The Goths & Other Stories
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Published by Punctum Books

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In the winter of 476 AD the Ostrogoths, hungry and exhausted from wandering for months through barren hills along the confines of the Byzantine Empire, wrote to Emperor Zeno in Constantinople requesting permission to enter the walled city of Epidaurum, and just kinda crash and charge their phones.

“My most magnificent and Christian Lord, 
Blessed Emperor of the Romans, 
Light of the East and West, 
Protector of the Universe,” wrote Theodoric, chieftain of the Ostrogoths, 
“My people are weary. We’ve been wandering around the Balkans for months. We’re hungry, we’re sleep-deprived, our kids are cranky, our feet are smelly, our crotches are itchy. We humbly request permission to settle in the city of Epidaurum and just kinda basically crash there and recharge, like, literally and figuratively.”

Nobody said anything. It was windy. It was cold. The wind kept whistling cheerfully between the rocks like a misguided fanfare
adrift in an empty graveyard. The Goths sat awkwardly on the hard cold rocks. The cold rocks sat on the dead yellow grass. The yellow grass sat on the raw ground. The whole universe sat uncomfortably, as if balanced on the edge of a boulder. A hawk circled overhead, looking down like a jaded office worker reading a snack bar menu.

Finally Zeno texted back:
“np” (in Greek of course)

Theodoric gazed fixedly at his phone and at those two imperial letters etched in glimmering gold on a rich deep crimson field on his screen — a twinkle of splendor nonchalantly texted from the opulence of Constantinople. Those two little Greek letters acceded to his request, and yet their negligent imperial sparkle seemed so unfair, so inconsiderately lavish in the desolate muddy emptiness of the cold, bleak Balkans.

“Allright,” said Theodoric aloud. “We’re going to Epidaurum. His purple-born majesty is letting us crash there.”

Exhausted cheers erupted around him like a weak froth fizzing up from a nearly-empty espresso machine.

“Sidimund,” said Theodoric to his best knight, “you ride ahead to Epidaurum and get everyone there to leave. Just scare the shit out of them. I want that whole city empty for us.”

“Very well, my lord.”

“I want no Greeks left in that town. Everyone out.”

“What am I to do with the ones that won’t leave?”

“Make them leave.”
II

Two days later Sidimund arrived at Epidaurum, a city he knew well for having been an exchange student at Epidaurum College for a semester.

He appeared at the city gates in the late morning alone
mounted on a gray horse
his long blond hair flowing
out of a gilded bronze helmet
dotted with gray iron studs
in vertical rows
bronze panels engraved
with allegories of the seasons
over his ears and his nose
his pale gray eyes
peering between them
a gray fur cape
fastened on his right shoulder
by an eagle-shaped silver brooch
a gray fur tunic
tied around his waist
by a garnet-studded silver belt buckle
his hands poised on the bridle
motionless
in their gray woolen gloves.

Anyone in the Empire would have known him as a Gothic knight — still and superb in the winter morning.

The sky was low the air was gray
the horse seemed made of sky and hair
the buckle hewn of rain
the silver glistened stark and cool
and winked a silent rimy gleam
a bleaker winter glint
than crimson garnet’s ruby sheen
aflare in coruscating hew but metal hard and hoar
a leaden light instilled oblique
as if the knight had plundered it
from jewels in the clouds
and drifted down on frigid winds
to rutilate his loot
arrayed in gleaming winter gray
insinuating thunder
still
in the winter morning.

The city guards totally freaked out and ran inside to get the governor.

The governor was like — oh shit this Goth is like seriously bad news, bad news, bad news!!! — quick quick a miracle solution someone do something quick: Bishop Irenaeus? Could he come up with some fancy bishop trick to drive the Goth away — like maybe some gory relic with like blood and toenails and stuff???
Or like a spontaneous mass prayer event type thing lol?

Sidimund waited patiently for the bumbling Greeks to finish scurrying around, and did not dismount.

A tunic tied atop his loins
his loins astride atop his horse
his horse askance across the gate
its gait assured upon its foot
he stood
was there an inkling in his stance
a hint of helmets in the air?
of stride afoot? of screams afar?
a crowd, a toot as in a shroud?
a cloud?
he stood
alone for now his sword at rest
the sky was gray the air still plain
the horse was still the plain still bare
he stood
    still
    in the winter morning.

Finally Irenaeus appeared and addressed him:

What brings you, Goth? — said the old man —
Do you seek oats, do you seek socks,
And why?
Will you steal goats and plums and frocks?
Why?
Could you nab kids and kidnap cats
To goad your stock and stick your stalks?
To bear your pennant proud and shrill,
Bet you will.
You're bare of fodder, keen to kill?
You're after figs and digs and pigs?
Are you, Goth?
Do you seek swags and swigs and tricks?
And tracks and sticks and stacks
    and food?

Do you seek food?
You Goth,
    so still
    in the winter morning?

“Dear Mr. Bishop,” said Sidimund.
(omg I so do not go by “Mr. Bishop” — thought Irenaeus — but
hey the situation did not lend itself to being picky about proto-
col did it now)

“My name is Sidimund, son of Sidimir the Amaling, and I
bear a request from my lord Theodoric, chieftain of the Ostro-
gothic people.”
“Do you come in peace?” asked Irenaeus.
“Well technically I haven’t killed anyone yet,” answered Si-
dimund.
He continued: “The request is as follows. My lord Theodoric will be arriving here in a few days, with forty thousand armed men and their families in tow. We are hungry and tired and would like to crash in your city. We don’t want to have to kill everyone because that’s typically time-consuming and stressful. Therefore we kindly request that you all get the fuck out and leave the city completely empty for us. Preferably leaving your refrigerators full for when we arrive, but I don’t want to be indelicate about it if you feel strongly about taking your food with you.”

“But… What… Leave? All of us? What about the children, the elderly, the sick? How? Where will we go?” pleaded Irenaeus.

“Mr. Bishop, I’m a Gothic knight, not a career counselor.”

Irenaeus stood silent and stern, like a bishop on a chessboard put in check by an opposing knight. He continued:

“Can you give us time at least? When would you want us gone?”

“Tonight, by sundown.”

Sidimund paused, then added: “Would you bring me a small child, like not too small but maybe six-seven years old?”

“Uhm, I suppose.”

“I’ll wait here.”

The bishop waddled back into the city diagonally, staying on squares of his own color, and reappeared a few minutes later with a terrified young girl, cautiously followed by her anxious mother a dozen paces behind.

“Thank you,” said Sidimund. “Would you bring her a little closer, to the right side of my horse please, about two arms’ length in front of me and one to the right. There, perfect. Now leave the girl there and please step back for a second. A little further back (diagonally of course and staying on squares of your own color). Yes, to that tree over there, please. Thanks.”

Sidimund unsheathed his sword and decapitated the little girl in one swift, silent motion, except for the swoosh of the blade skating through the air and the thud of her head falling into the grass. He added:
“Can you imagine how long it would take if we have to do this individually to every single person in the city? We can’t give everyone that much personal attention I’m afraid.”

Irenaeus quietly shat in his underwear and remained speechless. Sidimund moved his horse over to the grass where the girl’s head had landed, leaned over slightly, and speared it with the tip of his sword as if he was picking up a cherry tomato with a toothpick. He handed the head to Irenaeus, who grabbed it mechanically.

“Here, you can have it back, we have tons of these already,” said Sidimund while putting his sword away, leaving the girl’s head in Irenaeus’s hands.

“Sundown,” he added. Then he turned around and rode away.
After a few days’ walk the Ostrogoths arrived at Epidaurum. The city was nearly completely deserted, as requested. Theodoric’s wife Charlene, looking to move the family into some prime real estate, scored an awesome five-bedroom two-bathroom duplex villa!!!
   with indoor pool!!!
gourmet kitchen with marble counters!!!
   hi-gloss Soft-Close® cabinetry!!!
   SubZero® stainless steel appliances!!!
designer triclinium with wet bar!!!
private roof deck!!!
oversize peristyle with built-in tabulinum!!!
family room with floor-to-ceiling Ravenna-style mosaics!!!
thermostat-controlled hypocaust!!!
   and two-chariot garage (which was sorta overkill because they were on foot).

Theodoric walked in first, but on the second floor he found an old man named Marcellinus (perhaps the former owner of the property?) who had failed to evacuate. With one hand he grabbed Marcellinus by the neck and held him up against a shiny pink veined marble wall. With the other hand he grabbed his spatha sword by its graceful stone-studded hilt and pushed the blade into Marcellinus’s upper abdomen, approximately halfway between his sternum and his bellybutton, creating a longitudinal laceration in the parietal peritoneum of his anterior abdominal wall
   the parietal peritoneum of his anterior abdominal wall
   his stomach’s pyloric antrum
   his hepatoduodenal ligament
   the left lobe of his liver
   and his superior mesenteric artery.
   Marcellinus made a gurgly gagging sound, a bit of bright red blood pooled in his mouth and dribbled down his clothes. Some gas also came out of the opening in his belly.
Theodoric threw Marcellinus’s body out through an open window and looked for the master bedroom’s en-suite bathroom. Charlene walked in moments later.

“Theodoric, I know you’re trying to be efficient but who’s going to clean this up now? We got kids here, I’m trying to make this a wholesome and family-friendly environment.”

“Yeah sorry. I threw him out the window though. You can look up when trash pickup day is in this town, or call for special pickup if they don’t do bodies.”

“Thanks. What’s probably going to happen is I’m going to have to clean it up myself.”

Their young daughter Theodegotha walked in, holding a coarse flax-filled rag doll in the effigy of Saint Eudocia, complete with a miniature wooden cross. She pointed to the bloody mess on the chessboard-patterned marble floor and asked:

“Mommy what’s that?”

“It’s the blood of some Greek guy your dad just eviscerated, and a tiny bit of his liver as well. Are you ready for your nap or do you want to help mommy clean up the corpse?”

“Clean up the corpse with mommy!”

“Good Gothic girl, always ready for action!”
Theodoric welcomed me into his cluttered Midtown office, where he was kind enough to grant me an exclusive interview for this article. Amidst the jumbled decor of thousands of old books, gilded family portraits, antiques, and the purple velvet drapes framing the grand urban view out of his 28th-floor corner window, I asked the elder statesman to reminisce about the winter of 476 AD.

“Oh these were rough times. Savage times,” he confessed to me, puffing on his pipe. “The Balkans were a backwater in the fifth century, there was no food, no infrastructure. We had thousands of people in tow, they were hungry, they were tired. The priority was to feed them.”

I asked: “Were you expecting help from Byzantium?”

“Not really. I mean, it was complicated,” he said. “We were all culturally fascinated with Byzantium of course. As Goths, we had all grown up watching Byzantine television. There were only three channels, it was primitive. Byzantine television wasn’t even electrical, it was entirely mechanical. People today can’t even imagine what these mechanical TVs were like. They basically ran on olive oil. This is probably long before you were born, we’re talking 1500 years ago.”

“Indeed, I’m 43,” I nodded.

“So we grew up watching these Greek shows about people dressed in lavish outfits and having all these intrigues in marble palaces. And of course we were all secretly a bit jealous. Officially we were proud to be Goths, there was this whole public exaltation of Gothic culture, propping up warriors on shields, running sacred objects through fields for good harvest, etc. But I think in private a lot of us harbored a kind of Byzantine envy.”

I asked: “Did that make you disappointed with the Empire once you got to know it better?”

“Yes and no. I think we were always aware of the dark side of it, this sort of Greek shiftiness. We envied the Empire’s material
wealth but on some level I’d say even the average Goth on the street had a bit of disdain for Byzantine dishonesty. Honor was a big thing in Gothic society. And perhaps it wasn’t always such a priority for the Greeks.”

“And so to get back to the winter of 476?”

“The main thing is, we were hungry. We didn’t trust the Byzantines but we needed them. We knew they considered us Barbarians, they made it clear at every opportunity. If I had just followed my pride, I would have just burned all their cities to the ground and killed everyone there.”

“Well you sort of did exactly that, didn’t you?”

“No, I think that’s an exaggeration. We did that to a few cities, but the other ones we just ransacked for food and didn’t really kill anyone—unless they got in the way. Fundamentally we’re not murderous people, but we were just hungry. If you’re in charge of feeding thousands of hungry armed warriors and you have to play games with some two-faced Greek envoy, it’s a fine line. Of course you’d rather cut him in half or impale him. But you can’t afford to get chased down by imperial legions. You also can’t give in too much and lose your Gothic honor, or your own hungry men will kill you and go on a rampage.”

“Would you say that you’re anxious not to be remembered the same way as the Huns and the Vandals?” I asked.

“I think you’ve read my mind. Maybe all we wanted was a bit of dignity and material security.”

“But wouldn’t you say there was a cultural element of violence among the Ostrogoths?” I asked, hoping not to offend Theodoric with that question. To wit, I pointed at the collection of skulls arrayed in one corner of his office, and asked further: “I see you’ve kept the skulls of your enemies on display all these years. There’s something almost Aztec about that fetishization of your adversaries’ corpse, isn’t there?”

“Well I don’t know about Aztec, I wouldn’t push the comparison too far. We never had human sacrifices obviously. But yes, we are a warrior people, I think I’m comfortable with you printing that.”

“Is there one skull you’re still particularly proud of?” I asked.
“Hah,” Theodoric chuckled and his eyes lit up as if I’d brought up a comical memory. “Yes actually. That third one on the left is Odoacer. I’m still chuckling because I killed him with my bare hands at dinner — you know the story. I bent him backwards and sort of broke in him half. So you could say alright, nothing unusual about that part, but the thing is, he didn’t go “snap” or “crunch” as you would expect. He was kinda squishy. His body kinda went like “squish”. It’s hard to explain…” said Theodoric, his hands gesturing as if wringing a sponge.

“What about Boethius? I asked.

His expression changed and became pained: “I was hoping you wouldn’t bring him up — but I guess I expected you would. Yes. It’s an unfortunate story. I still have his books.” He got up from his desk and reached for a dusty volume. “I’ll read you some if you don’t mind,” he said, then declaimed in a clear smooth voice:

\[
O\ stellifer\ conditor\ orbis, \\
qui\ perpetuo\ nixus\ solio \\
rapi\do caelum\ turbine\ versas \\
legemque\ pati\ sidera\ cogis, \\
ur\ nunc\ pleno\ lucida\ cornu \\
rotis\ fratris\ obvia\ flammis \\
condat\ stellas\ luna\ minores…
\]

“Beautiful. Now would you translate it for our readers who aren’t as comfortable with Latin?” I asked, bearing in mind that many of you these days prefer to read classical texts in translation, little scoundrels!

“Sure” said Theodoric, “I guess the Greek would go something like this:

\[
Ω\ ἀστροφόρου\ κτίστη\ τοῦ\ κύκλου, \\
ὅς\ ἀϊδίῳ\ ἐσκημμένος\ τῷ\ θρόνῳ \\
tαχεί\ τὸν\ οὐρανὸν\ στρόμβῳ\ περιστρέφεις \\
kαὶ\ τὸν\ νόμον\ πάσχειν\ τὰ\ ἀστρα\ ἀναγκάζεις, \\
ὡς\ νῦν\ μὲν\ πλήρει\ λαμπρὰ\ τῷ\ εἴδει
\]
“Right... I meant... into English? I thought our readers might...” I prodded gently.

“Hehe, right, of course. See, this is the kind of generational difference that makes me realize what a fuddy-duddy I’ve become. I’m a man of my time, what can I say. Back in my day, “translating” meant between Greek and Latin — unless it was clear from the context someone meant Gothic. But we grew up knowing that nobody ever wanted to hear Gothic — well, unless they were a Goth. So I didn't even consider that. But anyway, yes, in English, it means roughly:

Oh stereophonic conditional orbit,
quick perpetual knickknack’s solitude
rapid kale turbine workups
legume’s keypad stares at cogs,
up nuns playing a look at a corny
tootsie frat rings up way a flan mass
condos stale as looney manors...”

“Thank you, it's beautiful. Theodoric, thanks again on behalf of our entire editorial staff for granting us this interview and sharing these precious memories with us.”

“My pleasure.”
Charlene walked out onto the porch of her new house along Theodosius Avenue, Epidaurum’s main thoroughfare, and ran into Sidimund, who was coming to visit his boss.

“Hey Sidimund, how is it going?”
“Good morning Charlene, look at that swank house!”
“I know, we totally scored, everyone loves it.”
“I bet. And awesome location, too.”
“Actually, yeah, how does it feel to be back in Epidaurum? This probably all looks totally familiar to you. You went to college here, didn’t you?”
“Only a semester. I was an exchange student. But yes, I’m on familiar ground.”
“How was it studying here actually? Good experience?”
“In some respects, yes. It’s all about finding your niche. I mostly hung out with the other exchange students, we were like the Epidaurum foreign student gang.”
“Oh yeah?”
“The local Greeks were pretty arrogant and racist, to be honest. A lot of ‘Barbarian this, Barbarian that.’ So I mostly had these two really good friends, a Jewish student named Isaac and this guy Thabudius who was from Numidia.”
“Oh wow, like, from Africa?”
“Yes. He was amazing, he had the most extravagant sense of fashion. He sometimes wore this sort of weird dark green silk pallium with an embroidered edge that was like, bright orange. Always with the most unusual motifs. And this awesome silver brooch. And he had this ridiculous collection of silver bracelets, some of them were just huge. And always with really strange stuff carved on them, like snakes, birds, whatever.”
“Ooh that sounds really attractive! Bracelets! Let’s totally go to Numidia right now and shop for bracelets!”
“Oh I know. He was incredibly handsome, too.”
“Were you guys ever, like, together?”
“Well, kind of. We hooked up a few times. He had really dark skin and a tattoo of an eagle on his lower back, it was unbelievably hot. We used to joke that I was the palest person on campus and he was the darkest. Once we were naked and tangled in bed we probably looked like a chessboard. And I’m sure he thought hooking up with a pale Goth was pretty hot, too, come to think of it.”

“Wow.”

“But anyway, I have no idea where he is now. I hope for him he didn’t go back to Africa. I don’t want to speak negatively of the Vandals because they’re our blood relatives, but… you know, the way they rule Africa. I mean, they’re going to make a bad name for themselves.”

“Well, yeah… what can I say… We read the same news…”

“Anyway. I think that was the reason his dad sent him abroad for college, he didn’t think Africa was a good place for his son to stick around. And maybe Rome was too expensive. So maybe that’s how he ended up at Epidaurum? I don’t know. We didn’t think about those things, we were college students.”

“What about Isaac, was he from Judea?”

“No I think he was from Alexandria, or some place around there. We were roommates actually. Straight guy but really nice, smart, intellectually curious. We used to talk until late at night, he heard all the details of my stories with Thabudius… And I heard all his stories. The Jews are really interesting people actually. They have this whole literary tradition with a bunch of sagas, kinda like ours. But theirs are all set in the desert and are all about people being too hot and trying to find someplace colder, so everything works backwards.”

“Hahaha omg that sounds amazing.”

“Yeah it’s cool stuff. Isaac was a really sophisticated guy. His dad wanted him to come back to Alexandria and go into banking, but he literally had zero interest in that. He was into Gnosticism, Montanism, and all that philosophy. He used to read Tertullian nonstop and tell me about Tertullian over breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It was kinda neat. I was never so much into theology but, you know, hearing it from such a smart and pas-
sionate person, you get into it. He said his family had no inter-
est at all in Christian theology — or even Jewish theology. He
actually audited a class on Gnosticism at Epidaurum and asked
the professor not to have that appear on his transcript. He was
like — dude if my dad finds out he’s paying for me to studying
this heretical Christian stuff he’s literally going to kill me.

“Hahaha I love it.”

“I once taught him how to use a sword. He said it was the most
terrifyingly exciting thing he’d ever done. He used to joke — if
my family knew that I’m hanging out with a Goth who’s teach-
ing me to wield a sword, they would just… And then he’d com-
plete the sentence with something absurd and hilarious they
would do: jump into the Nile, shred their shirts in mourning,
hold a vigil for him, send a dozen slaves to bring him home…”

“That’s amazing. Did you guys speak Greek together?”

“Yes. Actually his Greek was much better than mine when I
got there. I mean, he was basically a native speaker, growing up
in Alexandria and all.”

“And with Thabudius as well?”

“Yes, also. Thabudius obviously preferred Latin, but spoke
really good Greek. He had the most incredible Numidian ac-
cent in Greek. In Latin as well actually. I can’t even describe it.
Like something from the back of his throat, like a gentle roar.
He taught us a lot of funny Latin words from his country. Ap-
parently there are all these crazy Latin expressions that are only
used in Numidia. Some of them are just hilarious.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“So like, let me think… Like ‘to charge your phone’ you’d say
‘mobile inferre’ right? I mean that’s like standard. That’s what’s
printed on the bilingual label on the charger, etc., right?”

“Right. So what do they say in Numidia?”

“So according to Thabudius, people in Numidia say ‘gesta-
men fovere’ instead.”

“Oh wow. So ‘gestamen’ like it’s the thing you carry with you,
and ‘fovere’ yes, like it needs to be warmed up and nursed and
taken care of. That’s really cute actually.”
“I know, so adorable. Or like the stuff he cooked with. All manner of crazy ingredients with crazy names you’d never heard of. He’d be like ‘I’m making galbaneum with galenga with zenzur with zizuinnim’ and I’d be like ‘you are so making this up, there’s no way those are Latin words’ and he’d be like ‘dude it’s in Apuleius, look it up. It’s in the Asclepius.’ And of course Apuleius came up, like, ten times a day, because he’s pretty much their Numidian national hero. Thabudius would tease me and say: ‘Oh well, I guess my job here is to educate the barbarian Goths about Roman classics. Let me see, are there any wild Goths with long blond hair who need to be educated around here?’ And at that point I’d be so irritated and aroused we’d end up having wild sex and making a hot black-and-white skin chessboard.”

“It sounds like you guys were very close.”

“Yeah, well. I don’t know. Maybe. It’s complicated. He did introduce me to a lot of cool Latin music. He knew all the Latin bands. Do you know this song De reditu suo by Rutilius Namatianus?

Velocem potius reditum mirabere, lector, tam cito Romuleis posse carere bonis...

“Oh yeah! Rutilius! Omg I haven’t thought about Rutilius in a long time! I actually do remember the lyrics of that song:

quid longum toto Romam venerantibus aevo
nil umquam longum est quod sine fine placet...

“Yes exactly!”

“Oh I was totally into Rutilius, too. This is long before Theodoric and I had kids. We used to go out and sing this stuff all night. Well ok, that’s another story… But yes I totally remember it.”

Sidimund and Charlene sang on together:

O quantum et quotiens possum numerare beatos nasci felici qui meruere solo!
At this point Theodoric appeared on the porch. He grinned and briefly joined them in an improvised trio:

_qui Romanorum procerum generosa propago_
_ingenitum cumulant urbis honore decus!_

All three of them laughed. Sidimund bowed to Theodoric:

“Good morning my lord.”
“Good morning Sidimund. Are we having a little Rutilius disco moment?”
“Looks like it,” said Sidimund with a shy smile.
“I’m glad. I think we all really needed a little pause and something cheerful to think about. We’ve all earned it. Now we also do have some work to do.”
“Yes my lord. What can I do?”
“Sidimund, since you know the city, I’d like you to be in charge of grain distribution. Recruit as many people as you need, do a tally of the granaries, divide up what we have, and make sure everybody has enough to eat tonight.”
“Yes my lord, it will be done as you command.” Sidimund bowed again, and left.

“Speaking of food,” said Theodoric to Charlene, “did you take a look at the fridge and the pantry in this house? Did they leave any food?”
“I did. There’s a lot of lard, there’s a bunch of large clay tupperware with boiled lamb, boiled pork, and boiled goose…”
“Eeww why do the Greeks have to boil everything?”
“I know… There’s also a bunch of cans of murri sauce and garum sauce.”
“Omg that stuff is so gross. The Greeks just eat the weirdest things. I can’t believe they call us Barbarians…”
“Yeah seriously, that stuff is, like, weapons-grade. Like if you ever need to attack the Gepids and you want to get into chemical warfare, that garum stuff will do.”
“Right, thank you Charlene, excellent idea, I’ll remember that…”
“And then there’s a few actually usable things like some kop-toplakous cake, and a few cheeses like a whole anthotyros and about three quarters of a cephalotyrion.”

“Meh.”

“Yep. And a bunch of reflux medicine and stuff like that. The guy clearly had really bad reflux and abdominal gas problems.”

“Oh yeah haha that’s true, remember how all this gas kinda went ‘puff’ out of his stomach when I cut him open? I thought that was pretty funny.”

“Well if you eat this rotten fish sauce every day with boiled mutton and all that random Greek stuff, I don’t see how that’s going to be a surprise when you’re bloated like a bagpipe…”

“Well I guess that’s what we’ll eat for now. Still beats walking all day through the snow and getting blisters I guess.”

“I don’t know, barely.”

“Yeah well. Alright, let me get to work then. Love you.”
VI

Snow had fallen early on the Rhodope mountains that year and the passes were rough and icy.

Theodegotha asked: “Mommy, can I ride on the horse a little bit?”

“How?” said Charlene.

“Because I’m tired of walking and I’m cold and my feet hurt.”

“But a good Gothic girl walks at least twenty miles a day in the snow, sweetie.”

“I know but my feet hurt.”

“Alright, mommy will put you on top of the barley.”

Charlene lifted the little girl, while still walking, and hoisted her up on top of a sack of barley jouncing up and down on the mare’s sinewy rump.

“Okay you hold on tight and get some rest up there,” said Charlene.

“My feet also hurt and I’m also cold and tired,” confessed Charlene to Theodoric.

“And so do mine,” Theodoric answered.

“And everyone else’s, I bet,” said Charlene.

“I want to camp at lower altitude, maybe we’ll walk down another three hours and find a good spot without snow. I don’t want too many people freezing to death overnight.”

“How do you feel about slavery?” said Charlene after a long pause.

“Slavery? Why slavery? How is this coming up now?”

“I’m just working on my paper, as much as I can while we move around. And I was just thinking—would we ever want slaves?”

Theodoric thought for a while, the snow crunching under his boots. A hawk flew by silently, far above them in the stark winter sky.
“I don’t know,” he said finally. “I’m not against it. The concept sounds great. But how do you feed them?”

They walked on. A twig crackled underfoot.

“You can’t have slaves if you don’t have enough grain to feed everyone. It’s just more mouths to feed,” he continued. “Maybe one day if we settle somewhere rich and bountiful? I don’t know. It could also be really impractical.”

Theodegotha took off her left shoe. Her little foot was sore. There was a bit of blood where her sock covered a raw blister on her heel. She held her Saint Eudocia doll tighter and frowned.

“Theodegotha, put your shoe back on,” said Charlene.

“But it hurts.”

“I know it hurts but it’s cold and you can’t be barefoot in this weather, so put your shoe back on until we’re camping somewhere and we make a fire.”

“OK mommy,” said the little girl, reluctantly putting her bloody wool sock and then her dirty shoe back on.

They walked on, down from the pass into the valley. The trail gradually got wider and the snow slushier. The landscape lost its desolation and gained nothing in return.

The hard ice turned pulpy
the white turned sallow
the crisp crunch of each step devolved into a crunchy splosh
the stark became indecisive
the bleak became wan
the harsh became bleary
the grand became residual
the light gray became colorless

a goat bleated, far above them on an escarpment, and limped ungracefully out of sight after shitting on a patch of dead grass.

The path turned rockier and wetter. The mare hesitated and slipped a few times, sending jolts into the sack of barley and little Theodegotha’s spine. Charlene’s ankles twisted and turned
inside her woolen boots, pulling and tugging all the way up her legs.

Her knees hurt
a hundred horses hesitated
and slipped
one by one
as each tromped out of the white snow
into the sloshy slush
a thousand more ankles twisted
and hurt
each one in turn
in a caravan of sprains.

“So, I guess, who would our slaves be?” asked Theodoric.
“Well. I don’t know. Our enemies? People we capture in battle?” said Charlene.

Theodoric kept walking. He forded a brook, trudging across its marshy embankment. Water got into his boots. The cold bit him like a snake. He said nothing. Water got into Charlene’s boots. The cold soothed her blisters for an instant.

“If they’ve been brave in battle, wouldn’t it be more honorable to kill them than to enslave them?” said Theodoric.

“I suppose,” said Charlene.

“I don’t think anyone would choose to be a slave. I imagine anyone faced with that choice would prefer death,” Theodoric added.

“That’s assuming you give them the choice. But as a king, why would you give your enemy the choice?”

“If they’ve been bold enough to be your enemy, why would you want them as your slave? They’d probably make a terrible slave. Also, I like killing my enemies in battle. The last thing I want is to see them every day and be responsible for feeding them forever.”

They walked on. A spongy mat of soft dead grass provided false relief for a moment, then slowed them down like a wet rug.
Theodoric, do you think we're like the Hebrews? Do you think this is our desert and there's a mystical dimension to our years of wandering?” asked Charlene after a while.

“No.”

“I’ve been wondering about this, for my paper, but also personally. You don’t think there’s a great meaning to our wandering? That we’re chasing God, or God is chasing us?”

“No. I don’t see it. Maybe you’re right, but I don’t see it.”

“So why are we wandering?”

“Because we’re hungry, Charlene. We’re going to run out of barley and die. We’re going to lie down in the snow, right here in these mountains, and never wake up. And crows will eat our eyes. But we don’t want to die. Even dogs don’t want to die. Even mice don’t want to die.”

“Maybe we’re like the Mormons. Maybe we’re looking for our place, the home we were destined for, our manifest destiny as Goths.”

“Maybe Charlene. Maybe. You’re the scholar. I’m just a chieftain. I’m leading forty thousand men with blisters on their heels and water in their boots. All I know is that they don’t want to die. If they die, they want to go sword in hand, like Goths. Not like mice in a trap. Not of hunger. Not of frostbite. Not shitting their guts out in a mountain stream.”

“Mommy,” said Theodegotha from atop the barley sack, “can we order Thai when we get to camp?”

“No, sweetie,” said Charlene.

“Why not?” asked the little girl in disappointment.

“Because they don’t deliver to this area, sweetie. The nearest Thai place is hundreds of miles and years away,” Charlene explained. She paused, then continued: “Also my phone is dead and there’s nowhere to charge it. And there’s no reception. Everyone’s phone is dead, sweetie, it’s winter and we’re in the middle of nowhere. And it’s 476.”

Theodegotha frowned and clutched her Saint Eudocia doll tighter, bouncing on the sack of barley as the mare trundled on.
Charlene sat at the edge of Theodegotha’s frilly pink bed in the warm, quiet mansion in Epidaurum, reading her a bedtime story.

“And then the Amalings killed the evil Emperor Decius and every last man in his army, and threw their bodies into the Danube. And the river turned red from the blood of our enemies…”

The little girl fell asleep peacefully. Her mom tucked her in and kissed her on the forehead. Then she got up and went to sit on the rocking chair across the room, and just looked at her sleeping child for a while.

Theodegotha’s new room was a little girl’s dream. Like all little girls her age she was in her Saint Eudocia phase. Soon she’d probably grow out of it and become fascinated with another saint. But for now she would not sleep without her Saint Eudocia flax-filled rag doll. Above her bed were fold-out mosaic posters of Saint Eudocia cooking, knitting, and writing The Martyrdom of Saint Cyprian, taped to the wall. She had the official Saint Eudocia® “Martyrdom of Saint Cyprian Playset” with which she played all day at beheading Cyprian and having his body taken to Rome on a little ship. Clearly the Saint Eudocia® franchise made a lot of money from this. And in a few months she would probably lose all interest in it, and Charlene and Theodoric would have to go to the mall outside Epidaurum looking for the playset for her next saint.

The experience at the toy store at the Epidaurum Mall was nothing to look forward to. Theodoric and Charlene often found themselves wondering if they didn’t actually prefer walking across the Balkans in the snow. Somehow Theodoric felt more at ease fighting Roman legions in the freezing mud and splitting the skull of his enemies with an axe than dealing with his entitled, screaming, moody little Gothic daughter at a suburban mall.
Theodegotha’s obsession with wanting to be a princess was particularly insufferable to him — not because that kind of fantasy was unbecoming for a little girl, but because Theodegotha was already a princess. Nothing Theodoric said or did seemed able to convince his daughter that the aristocratic rank she pretended to have when playing was the one she actually had. Deep inside, Theodoric knew that the kind of princess she dreamed of being was the kind who lives in a beautiful castle and wears flowy crinoline dresses — not the homeless kind who sits on a sack of barley bouncing on top of a scrawny mare and puts her bloodied socks back on so her feet won’t freeze. He felt a sense of shame for not having managed to give his daughter a more comfortable childhood, or at least a sense of pride in her Gothic heritage.

“Theodoric,” Charlene had once asked, “do you think it’s important to expose young children to violence?”

“I think so, yes.”

“That’s also my intuition as a mother. I feel like they need to grow up knowing that violence and death is normal, and not feeling squeamish about it.”

“Of course. Death is a part of life. We kill people all the time, that’s just how things are.”

“I feel like violence needs to be demystified for young children. It shouldn’t be abstract, it shouldn’t be glossed over. I think it makes sense for them to experience the details of wounds, of how blood gushes, of the various sounds people make when they die.”

“I wholeheartedly agree. That’s how we were raised.”

“Especially slash wounds from swords, and also perforation wounds when people get pierced by an arrow. Those two are the most likely to come up in our environment. I think it’s good to be able to explain to young children in simple terms how an arrow enters the body, tears up internal organs and causes hemorrhage. And also ideally for them to see it first hand, so they can watch the pain on the face of someone who’s dying that way. I feel like that has real pedagogical value for a young child.”
“I’m glad you’re thinking about this. You’re articulating it better than I could.”

“I think next time we have a battle, or some other opportunity to kill people, we should actually do a hands-on workshop for kids. You know like a petting farm, but for violence.”

“That’s an idea. I like that.”

City life with a young child was another matter. It did not involve Ostrogothic battle workshops, or perforation-themed petting farms. In fact a quick stroll around the mall had made it clear to the embarrassed young parents that their Gothic tastes were painfully out of fashion, even in a provincial city like Epidaurum.

The latest craze in the Epidaurum toy world was the (supposedly educational) Faltonia Betitia Proba® make-your-own-Christian-poem Cento® set. The set consisted of 694 fridge magnets, each bearing a line from Virgil, which each player had to try to rearrange in such a way as to form an epic poem praising Christ, but without creating a pagan meaning. The game would beep if the magnets were rearranged in a pagan way—even by mistake—and would keep beeping until a Christian arrangement was found, making it one of the most annoying games parents could inflict upon themselves. The proper Christian rearrangement, called a Cento®, would cause the game to beep the tune of Saint Ambrose’s *Te Deum*. Every child in Epidaurum had to have their own Cento® set. Parents not only often struggled with Virgil’s Latin—often ashamed to tell the kids they didn’t really understand it—but also felt increasing pressure to get bigger and bigger fridges to accommodate the game’s 694 fridge magnets—an unrealistic number for the appliances owned by most middle-class families.

So I bet you guys are super curious to try, aren’t you? OK we’ll try it together. I got five Virgil fridge magnets to get you started. And I put an English translation next to it on the off chance that your Latin is rusty, little scoundrels!
Certa manent pueri et palmam movet ordine nemo
Mary had a little lamb

Promissisque patris
Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose

Nemo ex hoc numero mihi non donatus abibit
Three little pigs

Vestra” inquit “munera vobis
May the force be with you

“Audite, o proceres” ait “et spes discite vestras
God save the queen

Now let’s give this our first try. We’ll put the magnets in the right order to praise Christ, but if a pagan meaning comes out… Beep!!!

Nemo ex hoc numero mihi non donatus abibit
2 cups canned chickpeas
Certa manent pueri et palmam movet ordine nemo
½ cup tahini (sesame paste)
“Audite, o proceres” ait “et spes discite vestras
2 cloves garlic, peeled
Vestra” inquit “munera vobis Promissisque patris
Put it in a food processor

Ooops. Nope. You made the recipe for hummus instead. Pagan!

BEEEEEEEEP!!!!

Alright, let’s try this again and hopefully we’ll end up praising Christ this time.

“Audite, o proceres” ait “et spes discite vestras
The amount of the net capital loss
Certa manent pueri et palmam movet ordine nemo
for any taxable year shall be carried
Vestra” inquit “munera vobis Promissisque patris
to the earliest of the taxable years
Nemo ex hoc numero mihi non donatus abibit
to which such loss may be carried.

Ooooops. Noooo. That was the tax code rule on the carryover of capital losses. Pagan!

**BEEEEEEEEEEEPP!!!!!**

Ok last try and then we need to move on.

“Audite, o proceres” ait “et spes discite vestras
Those who hope in the Lord will be strong
Nemo ex hoc numero mihi non donatus abibit
They will soar on wings like eagles
Promissisque patris Vestra” inquit “munera vobis
They will run and not grow weary
Certa manent pueri et palmam movet ordine nemo.
They will walk and not be tired.

Yaaaay! Bravo!
That was the right combo!
Praise the Lord!

*Te Deum laudamus! Te Dominum confitemur!
Te aeternum Patrem omnis terra veneratur!*

Te Deum Lyrics all rights reserved © 387 by Ambrosian Studios
The Cento® game and the Faltonia Betitia Proba® brand are registered trademarks of the Faltonia Betitia Proba Toy Corporation.
They camped in the valley at lower altitude, on a sloped plain above the river, where it wouldn’t quite freeze overnight and there was enough dead wood around for everyone to make a fire.

It was cold. It was windy. It was dark. It was late. There were no stars, no clouds, no colors, and no shapes. The sky was gone and above them was just nothing.

Inside Theodoric’s tent the fire was beginning to crackle. Sidimund sat silently looking down, as in defeat. His hair was sticky and dank like old hay. Charlene remained silent. Her ankle hurt. She sat at the edge of a coarse jute sack, as if to avoid getting too comfortable. Theodegotha was crouched before the fire. The blisters on her little feet stung, but she was too tired to take her boots off.

Theoderic stood.

Finally he said: “Let us sing. We will fill the night with poetry. We are still alive. Our songs are alive in our hearts. We are a race of poets. We will make new verse tonight. Sidimund, do you want to start?”

Sidimund threw a branch onto the fire, looked up, and started wearily:

My hardy fox foot has vaulted through the forest needles
Trundled tramped and bolted over the unfair boulders
That the fierce mountain meted humbled I fled forth
Now my dreams are stout and dry the old blazing fire
Burns only in my blisters my eyes have forgotten
The world beyond the wool of my wet boots.

“Nice,” said Theodoric. “Charlene?”
Charlene sat up, threw a log on the fire. It crackled even more. She started:
soothing sunshine is somewhere else
soft safety is somewhere else
silky sleep is somewhere else
serene sweetness is somewhere else
but lurking in the murk — a gray area though?
down in the doldrums
  gray is neither here nor there
  gray is neither this nor that
  gray is too much and not enough
  in gray there’s poetry
  there’s pitch and line and crinkle an accent ruffles the emptiness
  a rhythm ripples and rings a soul sings.

“Nice,” said Theodoric again. “Theodgotha, do you want to try?”
“Do you want to recite the Greuthungi Saga, sweetie?” asked Charlene.
“I don’t remember it,” said Theodgotha shyly.
“I’m sure you do,” said Charlene.
“But I’m tired.”
“But this is what we do when we’re tired. This is always something we do at the end of the day when everyone is tired. Come on, tell us the Greuthungi Saga, sweetie.”

The little girl reluctantly stood up and recited in an even voice:
“Long ago when dragons roamed the plains
And dwarves dwelled in the mountains
And witches in the forests
There lived a king in the land of Oium
With the name of Gadareiks
The fourth king of our people
Since our ancestors had crossed the sea
He had a son called Filimer
Who drove the witches away
And made peace in the waterlands
But the witches hid and waited
And then came Gauts the Brave
Then Halmals the Fighter
Then sharp-sworded Augis
Who begat our father Amala
But still the witches hid and waited
His son Isarna the Bold
Begat the shining Austrogotha
Who defeated the evil Greeks
And their wicked king Decius
And spilled his blood into the Danube
Then came Hunvils, Athals, and Achiulfs
But the witches came out of hiding
And they were called Halju-runno
Because they went down into hell
And married devils and spirits
And begat cruel savage monsters
Called the hideous Huns
And Achiulfs’s son took up the sword
And his name was Airmnanareiks the Great
And he led our people against the Huns
And defeated them in battle
Then came Winithar
Who fought Boz of the Antai
Then Wandalar and Walamer the Clever
Who took the Greeks’ gold for his people
And then king Theodemir
And then daddy
And then meeeeeeerrrrr!!!”

Theodegotha ended cheerfully, as all little girls do when the story suddenly revolves around them. Everyone clapped.
“Good job! Good Gothic girl!” said Charlene.

“Mommy?” asked Theodegotha.
“Yes my baby?”
“Why am I in the only girl in that story?”
Charlene turned to Theodoric with a wry grin: “Well, I don’t know. I think that’s a good question for your dad, actually. Your majesty, tell us, why is our daughter the only girl in that story?” Charlene asked with a mixture of feigned and genuine curiosity.

Sidimund said nothing, looked at the fire, covered his mouth with his hand and repressed a smile — but suddenly all the stars that were missing in the sky that night sparkled in his eyes.

Theodoric also smiled, but a different kind of smile: the kind that focuses in the distance and makes blisters and sprains feel inconsequential. He said to his daughter: “We are a brave people, and you are a brave little girl. When I hear you recite our saga, I imagine all our girls were as brave as you are, as far back as the beginning of the story. So maybe from now on we should recite their names. The story is not finished, it’s up to us what the next lines will be and whose names will be remembered.”

Nobody said anything. It started to drizzle. The rain made a faint tapping noise on the tent.

“Let’s play Trope!” said Theodoric finally.

“How do you play, is it like chess?” asked Charlene.

“Almost. It’s actually a Greek thing — they do it for their liturgy but we’ll make it a Gothic thing and do it with our sagas. So someone recites a text we already know, for example the Greuthungi Saga we just heard, and then after each idea we add some verses to make it bigger and more beautiful, and that’s called a trope. So go ahead, start reciting and I’ll demonstrate.”

Charlene started, and Theodoric completed each line with a trope:

- Long ago
- when dragons
- roamed the plains
- and dwarves dwelled
- in the mountains
- and witches
- in the forests
- there lived a king.

in olden lore we learn
dreaded sullen rovers
and plied the swamps
down in glum caverns
wicked rock bellies
wandered wide and festered
this we faithful sing:
“Ooh this is fun!” said Charlene. “Alright now you recite and I trope! Or Sidimund, do you want to give it a try?”
“How about you recite, my lord, and you Charlene, how about you trope, and I’ll comment on each line.”
“This is so much fun!” said Charlene again.

Theodoric started in a different place, Charlene troped, and Sidimund commented:

*Who defeated* fought and vanquished
*the evil Greeks* their gruesome fate was bleak
This we sing. We fill the night with their cowardly deeds so the stars have reason to hide.
*And their wicked* weak and baffled
*king Decius* spring of sorrow deep and vicious
This we sing. We fill the frigid wind with their vile names so the cold will give all living things pause.
*And spilled his blood* the stream was red, the ground was mud
*into the Danube* and let the sea devour him.
This we carve into our verse, and our verse into our hearts, and our song into the night, for verse and valor carry us through the darkness.

They sang, recited, and troped until late. Theodogotha was already long asleep, curled up between two sacks of barley. It rained lightly on and off, delicately tapping the tent all night as if the world was mild.
As part of our documentary series, our reporter Sasha Kaoru Zamler-Carhart traveled to Thessaloniki to speak with Prof. Euphrosyne Didaskalidou, dean of the Distance Learning and Barbarian Graduate Education Program at the Byzantine State University at Thessaloniki. A transcript of the interview follows.

S: Prof. Didaskalidou, thanks for speaking to us today. What exactly is the Distance Learning and Barbarian Graduate Education Program?

E: The program was started about a decade ago to accommodate the needs of Barbarian students who want to complete post-graduate studies but come from nomadic or semi-nomadic backgrounds and are often unable to attend Byz State in person. We felt that those students have something to contribute and can still be a part of the Byz State academic community if we can accommodate their special circumstances.

S: Would you stay that the program has been successful so far?

E: It has been very successful, there was definitely a pent-up need among the Barbarian population and I’m proud to say that Byz State has been able to meet some of that. It has also been a success for the university. We have a mandate from the Imperial Ministry of Education to reach out to Barbarian populations and foster cultural goodwill towards the Empire, and educating Barbarian elites is definitely a way to achieve that.

S: On a more prosaic level, does the program end up costing the university money or is it self-sustaining?

E: The program actually generates revenue for the university, and I won’t lie about the fact that this is one of the other mo-
tivations for having it in the first place. We’re dealing with a student demographic that often comes from an aristocratic background, with families that have ample ability to pay for tuition, and who have calculated that a Byzantine degree from an imperially accredited institution is well worth the expense in terms of the prestige it will carry and the opportunities it will open up in their communities.

S: So have you typically not offered financial aid to those students?

E: We have in exceptional circumstances, but for the most part we haven’t had to. What we have often done, on the other hand, is made special payment arrangements to accommodate the unique financial circumstances of Barbarian students. There’s a reality about them coming from communities that are not well connected to the international banking system. They sometimes may also need to remit tuition payments in non-traditional ways because of their tribe’s political or migratory situation.

S: Can you give us examples?

E: We had one Vandal student who sent forty slaves as tuition payment, explaining that his clan was plundering various cities in North Africa and that it was impractical to use the banking system, but that he was in a unique position to pay us in slaves because of his family’s conquests.

S: Did you accept?

E: In principle we did, though twelve of the slaves turned out to be Roman citizens so we couldn’t take them as payment. But we did accept the other twenty-eight and credited them towards the student’s tuition bill.
S: Is that something you’d do again, or do you feel like there would be reasons to revisit that policy?

E: I think we should have just accepted the entire shipment as slaves, and not be so nitpicky about who’s a Roman citizen or not. We’ve been discussing getting slave insurance, so if a student sends a shipment of slaves as tuition payment and this type of issue arises again, we could just file a claim with our insurer and let them handle it.

S: Would you say your primary mission is to make sure the University gets paid?

E: We’re also trying to help the students. In-kind payments are of course much more work for our accounting office than just receiving a wire transfer. But that’s exactly why we set up this program: my office serves as a single point of contact between these Barbarian students and the university. We’re able to accommodate a variety of unique cases, whereas the student’s request might have been rejected or delayed if they had to deal directly with the accounting office. We had a Frankish student who paid her entire education in cows. She wrote us a detailed letter explaining that there was very little currency in circulation in Northeastern Gaul but plenty of cattle, and asked if we would accept payment in cattle, which we did.

S: On the academic side, do you find that there is a difference in performance between Greek students who live on campus in Thessaloniki and non-Greek students who are completing their education remotely?

E: Not really. There are some very talented people in the Barbarian world and we’ve had some truly innovative and valuable scholarship coming from Barbarian graduate students. For example we have one Gepid student who is completing her PhD in ethno-botany with a survey of the graminaceous plants of Pannonia and their symbolic and medicinal use in
her tribe. It’s a precious contribution to the field because it wouldn’t be safe or practical for Byzantine botanists to do field work in Pannonia, whereas this student lives there.

S: Can you tell us about language requirements? Has that been an issue?

E: The language of instruction at Byz State is Greek. We require dissertations to be written in Greek, of which at least 50% must be in verse. We insist on the 50% verse requirement, but we give students a choice between a more modern type of verse based on sequences of accent patterns, in the style of Romanos if you will, like:

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Ὑπάγεις, ὦ τέκνον,      πρὸς ἀδικον φόνον
καὶ οὐδείς σοι συναλγεῖ— οὐ συνέρχεται σοι Πέτρος
 ὁ εἰπὼν σοι…
```

then the same pattern repeats, you know, like:

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Ἀπόθου, ὦ μήτερ,      τὴν λύπην ἀπόθου—
οὐ γὰρ πρέπει σοι θρηνεῖν, ὅτι κεχαριτωμένη
 ὥνομάσθης…
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you get the idea… Or they can write in traditional metric verse, like regular classical poetry with long and short syllables, following the rules we all grew up with, like:

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Ἄριστον εἶναι πᾶν μέτρον, προεῖπέ τις.
Κάγω δὲ μετρεῖν πράξιν εἰδώς καὶ λόγον,
μέτροις ὁρίζω καὶ λόγους τοὺς ἐμμέτρους.
Μέτρων δ’ ἄν εὴ πᾶν τὸ συμμέτρως ἔχον·
μέτρων δ’ ἄμετρον οὐδαμῶς μέτρον λέγω.
Σκόπει τὸ ῥητόν, καὶ σύνες τί σοι λέγει
(ἐκ Πινδάρου σοι τοῦτο τοῦ σοφωτάτου),
καὶ μοι μέτρει μέν, ἀλλ’ ἄριστε, σὺν μέτρῳ.
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So they have a choice, depending on their personal preference. We try to stay open-minded about style, bearing in mind they’re non-native speakers and their level of proficiency is variable.

S: How do you see that in their work?

E: The 50% verse requirement is something that we emphasize because we consider it an essential element of a Byzantine education, but our students respond variously to it. Our Gothic students often have a pretty solid intuition for verse and invariably choose to write in metric verse. I would say this is actually true of all our Germanic students, whether they’re Goths or Gepids or Vandals or Franks. I obviously don’t know any barbarian languages, but from the way our students write we see that their native languages must also have long and short syllables and some sort of poetic meter. So this must make intuitive sense to them.

S: So they’re able to produce good Greek verse as a result?

E: Well, I mean… sometimes. They still come from a very different culture than ours, so inevitably expectations are sometimes, well… very different. Some of them end up writing this kind of bizarre alliterative verse because this is how poetry seems to work in their native language. We’ve deployed a lot of training resources on this subject and we try to help them discard Barbarian models, but some of them just can’t imagine it any other way. For example I recently got this from an Ostrogothic student who’s doing his PhD in theology:

Γλωσσῶν τὸ γλῆνος εἰς γλυκεῖαν λαλιάν
χέουσι χεῖρες καὶ χορεύουσι λίαν
εὖ τὸ μέλος μέλλεσθαι εἰς εὐρυθμίαν.
Ὤ κράμα καινόν· ἐκ κινημάτων μόνον
θαυμάσιον τὸ θυμίαμα θείων λόγων
εἰς ύμνον ἡμίν εὐρέθη ἁγίου λόγου.
So I read this and I'm like, ok, this student is basically writing Germanic alliterative verse, except in Greek, how am I going to explain that to him? Because of course, it's not technically wrong, but it's just… I mean, it's bizarre, right? It sounds really kooky, that's just not how we do poetry in Greek, it sounds totally incongruous. The entire esthetic of it is pretty much a big cultural misunderstanding. Which then begs the question: can the university legitimately endorse this person's academic work and recognize him as having received a Byzantine education when he's clearly thinking in Germanic alliterative verse, and his Greek poetry is basically Gothic verse in Greek?

S: And what did you decide in this case?

E: His father is a major chieftain and sent us several sacks of gold as a “thank you” for taking care of his son's education, so my office felt like that substantially addressed the issue.

S: Have you had cases where you’ve allowed a student to write their dissertation in a language other than Greek?

E: In Barbarian languages, no, we've never allowed it and never will. But in truly exceptional cases we've allowed students to write in Latin. For example we had this brilliant student from Ireland — which is a remote island somewhere in the middle of the ocean, if I recall — who wrote a really interesting sociology dissertation on monasticism in her country. She did a thorough demographic analysis of who tends to join Irish monasteries in her community, what economic backgrounds they’re from, how educated the parents are, how often siblings are likely to join together, etc. Really interesting, groundbreaking stuff, with a lot of local field work, and uniquely valuable because we have so little information on Ireland. I mean, I wasn't even sure that island actually existed before she applied, I thought it might be more like a mythical place with sea monsters and stuff. But in any case, she said
that in her country it would be nearly impossible to find any resources in Greek because literally nobody speaks Greek, and that she wanted her research to be accessible to her own people, which I can understand. And apparently even educated people there don't know Greek, can you imagine? So we accepted.

S: How did you handle the 50% verse requirement in her case?

E: We basically had to waive it. We could never get her to even understand what poetry is. I don't know how their language works over there, she is certainly an excellent storyteller, her prose is very fluid, but after two lines of verse she basically always lapses back into prose. The Irish just don't seem to have a concept of verse as distinct from prose. But we were so impressed that someone is doing scholarship on such a remote island — and good scholarship no less — that we let her graduate anyway. And now we have a Byz State alumna running around somewhere in the middle of the ocean, which is a nice thought.

S: As a conclusion, do you feel like there's perhaps a growing trend in academia to try to phase out the use of the word "Barbarian" or that some students might be less comfortable with that term?

E: No I haven't heard of any such trend. I mean, they're Barbarians, aren't they? That's just a fact. Some of them might be wealthy and educated, but obviously that doesn't make them Greek, they're just Barbarians.

S: Prof. Didaskalidou, thank you very much indeed for speaking to us about the Distance Learning and Barbarian Graduate Education Program at the Byzantine State University at Thessaloniki, and for sharing these wonderful stories about your work and your students.
This concludes our series “The Goths.”
Thanks for following us on this journalistic adventure.

I’m Sasha Kaoru Zamler-Carhart and you’re watching Byzantine Television Channel 3 — live from Constantinople.

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CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Theodoric son of Thiudmir
Flavius Zeno Augustus
Sidimund son of Sidimir
The Governor of Epidaurum
Irinaeus of Epidaurum
Epidaurean Girl
Epidaurean Girl’s Mom
Charlene the Goth
Marcellinus of Epidaurum
Theodegotha daughter of Theodoric
Sasha Kaoru Zamler-Carhart
Euphrosyne Didaskalidou
THE GOTHs & OTHER STORIES

With Special Thanks To:
Theodoric walked into his daughter’s room as quietly as possible. He tried to dodge the toys strewn all over the floor but stepped on a chessboard and shattered it under his weight, sending the black and white square flying every which way. Theodegotha woke up.

“Daddy?” she asked Theodoric.

“Yes sweetie?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“It’s something important.”

“I’m listening, my baby.”

“Can we go visit Constantinople?”

“No, I don’t think so, my sweetie. I don’t see that happening.”

“Why not?”

“Well… because people there don’t really want us to visit.”

“Why not?”

“Because… because we’re Goths my baby. It’s not a good place for Goths.”

“But Saint Eudocia went to Constantinople!”

“But Saint Eudocia was a Greek and we’re Goths.”

“But why does that make a difference?”

Theodoric was at a loss for an explanation. On the one hand the reasons why forty thousand armed Ostrogoths would not be welcome in Constantinople were really obvious. And on the other hand, if he couldn’t explain those reasons clearly to a little girl, then maybe they weren’t so obvious after all. Maybe there was actually no good reason.

“I think people there don’t want us to visit, sweetie. We can go other places,” said Theodoric finally.

“But why don’t they want us there?”

“Well… because… we’re displaced people, my sweetie. The Greeks are quietly sitting at home. They don’t want other people to come disturb them. They want to be at home by themselves. They want to cook their own food for themselves and stay warm
and cozy. It’s comfortable for them now. They don’t want visitors and people like us who don’t have a home yet.”

“But what do they have a home and we don’t? That’s not fair!”

“Our home is different, sweetie. Wherever your family is, wherever we camp around the fire, wherever you hear people sing our sagas in our beautiful language, that’s our home. One day we’ll have a fixed home, too.”

“And we’ll go to Constantinople?”

“No, sweetie, we won’t go to Constantinople.”

“But that’s not fair! Saint Eudocia went there!” said the girl in outrage.

Theodoric sat silently. Maybe it wasn’t fair.

“What about Jerusalem?” continued Theodegotha, “can we visit Jerusalem?”

“No, my baby, I don’t think we can visit Jerusalem either.”

“But Saint Eudocia went to Jerusalem!”

“I know. Saint Eudocia did many interesting things and went to many interesting places. She was a great woman and a great poet. But she was a Greek and we’re Goths. Our destiny is different, sweetie. We do different things.”

“But I don’t want to be a Goth! I want to go to Constantinople and Jerusalem!” the little girl protested.

Theodoric felt deeply wounded. He had dreaded this moment. His daughter didn’t want to be a Goth. She didn’t want to a Barbarian. She didn’t want to be a homeless girl marching around the Balkans with her tribe of refugees. She wanted to visit Constantinople and Jerusalem. She wanted to be a normal little girl in a normal little house, not a displaced Amaling princess trudging through the snow.

“Daddy?” asked Theodegotha again in a softer voice.

“Yes?”

“Can we go to Rome instead?”

Theodoric paused. “Rome… well… The thought has indeed crossed my mind.”

“Is that a yes?”
“It’s not a yes my baby, I just said the thought has crossed my mind. It’s not so easy. We can’t just walk into Rome.”
“Why not?”
Theodoric grabbed a handful of the loose black and white chessboard squares littering the floor and fumbled with them nervously, stacking them and rearranging them as if he was dealing cards. He thought for himself: “Actually why not? Why can’t we just walk into Rome? Maybe we actually can just walk into Rome.”
“Daddy, I want to go to Rome!”
“Well my sweetie, who knows, maybe one day we’ll go to Rome.”
“Promise, daddy?”
Theodoric hesitated. He bit his lips. He twiddled his thumbs. He tilted his head. He glanced up and down. He wasn’t going to make an empty promise to his child. He stroked his chin, stared at the floor, stared at the ceiling, dropped the loose chessboard squares in a random disorganized pile.
“Daddy! Promise we’ll go to Rome?” the little girl insisted.

Theodoric took a deep breath and looked up, as if he could see the sky through the walls of his daughter’s cheerful pink new bedroom. He crossed his hands on his lap and remained still for a moment, pondering the tremendous weight of the promise he was about to make to his daughter — his little innocent child, snuggled warm and cozy in some Greek family’s frilly pink bed in an expropriated mansion in Epidaurum — his little girl, who had no idea what it would mean for forty thousand armed Ostrogoths to march into Rome. He took Theodegotha’s hand into his own.
“Yes, sweetie, I promise. I’ll take you to Rome. Now go back to sleep, ok?”

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Theodegotha fell back asleep.
In this paper I explore the potential religious meaning of the wandering of the Ostrogothic people through the Balkans in light of other religiously meaningful wandering experiences, focusing especially on the Hebrews, and to a lesser extent the Mormons, and hopefully providing a tentative response to Virgil’s query:

sub caelo tandem, quibus orbis in oris
iactemur, doceas: ignari hominumque locorumque
erramus, vento huc vastis et fluctibus acti.¹

Recent scholarship on displaced people has increasingly cast the ongoing refugee crisis in a scriptural light, trying to understand it not in its socio-economic context or in light of demographic or climate pressures, but in a more contemporary, allegorical way that seeks to derive theological wisdom from a symbolic interpretation. This methodology has been characteristic of the emerging field of avant-garde scholarship known as Patristics. The emerging methodology has consisted in associating objectively observable events with unrelated — but theologically meaningful — events mentioned in canonical texts, and to draw conclusions by a process of poetic analogy justified by religious inspiration. That is the methodology this paper will also fol-

¹ “We’re basically wandering all over the place and have no fucking idea where we are, so if someone has any sort of clue what this whole trip is about, by all means let us know.” Berno of Reichenau, trans., Virgil for Millennials (Reichenau: Reichenau Abbey Press, 1000).
low, in keeping with today’s internationally accepted academic standards.

Patristics, and by extension this paper, is indebted to the pioneering research of Philo of Alexandria — arguably the first researcher to demonstrate the methodological superiority of poetic allegorical interpretation over analytical rigor. Philo sums up his methodology in one sentence: “ὁ δὲ νοῦς ὁ διδασκόμενός ἐστιν, οὐ χάριν αὐτόν ἀλλ’ οὐ τὴν αἰσθήσιν προκέκληται.”

When it comes to the question of wandering and displacement, Philo’s concern for the allegorical treatment of location is apparent in his interpretation of God’s dialogue with Adam in the book of Genesis: “Τὸ δὲ ‘ποῦ εἶ’ πολλαχῶς ἔστιν ἀποδοῦναί-ἀπαξ μέν οὐ τὸ πευστικόν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἀποφαντικόν τὸ ἴσον τῷ ‘ἐν τόπῳ ὑπάρχεις’ βαρυτομένου τοῦ ‘ποὺ εἶ’.” Which can be translated as follows: “The expression ‘Where are you’ can be rendered in several ways: firstly not as a question, but as a statement equivalent to ‘You are located somewhere,’ just by changing the [circumflex] accent [of the interrogative ποῦ] to a grave accent ποў, i.e., ‘You are here’.”

Expanding on Philo’s valuable insight that God addressed Adam in late Hellenistic Greek and that metaphysical answers can be found in spelling — and following the time-honored theological tradition of making up random shit based on unrelated words sounding kinda similar — it can be noted that ποў is also pronounced the same as “poux,” meaning “lice” in French, whereby the miserable condition of our exile as wandering Ostrogoths — and indeed, the deplorable sanitary conditions of our forced march through the Balkans — is symbolized by the centrality of lice in our daily experience, which allegorically relates to the rhetorical centrality of the interrogative particle in Philo’s interpretation of the scriptural text.

2 “The mind is capable of being taught: as a result of which [God] has called upon that [ability] and not upon the [physical] sense[s].” Philo Judaeus of Alexandria, “The Allegories of the Laws,” Book III, Ch. 17, trans. and ed. Sasha Kaoru Zamler-Carhart in Making Shit Up in Late Antiquity (Alexandria: Alexandria University Press), 1. Emphasis added.

3 Ibid., Book III, Ch. 52.
It can be further noted that ποῦ is pronounced the same as “poo,” opening up several levels of interpretations of the statement “ποῦ εἶ” ranging from the political allegory “You are poo,” which can refer to the Ostrogoths—and generally all displaced people—being treated like poo on the basis of an ontological conception of their lives having the value of excrement, to the eschatological “You are poo,” taken to remind the Ostrogoths—and by metonymy, all humans—of the finiteness of their bodily incarnation.

On the political question of a possible ontological equivalency between displaced people and “poo,” John of Damascus takes a dissenting view: “let us honor [those] who wandered around in sheepskins and goatskins, being poor, afflicted, tormented; they wandered in deserts and in mountains and in holes and caves of the earth. Let us carefully review the life of these men, and let us emulate their faith and love and hope and zeal and way of life, and endurance of sufferings and patience.”

On the other hand, Patristic scholarship does at times hint at an ontological conception of displaced people as “poo” by maintaining a sharp distinction between the tone used to discuss displacement as an object of theological inquiry, and the tone used to address displaced people directly. When indeed, at the turn of this century, our own Gothic theologians Sunnia and Fretela wrote to local religious commentator and translator Jerome of Stridon asking for his insights on a point of Hebrew translation, he responded, perhaps controversially: “Quis hoc crederet, ut barbara Getarum lingua Hebraicam quaereret veritatem, et ipsa Germania spiritus sancti eloquia scrutaretur?” or “Who would have believed it, that the barbarian tongue of the Getae would seek the truth of the Hebrew tongue, and that the Germanic world itself would research the eloquence of the Holy Spirit?”


Jerome does not specifically use the term “poo,” but does appear surprised to see the Goths engaged in intellectual pursuits—while himself confusing the Goths with the non-Germanic Getae, who lived in the time of Herodotus a thousand years ago. He expands on his impression of contemporary Gothic intellectual life: “Dudum callosa tenendo capulum manus, et digiti tractandis sagittis aptiores, ad stylum calamumque mollescunt” or “It wasn’t long since their thick-skinned hand was holding the hilt of a sword, and their fingers were more fit for handling arrows, and now they’re softening to using a pen.”

Jerome’s perspective on the experience of displaced people is possibly influenced by the recent fashion of “Desert Fathers,” a new-age movement of middle-class urban tourists moving *en masse* to undeveloped areas for a limited time and on a voluntary basis, and growing their beards in search of personal fulfillment and spiritual experiences. Jerome himself spent some time in a touristy area of the Syrian Desert, benefitting from the region’s dense support infrastructure for hermits and its long experience outfitting ascetic-themed safaris, and may have been under the impression that this constituted a first-person experience of displacement and exile.

The Patristic experience of displacement is, however, not always a result of tourism. Some authors have drawn significant theological insights from the discomfort caused by travel imposed upon them for professional reasons—even though there is still arguably a meaningful difference between mass homelessness and being assigned a job in an unexciting small town.

Just a few generations ago two social scientists of the so-called Cappadocian School, Gregory of Nazianza and Gregory of Nyssa, reflected on the theological implications of homelessness as a result of their own experience with housing instability, ushering in an era of contemporary scholarship where limited personal experience can be allegorically sublimated into theological findings. Gregory of Nazianza revealingly writes to his friend Gregory of Nyssa:

6 Ibid.
Δυσχεραίνεις τῇ περιόδῳ, καὶ ἀστατεῖν σεαυτῷ φαίνη, καθάπερ τὸν ξύλον ἃ καθ’ υδάτων φέρεται. Μηδαμώς, ὃ θαυμάσιε, μὴ οὕτως ἔχε. Τὸν μὲν γὰρ ἁκοῦσις ἡ φορὰ, σοῦ δὲ κατὰ Θεόν ἡ περίοδος, καὶ πάγιον τὸ τοὺς πολλοὺς εὖ ποιεῖν, κἂν εἰ μὴ τὸ πεπήγοις, κἂν εἰ μὴ τόπῳ φέρεται. Εἰ μὴ καὶ τὸν ἥλιον αἰτιώτό τις, ὅτι περιτρέχει σπείρων τὴν ἀκτίνα, καὶ πάντα ζωογονῶν ὅσα ἐπέρχεται· ἢ καὶ τῶν ἀστέρων τοὺς ἀπλανεῖς ἐπαινῶν, κακίζῃ τοὺς πλάνητας, ὧν καὶ τὸ πλάνον ἐναρμόνιον.  

Which we may translate as follows:

so rn ur stressed out by all this traveling and u feel like ur all over the map like ok ur basically a piece of wood in a river or something #travelingsucks but dude chill out so like the wood is basically kinda whatever like its not like anyones in charge of it it just kinda does its thing right whereas imho ur totally getting pushed around by god ur going from place to place just being an awesome person to everyone no change there thats like ur thang even tho u cant seem to keep ur ass in one place its like if someone was like dude the sun sucks just because it keeps moving and shining on stuff and btw giving life to shit it hits no joke those rayz tho or like if some-one was like ok stars r cool but planets r lame but yo their moves r lit af

Recent Patristic scholarship has thus tended to applaud the virtu- tue and fortitude of displaced wanderers, although indeed it has occasionally done so in a self-congratulatory manner, promoting that virtue as a badge of honor to be awarded to middle-class thrill-seekers who pursue that experience on a voluntary basis as part of a personal soul-searching quest, such as the “Desert Fathers.”

7 Gregory of Nazianza, My Letters to Various People (Nazianza: Amalgamated Cappadocian Publishers, 379), letter 81.
8 Berno of Reichenau, Patristics for Millennials (Reichenau: Reichenau Abbey Press, 1000)
While the causes for displacement and exile are indeed manifold and range from tragedy to tourism, the moral position of those who are not wandering, and who may be in a position to accommodate the wanderers and extend hospitality to them — whether they choose to do so or not — also bears dissenting upon.

The contemporary Milanese essayist Ambrose points out:

Sine [benevolentia] usus hominum esse non potest ut peregrinanti monstrare viam, revocare errantem, deferre hospitium — non igitur mediocris virtus, de qua sibi plaudebat Job dicens: foris autem non habitat hospes, janua mea omni venienti patebat.9

Which we may translate as:

Mean people basically don’t give a shit about showing you the way if you’re lost, or letting you know if you’re driving down the wrong street, or being hospitable. Hospitality is actually a big deal. iirc Job himself was like, if you show up at my door you can basically just walk in, I’m not gonna make a bro wait outside — and this is coming from a guy who’s like a professional prophet I wanna point out.10

Which begs the question of whether the Greeks, who on the current geopolitical chessboard are in the position of the Biblical Job, have acted like him and extended their hospitality to the wandering Ostrogoths — and to displaced populations in general — or whether they have, to use Ambrose’s own words, “made a bro wait outside” by promoting a policy of keeping these populations on the margins of the Empire, perhaps consciously or unconsciously motivated by an underlying excremental con-

9 Aurelius Ambrosius, De Officiis Ministrorum (Milan: Mondadori, 397), Book I, Ch. XXXII, 167.
10 Berno of Reichenau, Patristics for Millennials.
ception of displaced populations as ontologically equivalent to “poo.”

We can offer a tentative response by returning to Virgil’s *Aeneid* and engaging with the text in a manner consistent with contemporary standards of academic scholarship, i.e., not by undertaking an analysis of its contents or context, but by stuffing the canonical Virgilian text with an alliterative macaronic trope:

sometimes

\[ \textit{sub caelo} \] the sky is

not \textit{tandem} even tented above them

camped \textit{quibus} about

in the open \textit{orbis} borderless abyss

nor \textit{in oris}

in a narrow sorry

\textit{iactemur} yarn

of murmur hacked

as \textit{doceas} dull talk

a gas

an air \textit{ignari} gaunt and weary

humble \textit{hominumque}

numb dumb

lack \textit{locorumque} luck or room or way

so we \textit{erramus}

slog aroam

\textit{vento huc} wanting wandering hookey hunting

\textit{vastis et} was this

Job’s hospitality or a \textit{fluctibus acti} sick fact of business

as usual?
The End