.

I asked two questions at the beginning of the review. The answer to the first question is: yes, such a comprehensive study is very much needed. The answer to the second question is, unfortunately, negative. This edited volume is written mainly by young scholars and this is precisely where its main shortcoming lies. A thorough mastery of the literature on the subject requires many years and this is why publishing such a synthesizing study would make sense, if its authors included older, established scholars better prepared for such a venture.

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