NEGLECTED BARBARIANS

Edited by

Florin Curta

BREPOLS
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THE HERULES: FRAGMENTS OF A HISTORY

Roland Steinacher

Some gentes — armed social units or peoples such as the Goths, Franks, Burgundians, or Vandals — became an intrinsic part of European history. Others like the Herules, Sciri, Gepids, and Rugi played their somewhat vague role, but disappeared from our sources without having had the opportunity to forge new medieval national identities or form any stable regnum on formerly Roman provinces. To be sure, historians did not hesitate to apply to the ‘neglected barbarians’ the concept of Völkerwanderung, complete with historical maps showing entire peoples wandering across the page. The Herules, for example, appear on a map showing the ‘Great Migration’ published in a book that used to be very popular among German readers born in the 1940s. The map shows the Herules following a trail from southern Scandinavia, along the Danube, north of the sea of Azov, along the Lower Rhine, and finally into Italy. In this essay I will not spend too much time discussing ideas of migration, even though it is important to be aware of numerous influential tales concerning the origin and migration of the Herules from the far North. The Herules have often been imagined more as a group of wandering warriors or as a band of Viking-like robbers than as a group with a distinctive ethnic identity. Other scholars even strove to reconstruct the history of the Herules as a people moving from Scandinavia all the way to the Maeotis Lake.
(Sea of Azov). It goes without saying that both positions conspicuously ignore the complexity of the historical sources available for writing Herul history. Nor does the older scholarship on the topic do justice to those sources, when attempting through a seemingly contiguous narrative to write the story of a people wandering from Scandinavia to the Maeotis Lake, and then back home. In Late Antiquity there were Gothic, Vandalic, and Alanic groups acting at various settings in time and space. The sources denominate those groups by the same name; for example, Silings and Hasdings are accepted as two Vandalic clusters. It is astonishing that the Herul groups acting in the East as in the West are not accepted as such. Most scholars discussed the idea of an East- and West-Herul people, each separated from the other in its history. 1 Discussing the very name Herules like other comparable phenomena is one aim of this text. It seems impossible to write a history of the Herules, even though a Herul identity existed, which was attached to a regnum established in Central Europe in the second half of the fifth century. Apart from that Herules were also part of the so-called ‘Hunnic system’, members of which joined Odoacer and fought in the armies of Justinian. Procopius knew the Herules as fierce warriors, who could fight bravely in the Roman army. It seems therefore necessary to take into account different circumstances in order to get a complete picture of what we know about third- to sixth-century Herules. What is possible is to re-examine the sources available in an attempt to put together the fragments of Herul history. Delineating a Herul identity may be a much more difficult task. Sources have already been perused and analysed for almost five centuries now, and the end result is a wide variety of interpretations, editions, and commentaries. Besides source criticism, any new approach to Herul history will have to take into account the arguments put forward by generations of historians. 2

3 Goffart, Barbarian Tides, p. 206: ‘The main scholarly problem they [the Herules] pose is whether “Herule” refers to one people, possibly in two branches, or two, possibly altogether distinct from each other.’

4 Herwig Wolfram, The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples (Berkeley, 1997), p. 123. ‘Hunnic Alternative’ is the title of the book’s fifth chapter. That refers to the Hunnic way of remaining outside the Roman borders and trying to get money from the Romans by means of tributes and other prosperities instead of entering the empire and becoming part of the Roman world, like the Goths did.

The ethnic name ‘Herules’ first appears in Graeco-Latin literature during the third century. Groups of warriors identified by that name then resurface in different places and under different circumstances between the third and the sixth centuries, a phenomenon pointing to the complexity of ethnic identity in Late Antiquity. In 268, ‘Scythians’ are said to have attacked Greece and the Balkans, and among them were *Ερουλοί (*Eruloi*). Eighteen years later, the Emperor Maximian stopped barbarian intruders across the Lower Rhine. Among them were also *Eruli*. Some of those warriors eventually settled on Roman soil and were recruited for a newly formed auxiliary unit, the *numerus Erulorum*, which appears in several sources throughout the 300s. Herul raids into Gaul and down to the Spanish coast continued to AD 400. During the first half of the fourth century, the Herules attempted to establish a base of power north of the Sea of Azov. They were defeated and incorporated first into Ermanaric’s Gothic kingdom and then into the Hunnic polity. During the 400s, it was apparently expected to find Herul warriors in Attila’s troops.

Following the battle at the Nedao River (454 or 455), some Herules established a *regnum* on the river Morava, not far from the Roman frontier, while at the same time others joined Odoacer’s army in Italy. The Herul kingdom in the Middle Danube region was an ephemeral polity, which came to an end after only a few decades. Herul warriors had to look for glory and booty elsewhere. According to Procopius, some Herules entered the empire as federates in Dalmatia, while others tried to reach Thule, in the Far North. Procopius’s story may have originated on account of the sudden interest of the Ostrogothic court in Italy for all things northern. In any case, one cannot take the story seriously, as proof of a supposed Scandinavian origin of the Herules (who now wanted to return ‘home’). Instead, the story simply shows that elites in Constantinople (where Procopius may have written his *Wars*) knew about the image of the North created by and for the consumption of barbarian elites in Ostrogothic Italy. To be sure, Herul recruits fought in separate units within the Roman armies dispatched by Emperor Justinian to the eastern front against the Persians, to Africa against the Vandals, and to Italy against the Goths. After 550, the Herules completely disappear from the sources.


The Third Century: The Herules as Enemies or Partners of the Romans

Sources relating third-century events have the Eruli or Ἐρούλαι as one of the 'Scythian' groups attacking the eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Dexippus, for example, mentions a people named Ἐλουροί, a name which he then explains as deriving from the swamps (in Greek ἐλοῖς) around the Maëotis, in which those people supposedly lived. Only Jordanes, writing in the mid-500s, linked Dexippus's swamp-dwelling Ἐλουροί (Eluri in Jordanes's Getica) to contemporary Herules. Neither Jordanes nor Dexippus drew any explicit connection between Herules and the 'Scythian' invasion of 268–69. Fourth- to sixth-century authors may have employed a name commonly used to describe third-century events, and not a specific ethnic name, even though it is theoretically possible that Herules participated in the invasion of 268–69 and that Dexippus's Ἐλουροί were indeed in some way linked to the later Herules.

Whatever the case, it can be no doubt that a sea-borne barbarian invasion of unprecedented size took place in the spring of 268. It is very difficult to reconstruct the exact chain of events, for there seem to have been many concurrent movements.

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7 Publius Herennius Dexippus, Fragmenta, 5, in Fragmenta der griechischen Historiker, ed. by Karl Müller, tta (Paris, 1880), no. 100, p. 456; Thomas Gaisford, Etymologicon magnum: seu verius Lexicon saepissime vocabulorum origines indicans et pluribus lexis scholasticis et grammaticis anomyni cuiusdam opera concinnatum (Oxford, 1848; repr. Amsterdam, 1994), no 333, p. 952: Stephen of Byzantium, a contemporary of Procopius and Jordanes, also noted that Dexippus’s Ἐλουροί were a gens Scythica.


9 All known variations of this ethnic name are discussed at length in Hermann Reichert, Lexikon der altgermanischen Personen- und Völkernamen (Heidelberg 1911), pp. 78–80. The only doubts about the equivalence established between the two ethnic names were raised by Alvar Ellegrård, ‘Who Were the Eruli?’, Scandia, 53 (1987), 5–34 (pp. 28–29): ‘To summarize. Dexippos’ Helouroi may have called themselves Eruli. In that case the later historians’ identification of the two was in fact correct. On the other hand, Dexippos’ form may be a correct rendering. In that case the identification of the Heluri and the Eruli was as mistaken as Jordanes’ (and many others) identification of Gothi and Getae. We shall never know.’ One can only add that Jordanes’s (and, supposedly, Cassiodorus’s) equation of Goths and Getae was not a ’mistake’, but a central idea for the narrative strategy of the Getica. Roman authors interested in ethnography strove to classify barbarians, while at the same time supplying a credible version of history for their opponents and partners.
and battles. In addition, historians know the events from mostly later, not contemporary sources, primarily Zosimus, the *Historia Augusta*, Jordanes, John Malalas, George Synkellos, and Zonaras. Furthermore, all of them may have relied on the now lost works of Publius Herennius Dexippus, the author of a *Scythica* and of a Roman history from the beginnings to the reign of Claudius II Gothicus, which is often mentioned by the authors of the *Historia Augusta*. ¹⁰ Later literary sources provide only vague and disparate accounts of the Herul attack on Athens, and none which refers to it is earlier than the latter half of the fourth century. A further confusion arises from the fact that the episode apparently came at the very end of Gallienus’s reign, and a decisive defeat of the Scyths was achieved only by Claudius.¹¹

Large numbers of warriors from among the ‘Scythian’ peoples (‘Scytharum diversi populi, Peuci, Greutungi Austrogothi, Tervingi, Visi, Gipedes, Celtae etiam et Eruli’)¹² left the shores of the Maeotis Lake (the region of the Sea of Azov) and the mouth of the Dniester on boats to cross the Black Sea. Zosimus claims five thousand boats while the *Historia Augusta* claims three thousand boats, and the total number of warriors is said to have been 320,000.¹³ According to Ammianus Marcellinus, there were only two thousand boats and ‘swarms of Scythian peoples’ (‘Scythicarum gentium catervae’).¹⁴ Those numbers appear as exaggerated as


¹¹ Fergus Millar, ‘P. Herennius Dexippus: The Greek World and the Third-Century Invasions’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 59 (1969), 12–29 (p. 26). Older research assumed two separate invasions, one in the reign of Gallienus (267), the other in the reign of Claudius (269), and dated the sack of Athens and Dexippus’s heroic defense of his homeland to 267. For the idea of two separate invasions, see Ludwig Schmidt, *Die Ostgermanen*, vol. I of *Geschichte der deutschen Stämme bis zum Ausgang der Völkerwanderung* (Munich, 1941; repr. 1969), pp. 215–20; Bruno Rappaport, *Die Einfälle der Gothen in das römische Reich bis auf Constantin* (Leipzig, 1899), pp. 67–92. For the theory of only one attack, dated to 268, see Wilkes, ‘Provinces and Frontiers’, p. 227; Schwarz, ‘Die gotischen Seezüge’, p. 52 and n. 34.

¹² *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, II, Divus Claudius 6.2, ed. by Ernst Hohl (Stuttgart, 1997).


Ammianus’s image of ‘innumerae gentium multitudines’ (‘countless swarms of nations’) pouring into the empire when the Goths arrived in Thrace in 376 in unexpected numbers. Herodotus had reported innumerable hordes of Persian barbarians invading Greece in the fifth century BC. According to Ammianus, what had happened in 376 confirmed the trustworthiness of the old stories of great numbers of barbarians living outside the known world. In the region of the Sea of Azov and in the Crimea, along the northern border of the empire, barbarian warriors had taken over Greek cities and soon acquired from them the knowledge of how to operate ships and the manpower to do it. This already announces the later takeover of Roman provinces by barbarians. In 268/69 the ‘Scythians’ caused a lot of havoc, and several land and sea operations by Roman forces had to be organized over the next few years in order to regain control of Greece and the Balkans. Several groups of Goths and Herules roamed freely in the area before the Romans were first able to intercept and destroy a large group of invaders on the river Nessos. Emperor Gallienus’s new mobile field-army consisting of cavalry regiments (tagmata) are said to have killed three thousand men. After that crushing defeat, the Herul chief Naulobatus surrendered to Gallienus in an act of deditio and received in turn the insignia of a Roman consul. This was the earliest barbarian known to have received consular insignia. It is quite possible that the defeated Herules, together with their chief, were immediately recruited into the Roman army, but that is nowhere explicitly mentioned in the sources. At any rate, the episode illustrates the speed at which defeated barbarians could be integrated into the Roman system immediately following their plundering of Roman provinces.

15 Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae, 31.4.7–8.
Taking advantage of the chaotic situation, a group of Herules moved quickly to Athens and sacked the city. The story of Publius Herennius Dexippus gathering a group of two thousand companions from Athens and launching a counterattack is well known and needs no repetition.\textsuperscript{20} One of the fragments surviving from his work is actually a patriotic speech associated with those events.\textsuperscript{21} Another less-known episode is reported in a much later, Byzantine tradition. The Herules were about to set fire to a large pile of books in Athens, when one of them stepped forward urging that ‘they should leave the Greeks something to occupy themselves in reading so that they would forget to exercise their armies and would be more easily vanquished’.\textsuperscript{22} This episode illustrates a resistant stereotype about Herules: they were often depicted as violent, rude, and fierce warriors, while at the same time ruthless and strong, fascinating and horrible. Their image is that of an almost dehumanized human group marked by bestiality: they fought naked, were capable of killing their elders, and of forcing widows to commit suicide upon their husbands’ deaths.\textsuperscript{23} In reference to Pharas, a Herul officer who distinguished himself in Belisarius’s army against the Persians and who led siege to a fortress in the African mountains to which the Vandal king Gelimer had fled, Procopius mentions that

\textsuperscript{20} Peter Heather, ‘Disappearing and Reappearing Tribes’, in \textit{Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800}, ed. by Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (Leiden, 1998), pp. 95–112 (p. 97 and n. 6): ‘Not only do they [Herules] find specific mention in Zosimus, but some surviving fragments of Dexippus’ history (Zosimus’s source) make it clear that Dexippus’ famous defence of Athens was actually made against Herules, rather than against Goths or any other of the participating groups.’ The \textit{Scriptores Historiae Augustae} mentions Dexippus, but only Goths as his enemies. See \textit{Scriptores Historiae Augustae}, II, Vita Gallieni 13.7–8, ed. by Hohl: ‘Veneriano item duce navali bello Gothi superati sunt, cum ipse Venerianus militari perit morte. Atque inde Cyzicum et Asian, deinceps Achaiam omneem vastarunt et ab Atheniensibus duce Dexippo, scriptore horum temporum, victi sunt. Unde pulsi per Epirum, Macedioniam, Moesiam pervagati sunt.’


it is remarkable for a Herul not to be treacherous and drunken. Pharas is described as energetic and serious, despite being a Herul by birth. Such patronizing comments come very close to the notion of racism as understood in more recent times, even if it is also true that Procopius and others may have been right in condemning the brutality of any Roman soldier, including those of Herul origin. Whatever the case, the stereotype about the Herules stuck and seems to have been reproduced in much later works of Byzantine authors.

In the spring of 269, an army under the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Claudius Augustus Gothicus inflicted a crushing defeat on both Goths and Herules near Naissus (modern Niš) in the province of Moesia Inferior. Following his victory, Claudius II assumed the triumphal epithet of Gothicus, the first Roman emperor to do so. Another Herul chieftain named Andonnoballus is said to have switched sides. However, ‘Scythian’ attacks from the northern shore of the Black Sea continued unabated until 276.

In the West: Pirates and Soldiers in the Roman Army

In 286 Herules and Chaibones attacked Gaul. Emperor Maximian intercepted them and, according to a panegyric of Claudius Mamertinus, managed to kill them all. Modern commentators refused to take at face value Mamertinus’s testimony and claimed instead that, following his victory, Maximian recruited barbarians for a Herul auxiliary unit. During the fourth century, that Herul auxilium (numerus

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24 Procopius, Wars, 4.4.29. See also Averil Cameron, Procopius and the Sixth Century (London, 1985), p. 240 and n. 79; Felix Dahn, Prokopius von Cäsarea: Ein Beitrag zur Historiographie der Völkerwanderung und des sinkenden Römerthums (Berlin, 1865), pp. 121–22: ‘Ganz besonders zuwider ist ihm der germanische Stamm der Heruler: er findet gar nicht Worte genug, sie herunterzusetzen, geräth in eine leidenschaftliche Häftigkeit.’ Dahn assumes that Procopius had contacts with Herul warriors and did not like them because of his personal experience.

25 Zosimus, Historia nova, 1, 45, 1; see Michael Kulikowski, Rome’s Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric (Cambridge 2007), p. 29 and n. 17; Wolfram, Die Goten, p. 65; Schmidt, Die Ostgermanen, pp. 216–17 and n. 7.


Erulorum seniorum) was part of the auxilia Palatina in Italy. Several funerary inscriptions are known, which name the unit as a whole or some of its individual members. The unit was stationed near Concordia, an important military centre in Venetia.29

The numerus Erulorum was a troop of lightly equipped soldiers, who received much praise for their valour and was often mentioned together with the Batavians (Batavi seniores).30 Ammianus Marcellinus mentions a Herul soldier named Vitalianus (Erulorum e numero miles), who began his career as domesticus under Emperor Jovian and later became comes.31 Herules led by Charietto fought in January 366 against Alamannic marauders from across the Rhine. Charietto died in battle, and the Alamanni captured the standard of the Herul and Batavian unit, ‘which the barbarians with insulting cries and dancing with joy frequently raised on high and displayed, until after hard struggles it was recovered’.32 In 366, Julian sent the Herules against the Picts and the Scoti attacking Britannia, again accompanied by the Batavian auxilium. At the head of this corps was the magister militum Lupicinus. He crossed the channel from Gallia to Londinium,33 only to learn that Constantius, jealous of Julian’s military achievements, had ordered the transfer of the Herul and Batavian auxiliary troops to the eastern front under the pretext that they were needed for an attack against the Parthians the following spring.34

Herules had a good reputation as soldiers in the Roman army, but fifth-century sources depict them as fierce marauders and pirates. Jerome knew them as one of the barbarian groups crossing the Rhine and devastating Gaul in 406.35 Herul raids are also reported as having targeted the coasts of Spain. Hydatius mentions seven

29 Notitia dignitatum, Occ. 5.162; 7.13, in Notitia dignitatum: Accedunt notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae et laterculi provinciarum, ed. by Otto Seeck (Berlin, 1876). For inscriptions, see Hoffmann, Das spätromische Bewegungsheer, pp. 77–79 and 88–91; Rappaport, ‘Heruli’, pp. 1152–53. See also Hoffmann, Das spätromische Bewegungsheer, II, 272 (index).
30 Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae, 20.1.3, 20.4.2, 27.1.6, and 27.8.7. See Hoffmann, Das spätromische Bewegungsheer, pp. 156–58.
31 Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae, 25.10.9.
32 Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae, 27.1.6; Zosimus, Historia nova, 4, 9, tells the same story but mentions only Batavians.
33 Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae, 20.1.3.
34 Ammianus Marcellinus, Res gestae, 20.4.1–2; Rappaport, ‘Heruli’, p. 1153; Schmidt, Die Ostgermanen, p. 559.
ships and four hundred warriors attacking his native province, Gallaecia, and then moving to Cantabria. Three years later an even stronger attack reached the coasts of Baetica.

Scholars have traditionally treated those third- to fifth-century Herules as a separate ‘West-Herul’ group to be distinguished from the ‘eastern Herules’ mentioned in relation to the invasion of 268/69. However, such a distinction is not mentioned by any late antique source. The idea of a separate ‘West-Herul’ group implies that the Herules were settled somewhere north of the Roman frontiers in the west. Ludwig Schmidt, for example, argued that such a settlement area was necessary to provide recruits for the auxilium. Further support for the idea of a Herul kingdom north of the Lower Rhine was found in a letter of Theoderic the Great contained in Cassiodorus’s Variae and a cursory remark in one of Sidonius Apollinaris’s letters. Theoderic’s letter is addressed to the kings of the Thuringians, the Herules, and the Varni, without any specific names, and was meant to gather support for his attempt to negotiate a peace between Clovis and Alaric II. His request of assistance was apparently based on a precedent. Both Theoderic’s letter and the short remark in Sidonius Apollinaris’s letter have been taken as a proof for the existence of a Herul kingdom somewhere on the Lower Rhine. However,


37 Hydatius, Continuatio Chronicorum, 194: ‘Eruli maritima conventus Lucensis loca nonnulla crudelissime invadunt ad Baeticam pertendentes.’


such an interpretation is not really necessary, for Theoderic may well have had in mind the Herul kingdom in the Middle Danube region, a point to which I shall shortly return. In fact, a Herul king in that region is the addressee of another letter written by Cassiodorus in the name of Theoderic (‘regi Erulorum Theodericus rex’). Sidonius Apollinaris describes in his letter various envoys pressing upon one another at the court of the Visigothic king Euric. Among them is also a Herul: ‘Here strolls the Herul with his glaucous cheeks, inhabitant of Ocean’s furthest shore, and of one complexion with its weedy deeps.’ Sidonius’s mention of the Herul’s origin from the ‘Ocean’s furthest shore’ has been interpreted as indicating a Herul kingdom at the mouth of the Rhine. However, this may in fact be nothing more than a bookish reference to third-century accounts of Herules attacking from the sea. Indeed, a Parthian ‘Arsacid’ mentioned in the next line clearly points to a third-century historical context for Sidonius’s allusions. As a consequence, there is no support in either Theoderic’s or Sidonius’s letter for the idea of a ‘West-Herul’ group, which seems to have been concocted without much regard for sources. Neither a ‘northern’ kingdom, nor a specific settlement area is necessary in order to explain the presence of the Herules in the West as soldiers and pirates. Warriors who had started as soldiers in the Roman army could have easily turned into freebooters, and pirates may have easily become soldiers. Different Herul groups

47–48. According to Barnish, ‘the Herules and Warni were probably the western branches of those tribes, between the lower Rhine and Elbe’. Elias Wessén, De nordiska folkstammarna i Beowulf (Stockholm, 1927), p. 86, wrongly believed that both letters of Theoderic had been sent to a Herul king in Scandinavia. Goiffart discusses those sources in Barbarian Tides, p. 206 and nn. 93–96.


appear to have operated in close proximity to the empire, but at different locations. To regard the Herules as ‘pre-Vikings’ from the North is based on nothing else than the association between their seaborne attacks and the Viking raids of later centuries, all in an ill-defined Scandinavian context inspired by Jordanes’s and Procopius’s accounts. Where sources fail to support such farfetched theories, linguistic speculations about ethnic names are called to the rescue. In reality, there is nothing special about attacks from the sea: various marauders employed such tactics at various points in history. It is just easier and not too dangerous.

_Gazing at the Dark Side of the Moon: The Herules Choose, More or Less Voluntarily, the ‘Hunnic Alternative’_

Peter Heather has used the Herules to illustrate his idea of ‘disappearing and reappearing tribes’:

No fourth-century text, however, mentions them [the Herules]. This could simply be a lacuna in the evidence, but contemporary sources make it clear that first Gothic and then Hunnic groups were politically dominant in the northern Pontic areas which Herules had occupied in the third century, and Herules certainly reappeared with a bang after the crash of the Hunnic Empire in the mid-fifth century. Their subsequent history is recorded in a number of sources.

44 For a particularly egregious example, see ‘The Heruls’, <http://www.gedevasen.dk/heruleng.html#C7> [accessed 1 April 2007]: ‘We do not know a tribe called Wicinga and the word Viking is not known so early from other sources — long time before the Viking Ages. To the editor of Widsith in the 10th century a combination “Eorla cynn” would not make any sense in this line of names. Maybe he instead used “Wicinga” as a general word for Nordic warriors. If “wicinga” really was the original wording, this was probably a tribe giving name to the later Vikings, and as the Herules were regarded as pirates in the Atlantic Ocean and the Black Sea they are probably in both cases the best candidates to the names “Wicingas” and “Lidwicingas” (“Lid” must be the old word for a private army used by the Vikings). Widsith also used the Herul-like “Herelingas” — probably covering at that position in Widsith a personal name and therefore unchanged by the authors of Widsith.’

45 In his conclusion to session 613 entitled ‘Neglected Barbarians’ and organized for the 40th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo (8 May 2005), Thomas F. X. Noble used this striking metaphor to describe the confusion arising from the Greek and Roman ethnographic texts and our attempts to understand the world beyond the Roman borders: The territory north, east, and south of the Roman borders is the dark side of the moon. We know hardly more than names and archaeological material of the societies there. Our bright side of the moon is the empire with its texts and inscriptions. Wolfram, _The Roman Empire_, p. 123. ‘Hunnic Alternative’ is the title of the book’s fifth chapter.

Before the mid-fourth century, the Herules appear in the region north of the Sea of Azov, but we do not know much about their political structures. That was certainly a region adjacent to territories under Roman control and with substantial urban structures. The Herules living in that area must have become part of a Gothic and, later, Hunnic confederation. Historians derive further information about the Herules from Jordanes, who wrote two centuries later. According to Jordanes, under their leader Alaric (*Halaricus*), the Herules were defeated by Ermanaric, the almighty Gothic king. It is important to note that in order to refer to the Herul leader, Jordanes avoids using the title of king: ‘*gentem Herulorum, quibus praeerat Halaricus*’ (‘Alaric, who presided over the Herules’).  

Nothing is known about either a Herul king or a Herul kingdom, and all we have is what Jordanes has to offer:  

He [Ermanaric] subdued many warlike peoples of the north and made them obey his laws, and some of our ancestors have justly compared him to Alexander the Great. [...] But though famous for his conquest of so many races, he gave himself no rest until he had slain some in battle and then reduced to his sway the remainder of the tribe of the Herules, whose chief was Alaric. Now the aforesaid race, as the historian Ablabius tells us, dwelt near Lake Maeotis in swampy places, which the Greeks call *bele*; hence they were named Heluri. They were a people swift of foot, and on that account were the more swollen with pride, for there was at that time no nation that did not choose from them its light-armed troops for battle. But though their quickness often saved them from others who made war upon them, yet they were overthrown by the slowness and steadiness of the Goths; and the lot of fortune brought it to pass that they, as well as the other tribes, had to serve Hermanaric, king of the Getae.  

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48 Like many before and after him, Schmidt, *Die Ostgermanen*, p. 335, makes Alaric a king and assumes therefore that Ermanaric conquered a Herul kingdom.

After having beaten the Herules, Ermanaric turned against the Venethi. The much discussed equation of Venethi, Antes, and Sclaveni follows.\(^{50}\) The Aesti, located on the farthest shore of the German Ocean, were also attacked and subdued by the great Gothic king. Finally, Jordanes remarks, Ermanaric ruled over all nations of Scythia and Germania.\(^{51}\) Jordanes introduces Ermanaric as Theoderic’s most important harbinger, equal to the great Alexander and ‘raised into a mythical figure that has borrowed several characteristics from Attila’\(^{52}\). According to Ammianus, the mighty and famous \textit{bellicosissimus rex} eventually committed suicide after having failed to resist the Hunnic onslaught. Ermanaric is the first Gothic king mentioned not only in Jordanes’s \textit{Getica}, but also in a contemporary, fourth-century source.\(^{53}\) He was obviously a key character in the construction of a glorious past for the Amal dynasty. As a consequence, his deeds and merits were greatly exaggerated in Jordanes’s account. Both Otto Maenchen-Helfen and Herwig Wolfram have suggested bringing Ermanaric’s achievements to real size: instead of a large Gothic kingdom covering much of Eastern Europe, one should envision an area of trade relations and treaties, as well as intertribal conflicts.\(^{54}\) Ermanaric was undoubtedly an important person in the 300s, but Jordanes described him as a Gothic Alexander, and the later medieval literature blew his image out of proportion even further.\(^{55}\) As a consequence, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, German- and Slavic-speaking scholars began quarrelling over the true achievements


\(^{51}\) Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 120: ‘Idem ipse prudentia et virtute subegit omnibusque Scythiae et Germaniae nationibus ac si propriis laboribus imperavit.’


of Ermanaric and over the expanse of land he had under his rule. In his Slavonic Antiquities, Pavel Josef Šafarík (1795–1861), one of the founders of the discipline of Slavic studies, first raised doubts about the trustworthiness of Jordanes’s account. In reply, Eduard von Wietersheim strove to demonstrate that, on the contrary, Jordanes’s account must be taken seriously, and imagined a great Gothic Empire covering much of Eastern Europe.⁵⁶ To be sure, Jordanes’s account is very imprecise, with no specific details about the location of the Herules. His etymological speculation connecting the Herules with the swamps and the Sea of Azov is entirely taken from Dexippus.⁵⁷ Ablabius is a problematic source, which is only mentioned by Jordanes. Theodor Mommsen first imagined Ablabius as the author of a now lost Gothic history, but more recent studies are much more reserved in that respect and some went so far as to raise doubts about the existence of Ablabius.⁵⁸

In order to explain the Hunnic subjugation of the Goths, Jordanes introduces the story of the Rosomonorum gens infida. Following her husband’s aborted revolt against the Gothic king, Queen Sunilda was tortured and eventually executed. According to Jordanes, her husband’s treachery had aroused Ermanaric’s rage. In return, Sunilda’s brothers Ammius and Saras assassinated Ermanaric, plunging a sword into his side.⁵⁹ The meaning of this episode for Jordanes’s narrative strategy is obscure. The very name Rosomoni may be translated as either ‘the quick ones’ or ‘people with red hair’. Gens, on the other hand, is a very ambiguous term, which can refer to a group of warriors regarded as a clan, to a family, or to a people. Herwig Wolfram viewed the Rosomoni as Herules living north of the Black Sea or as their stirps regia. He accordingly saw in Jordanes’s episode the evidence for a Herul uprising taking advantage of the weakening of the Gothic rule. Others, however,


⁵⁹ Jordanes, Getica, 129; Maenchen-Helfen, World of the Huns, p. 17 and n. 23.
treat the Rosomoni as just another Gothic noble family. Both interpretations overstretch the evidence of Jordanes. In any case, name similarity is definitely not sufficient evidence for tracking down the ‘disappearing Herules’.  

There is no mention of Herules throughout the entire period between c. 400 and 450. It is of course quite possible that Herul warriors fought alongside the Huns in Attila’s army, but there were also Herules in Roman service. According to Sidonius Apollinaris, Herules marched into Gaul in 451 with Attila. According to Peter Heather, they ‘reappeared with a bang after the crash of the Hunnic Empire’. Attila’s death brought about the disintegration of the broad coalition of many different gentes, which had formed the Hunnic polity. The Hunnic leader had secured the constant supply of revenue extorted from the Roman Empire. His ‘warriors could enjoy the benefits of the Roman world without having to enter it’, but the Romans were also successful in fighting the Huns back, and a great Hunnic attack on the Eastern Empire, which was planned for 453, had to be abandoned. It was no longer possible either to wait in Pannonia for Roman supplies to be shipped or to organize successful raids across the borders into the neighbouring Roman provinces. This was the end of Attila’s policies, aptly called the ‘Hunnic alternative’ by Herwig Wolfram, which the Herules, among others, had enjoyed. At Attila’s death in 453, his former allies and subjects were at each other’s throats. The Hunnic leader’s sons attempted to forge separate polities, which included selected gentes that may have remained loyal to them. If successful, this would have
been the equivalent of a multitude of Hunnic rulers, each striving to maximize his version of the ‘Hunnic alternative’. That alternative, however, was no longer viable. A coalition of forces was formed against those Hunnic petty kings, led by the Gepid king Ardaric. These men longed for a better apportionment. What actually happened after 453 is difficult to reconstruct, for the only source for the events that followed is again Jordanes, and since his purpose was to write a history of the Goths, he had no interest in documenting Gothic losses. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the Goths of Valamir, Theodoric’s grandfather, were on the side of Attila’s sons and therefore entered the conflict with smaller groups attempting to evade the Hunnic rule. Jordanes did not have anything glorious to report about the generation of Goths before the great Theodoric. In 454 or 455, a coalition of Gepids, Sueves, Herules, and others obtained a decisive victory, the last one in a series, on the river Neda in Pannonia. Attila’s son Ellac died in battle.65 ‘Once again the same tribes fought on both sides; one thing is clear, though: the majority of the Hunnic Goths under Amal leadership were amongst the losers, while the Gepids led the victorious army.’66 At this point in his narrative, Jordanes has a ‘catalogue of nations’ meeting on the battlefield, each one with its ‘national’ weapons, but it is not clear who was on what side.

There an encounter took place between the various nations Attila had held under his sway. Kingdoms with their peoples were divided, and out of one body were made many members not responding to a common impulse. Being deprived of their head, they madly strove against each other. They never found their equals ranged against them without harming each other by wounds mutually given. And so the bravest nations tore themselves to pieces. For then, I think, must have occurred a most remarkable spectacle, where one might see the Goths fighting with pikes, the Gepidae raging with the sword, the Rugii breaking off the

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66 Wolfram, *The Roman Empire*, p. 139; Martin Nagy, Walter Pohl, and Agnés B. Tóth, s.v. ‘Gepiden’, in *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, xi, 2nd edn, ed. by Heinrich Beck, Dieter Geuenich, and Heiko Steuer (Berlin, 2003), pp. 115–41 (pp. 133–34); Pohl, ‘Gepiden’, pp. 247–49. According to Pohl, the Ostrogoths and the Gepids were two rival groups vying for power under Hunnic rule. Valamir and Ardaric were both close companions of Attila (Jordanes, *Getica*, 199). The Gepids and the Huns were often mentioned together and sometimes even mistaken for one another. Attila, for example, is said to have been a Gepid in the *Chronicon Paschale* and in the *Chronographia* of John Malalas. See note 101 below.
spears in their own wounds, the Suevi fighting on foot, the Huns with bows, the Alani
drawing up a battle-line of heavy-armed and the Herules of light-armed warriors.\footnote{Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 261: \textit{‘Illic concursus factus est gentium variarum, quas Attila in sua tenerat
dicione. Dividuntur regna cum populis, fiuntque ex uno corpore membra diversa, nec quae
unius passioni compaterentur, sed quae exciso capite in invicem insanirent; quae
numquam contra se pares invenerant, nisi ipsi mutuis se vulneribus sauciantes se
ipsos discerperent fortissimae nationes.’}}

It is also not clear whether the Herules had been on the side of Attila’s sons. There
seems to have been a division of several \textit{gentes} into warring parties. Edica,
Odoacer’s father, one of the most powerful followers of Attila who enjoyed much
influence, was not capable of gathering all Scirians on his side.\footnote{Jordanes,
not only did different \textit{gentes} fight against each other, but also ‘the bravest
nations tore themselves to pieces’ (‘se ipsos discerperent fortissimae nationes’).
Several splinter groups could thus appear out of a single ethnic group within a
relatively short period of time. Ethnic identities were reinvented, and previously
smaller groups rose to prominence. In Jordanes’s words: ‘Kingdoms with their
people were divided, and out of one body were made many members not responding
to a common impulse’. Several warlords may have gone their own way, with some
Herul leaders fighting on the side of Attila’s sons, others against them. Still others
must have waited on the side, to see who would win in the final confrontation.
There is therefore no room for the nineteenth-century idea of oppressed Germanic
peoples freeing themselves from the Hunnic yoke through a liberation movement.
Following this rather chaotic period, the Ostrogoths, but also some Sciri, Alans,
Rugi, and many others (‘vero aliaeque nationes nonullae’) asked the East Roman
government for permission to enter the empire. They were settled as federates by
Emperor Marcian. Given the subsequent developments, it seems likely that among
the ‘aliaeque nationes nonullae’ were also Herules.\footnote{Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 263–66, the
citation from 266; Lotter, \textit{Völkerverschiebungen}, p. 103, is certain that Herules were among
the federates admitted into the Eastern provinces.} To get a clear picture of them,
it is necessary to understand the milieu in which they operated. One therefore
needs to turn to the events taking place in the Middle Danube region, in Pannonia,
and in Italy during the second half of the fifth century.

\footnote{Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 261: \textit{‘Illic concursus factus est gentium variarum, quas Attila in sua tenerat
dicione. Dividuntur regna cum populis, fiuntque ex uno corpore membra diversa, nec quae
unius passioni compaterentur, sed quae exciso capite in invicem insanirent; quae
numquam contra se pares invenerant, nisi ipsi mutuis se vulneribus sauciantes se
ipsos discerperent fortissimae nationes.’}}

\footnote{Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 277; Pohl, \textit{‘Gepiden’}, p. 261.}

\footnote{Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 263–66, the citation from 266; Lotter, \textit{Völkerverschiebungen}, p. 103, is
certain that Herules were among the federates admitted into the Eastern provinces.}
The Herul Regnum on the Roman Frontier

After the battle the victorious tribes settled directly on the left bank of the Danube and established, between the Lower Austrian Wachau Valley and the Transylvanian Carpathians, a series of kingdoms linked as federates to Constantinople. At the threshold of a mighty Gepidia there arose, between the Danube and the Tisza, a Scirian, and a Sarmatian kingdom. West of them the Suebi had a regnum. The Herules and the Rugians resided at the March respectively north of the Danube. Evidently the victorious barbarians of the Danube had contractually guaranteed rights to the economic prosperity of the provincials on the right side of the Danube. To keep a rein on these claims, the defeated Goths were to be settled as federates of east Rome inside the empire.  

The place chosen by authorities in Constantinople for the Goths of Valamir and his brothers Thiudimir and Vidimir was Pannonia. There they controlled the Danube between Vindobona and Singidunum, a key area for both West and East, as well as for other barbarian groups emerging in the aftermath of the collapse of the Hunnic polity. Throughout the second half of the fifth century, the Pannonian Goths strove to obtain hegemony over all former subjects of Attila’s Huns, either as an ally or as an enemy of the empire. The other gentes carried out attacks on the Goths either to enter the empire as a Roman exercitus or to force the Romans to pay them for maintaining the peace. By 473, however, the greater part of the Pannonian Goths left for the Balkans, and in 488 they entered Italy with an imperial mandate to fight Odoacar. The second leading group emerging out of the Hunnic system were the Gepids, separated from the Goths by the old Roman frontier. The Gepids had occupied the territory between the Danube, the Tisza, and the Olt Rivers, on the one hand, and the Carpathian Mountains, on the other hand, an area which included the former province of Dacia. They had a contract of peace and friendship with the emperor, which lasted for nearly a century. As a consequence, they were paid annua sollemnia. Between the Danube and the Tisza, a Scirian polity was established by Edica and his sons, Odoacar and Onoulf (Hunulf). Priscus had known Edica to be one of Attila’s confidants. This family,

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having made themselves the Scirian *stirps regia*, was linked to several centres of power at that time. They established ‘international’ relations and soon became the main rivals of the Goths. Odoacar and Onoulf played important roles in barbarian society both inside and outside the empire. But the Scirian polity came to an end in c. 468, when the Ostrogoths defeated their rivals.⁷⁴ “Thereupon the Goths proceeded to exact vengeance for the death of their king, as well as for the injury done them by the rebels. They fought in such wise that there remained of all the Scirian nation only a few who bore the name, and they with disgrace. Thus were all destroyed.”⁷⁵ Jordanes’s report can be understood as a tale concerned with the end of an alternative. The Gothic solution was successful, the challengers had been beaten, and the Scirian ethnic coherence had become obsolete. The ‘bearers of the Scirian name’ can be understood as the royal family of Edica, Odoacar, and Onoulf, with enough warriors to act as a military power.⁷⁶ After all, they maintained an alternative to the powerful Goths by opening to other ethnic identification; the story of Odoacar in Italy demonstrates how that could actually happen. It took another twenty years for Theoderic to bring that alternative to an end.

In 470, with tacit Roman support, a broad coalition of Edica’s Sciri, Sarmatians, Sueves, Gepids, and Rugi rose to challenge the Goths. There is no mention of Herules.⁷⁷ Edica died in the ensuing battle at the Bolia River, and his son Onoulf escaped to Constantinople, together with his retinue of warriors, where he entered


⁷⁶ Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, p. 205: ‘There is no evidence for the recruitment of Sciri into the Roman army until the days of Odoacer. […] If they may be said to have a history at all, its most noticeable trait is that their final downfall as a people coincides with the prominence of two half-Scirians, sons of a famous father, in the military aristocracy of the Roman Empire.’

⁷⁷ Jordanes, *Getica*, 277: ‘Quorum exitio Suavorum reges Hunimundus et Halaricus veret, in Gothos arma moverunt freti auxilio Sarmatarum, qui cum Beuca et Babai regibus suis auxiliarii ei advenissent, ipsaque Scirorum reliquias quasi ad ultionem suam acriss pugnaturos accersientes cum Edica et Hunuulfo eorum primatibus habuerunt simul secum tam Gepidas quam ex gente Rugorum non parva solacia, ceterisque hinc inde collectis ingentem multitudinem adgregantes ad annem Bolia in Pannoniis castra metati sunt.’ Schwarz, ‘Die Heruler an der Donau’, p. 509, suggests that Alarin, the king mentioned beside Hunimund, may have been a Herul because he had the same name as a fourth-century king. However, Jordanes specifically refers here to *Suavorum reges*. 
Roman service and rose to the rank of magister militum per Illyricum. Some time later, in 479, he met his Gothic archenemies one more time, this time as a Roman officer. Odoacer fled up along the Danube, met with St Severin who reputedly predicted him a great future, and then moved to Italy, where he was chosen leader by a great number of Herules, Sciri, Rugians, and Torcilingi eager to grab the opportunities opening for them in the West. By their victory at the Bolia River, the Goths had taken revenge for the defeat at Nedao and established themselves as the uncontested hegemonial power at the gates of the empire in Pannonia.

A Suevic regnum emerged in what is today southern Slovakia, established by those Sueves who had not left in 406 with the Vandals and the Alans. Their king Hunimund strove to establish a centre of power and to forge a strong Suevic identity. After several confrontations with the Goths, a separate Gothic strike crushed the Sueves at the Bolia River. Hunimund became a warlord with a few dozens of followers, a band mentioned in the Vita Severini. Next to the Sueves, a Sarmatian polity had maintained itself, which the Goths soon also managed to destroy. Much like the Sciri and the Sueves, the Sarmatians were attacked by Theoderic in 471, who killed their king Babai in battle, captured his treasure, and occupied Singidunum. Eliminating the royal stirps, capturing the treasury, and cutting off the ties to the empire were meant to deprive the barbarian elites of their basic needs.

The Rugi established themselves north of the Middle Danube, with their royal seat around modern Krems on the Danube. Their short-lived polity was destroyed

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79 Eugippius, Vita Sancti Severini, 7, ed. by Theodor Nüßlein (Stuttgart, 1986); English translation in George W. Robinson, The Life of Saint Severinus (Cambridge, MA, 1914); Wolfram, Die Goten, p. 267 and n. 48; Goffart, Narrators, p. 355 and n. 88.


by Odoacer in 487. By 454, a Herul polity was also established in the neighbourhood, namely within the eastern Weinviertel and in southern Moravia. The Herul polity may have extended eastward to the Little Carpathians. The Herules ruled over a mixed population of local Sueves, Huns, Alans, and others. The success of the Herul polity must have attracted other tribal groups as well, but its territorial expansion was primarily the work of Herul warriors. Procopius describes the situation as follows:

But as time went on they became superior to all the barbarians who dwelt about them both in power and in numbers, and, as was natural, they attacked and vanquished them severally and kept plundering their possessions by force. And finally they made the Lombards, who were Christians, together with several other nations, subject and tributary to themselves, though the barbarians of that region were not accustomed to that sort of thing; but the Eruli were led to take this course by love of money and a lawless spirit.

Local Suevic and (formerly) provincial farmers seem to have secured the relative prosperity of the Herul regnum well after 500. The Herules were able to line up an impressive number of battle-seasoned warriors. The Vita Severini reports a Herul attack on Ioviaco (near Batavia/Passau) around 480. The holy man Severinus tried to warn the inhabitants of Ioviaco three separate times. During the night following the third warning, the Herules sacked the city and took many people captive. They hanged the local priest, Maximianus, on a cross. According to Eugippius, the Herules led many prisoners (plurimos captivos) away from Ioviaco. This may indicate that

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87 Pohl, ‘Gepiden’, p. 278.
88 Eugippius, Vita Sancti Severini, 24. Schwarz, ‘Die Heruler an der Donau’, p. 505, interpreted the subsequent execution by hanging of a certain priest Maximianus as a ritual sacrifice to Wotan. However, the execution of the spiritual leader of a community may also be seen as an attempt to subdue that community and to prevent resistance. For the Vita Sancti Severini, see also Walter Goffart, ‘Does the Vita S. Severini Have an Underside?’, in Eugippius und Severin: Der Autor, der Text und der Heilige, ed. by Walter Pohl and Maximilian Diesenberger (Vienna, 2001), pp. 33–40.
the Herules were concerned with enlarging the population within their polity by means of prisoners of war from Noricum Ripense. From their core area north of the Danube, the Herules expanded into the territory south of that river, but north of Lake Balaton, taking advantage of the disappearance, one by one, of the Suevic and Scirian polities, both eliminated by the Pannonian Goths who soon after those struggles left for Italy, and then of the Rugians, destroyed by Odoacer in 488.89

Herules Trying to Make Odoacer their King in Italy

‘Then as the spoil taken from one and another of the neighbouring tribes diminished’, as Jordanes has it, warriors from the Danube region — Herules, Sciri, and Rugians — moved to Italy to participate in Odoacer’s exercitus of externae gentes.90 Herules were among the strongest in ‘king Odoacer’s whirlpool of peoples in which he made his career’.91 Some sources even call him rex Erulorum. This underlines the key role Odoacer had in bringing at least some Herules to live the life of the rich and privileged in Italy. Odoacer himself originated from a mixed milieu at the meeting point between the Roman and Hunnic spheres of power. His brother Onoulf made his career in the East. Odoacer’s career began in Italy under Ricimer. During the civil war fought by the magister militum Ricimer and Anastasius (471/72), he was on the side of the former. Onoulf, already a powerful man in Constantinople, joined Odoacer in Italy in 479 after having fallen out of favour with Emperor Zeno.92

Odoacer’s unique opportunity arrived in 476, during the conflict between soldiers of the externae gentes and the patricius Orestes. Orestes had begun his career

89 Demandt, Die Spätantike, pp. 212–14; Wolfram, Grenzen und Räume, p. 58.
as Latin secretary to Attila, but soon became the rival of the Hunnic ruler's companion, Edika, Odoacer's father. Orestes was now opposed to the demand that soldiers recruited from among the exterae gentes be paid just like Roman soldiers (a soldier of barbarian origin seems to have received much lower wages, perhaps as a consequence of the constant supply of barbarians eager for recruitment). ‘While the Roman army had a vested legal claim to a third of the curial taxes, the economic security of the federates of Italy was far less clearly established; they did not receive “regular” pay but extraordinary monies, agreed upon by treaty, to be sure, but revocable. In 476, the barbarians in Italy demanded to be given equal status with the Roman army. ’93 When Orestes, as the highest magistrate present, refused to yield to such demands, the soldiers turned to Odoacar who promised to fulfil their requests, ‘should he attain supramagisterial power’.94 All in all, the impression one gets from the sources makes one think of a coup d’état or a putsch performed by armed forces.95 According to Procopius, one third of the Italian land was thus given to the barbarians, the same amount of land that Theoderic would grant to his Goths in 491. This is not the place to enter the complex debate concerning the ‘accommodation of the barbarians', whether by means of land or by means of tax money.96 Instead, it is worth re-examining our sources in order to identify those

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93 Wolfram, The Roman Empire, pp. 184–85.
94 Wolfram, The Roman Empire, pp. 184–85.
95 Goffart, Narrators, p. 355 and n. 88 gives an accurate idea how to understand the verb invadere in Jordanes, Romana, 344, ed. by Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA, 5.1 (Berlin, 1882; repr. 1982): ‘Jordanes spoke of Odoacar “invading” Italy supported by hordes of tribesmen; he probably meant invadere in the sense of “to seize (from within, as by coup d’état)”. [...] All in all, the underpinnings for “Odoacar’s barbarian conquest of Italy” were less flimsy than those for the lady Digna and the Vandal plunder of the Campania.’
96 Procopius, Wars, 5.1.5–8, trans. by Dewing, pp. 2–5: ‘Now it happened that the Romans a short time before had induced the Sciri and Alani and certain other Gothic nations to form an alliance with them: [...] And in proportion as the barbarian element among them became strong, [...] so that the barbarians ruthlessly forced many other measures upon the Romans much against their will and finally demanded that they should divide with them the entire land of Italy. And indeed they commanded Orestes to give them the third part of this, and when he would by no means agree to do so, they killed him immediately. Now there was a certain man among the Romans named Odoacer, one of the bodyguards of the emperor, and he at that time agreed to carry out their commands, on condition that they should set him upon the throne. [...] And by giving the third part of the land to the barbarians, and in this way gaining their allegiance most firmly, he held the supreme power securely for ten years.’ See Wolfram, ‘Odowakar’, p. 574, who sees in Procopius the evidence for the fact that the wages to be paid to the troops were the main reason for the conflict. The controversy regarding the accommodation of the barbarians in the later Roman
who raised Odoacer to power. According to Jordanes, although a Rugian by birth, he was the king of the Torcilingi, the Sciri, and the Herules, and of other gentes. The Anonymus Valesianus has Odoacer coming to Italy together with the Sciri.97 But according to the Auctarium Hauniense, the Herul soldiers made Odoacer their king.98

To Felix Dahn, calling Odoacer a rex Erulorum was a mistake.99 In reality, taking the account in the Auctarium Hauniense at face value implies accepting a version of history which is not at variance with what is otherwise known about barbarian identity in the fifth century. It also involves acknowledging the fact that several processes were at work at the same time. Proclaiming Odoacer their king


meant a lot to the Herules fighting with and for him. By raising him to that position, they entrusted him with the task of looking after the entire Herul exercitus. Herules in the army were in competition with other gentes, who also claimed Odoacar for themselves in order to obtain a hegemonic position within that army. The contemporary and parallel stories of the Vandals and Alans show clearly that different groups could split up at different moments, each taking on a new identity or reinventing itself on the basis of an already existing (but alternative) identity.\textsuperscript{100} It is therefore not surprising that Odoacar bore many titles, as attested in our sources. He was rex Gothorum, Rugorum, but also simply rex, even rex gentium and rex Italiae. Similarly, Attila could become a Gepid in the eyes of John Malalas. Roman and Greek writers seem to have had a hard time grasping the bewildering variety of identity and names for all those whom they otherwise labelled simply ‘Huns’ or ‘Scythians’. That they made mistakes and errors of interpretation in the process is only understandable.\textsuperscript{101} An error is just one way of understanding those sources. We do not know much about Odoacar’s self promotion during the political struggles in Italy. Perhaps he understood quite well how to manipulate different identities and ethnic affiliations to keep warriors on his side. If this was so, Roman and Greek authors just referred to a complex political situation and tried to do their best at transmitting what they knew. For sure Odoacar acted in different ways. The political symbols used to interact with Constantinople or the Roman Senate must have been very different from those used with the armed men in Italy. Flavius Odoacar adressed Roman aristocrats, a rex Rugorum the Rugian warriors. A Roman author made Odoacar the rex gentium to indicate the basis of his power.

If the Herules who proclaimed Odoacar their king had future dreams of a better life in Italy, their hopes were soon thwarted. Part of the problem seems to have been that they remained with Odoacar, and even when he started to slip, they did not hasten to Theoderic’s side. Instead, they were together with Odoacar in Ravenna during its siege by Theoderic’s troops. It is together with the Herules that Odoacar made his last-ditch attempt to break out of the besieged city in the night of 9 July 491. Livila, Odoacar’s general and successor of Tufa, the former magister militum serving Odoacar who had deserted to Theoderic in 489, died in the


ensuing battle, together with the best of Odoacer’s Herul troops. In Ennodius’s words, ‘quid Herulorum agmina fusa commemorem’.

The Struggle in Pannonia at the Gates of Italy and the End of the Herul Regnum

Like Odoacer before him, the victorious Theoderic tried to secure the passage into Italy. Given the numerous eager and strong barbarian groups in that region, what Cassiodorus has to say about the Raetiae as protecting the gate to Italy (‘Raetiae namque munimina sunt Italiae et claustra provinciae’) also applies to the region of the Middle Danube and to Pannonia. In 504, Theoderic conquered the ‘former seeds of the Goths’ from the Gepids, ‘ad Sirmiensem Pannoniam, quondam sedem Gothorum’. It is from Pannonia that various leaders had entered Italy, the core of the Western Empire, from Alaric, Radagais, and Attila to Odoacer and Theoderic himself. Theoderic’s capture of Sirmium brought him in direct conflict with the Romans, which in turn brought about the destruction of the Herul realm. Most likely Constantinople had granted Sirmium to the Gepids, and Theoderic acted against the plans of the imperial government.

By 500, the Herules had established peaceful relations with the Goths, which may have encouraged Theoderic to treat them as potential allies. He made an unnamed Herul king his son-in-arms (adoptio per arma). Horses, shields, and reliqua instrumenta bellorum were sent to that king, who was now treated as the greatest barbarian ruler in the area. Some have assumed that the unnamed king whom


104 Cassiodorus, Variae, 7.4.


106 Cassiodorus, Variae, 4.2, ed. by Mommsen: ‘Damus tibi quidem equos enses clipeos et reliqua instrumenta bellorum: sed quae sunt omnimodis fortiora, largimur tibi nostra iudicia. summus enim inter gentes esse crederis, qui Theoderici sententia comprobaris.’ See Wolfram, Die Goten,
Theoderic made his son-in-arms was Rodulf, a Herul leader mentioned by Procopius at the time when the reign of Emperor Anastasius (491–518) began, and by Paul the Deacon. Jordanes had also a Rodulf rex seeking Theoderic’s protection in Italy. Some even went further and speculated about the kind of information about northern barbarians that Rodulf may have been able to supply to Cassiodorus for his history of the Goths. Given the assumed influence of Cassiodorus’s work upon Jordanes’s Getica, Andrew Merrills’s remarks are worth citing in full at this point:

There are several problems with this interpretation, although none of them is substantial enough to warrant its complete rejection. Perhaps chief among these is the immediate acceptance by later commentators that Rodulf’s origins were precisely those claimed by the Getica. There is no reason to interpret Procopius’s brief account of the king’s background as an assertion that his homeland was in the far north of Europe or in Scandza. Indeed, the political and ideological implications of Theoderic’s support for a northern exile would have been considerable in the early years of the sixth century, when his people began to assert their own affiliation with the northern parts of Europe. Rodulf’s...

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107 Procopius, Wars, 1.11.10–30, describes at length how the Byzantines used an adoptio to make peace with the Persians. According to him, ‘the barbarians adopt sons not by a document, but by arms and armor’. Wolfram assumed that the Byzantine foreign policy used the adoptio per arma as one means to forge alliances. This would in turn mean that the adoptio of a Herul king by Theoderic followed Roman not barbarian customs. See Herwig Wolfram, sv. ‘Waffensohn’, in Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, XXXIII, 2nd edn, ed. by Heinrich Beck, Dieter Geuenich, and Heiko Steuer (Berlin, 2006), pp. 49–51. According to Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards, 1.23, in Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et Italicae, saec. vi–ix, ed. by Georg Waitz (Berlin 1878; repr. 1988); English translation from William Dudley Foulke, Paul the Deacon: History of the Lombards (Pennsylvania, 1907; repr. 1975), ‘it is not the custom among us that the son of the king should eat with his father unless he first receives his arms from the king of a foreign nation’ (‘nisi prius a rege gentis exterae arma suscipiat’).

108 Jordanes, Getica, 24. Jordanes mentions Rodulf immediately after his account of Dani driving the Herules out of their lands: ’Sunt quamquam et horum positura Grannii, Angandzi, Eunizi, Taretel, Rigi, Arochi, Rani, qui quibus non ante multis annos Rodulf rex fuit, qui contempto proprio regno ad Theodorici Gothorum regis gremio convolavit et, ut desiderabal, invenit. Hae itaque gentes, Germanis corpore et animo grandiores, pugnabat beluina saevitia.’

somewhat ambiguous origins may thus have been imposed, or accentuated retrospectively by Cassiodorus, in an effort to develop the political undertones of his own work. The *Getica* may, of course, be correct in its association of Rodulf with the far north, but the possibility that it merely reflects an ideological distortion should not be overlooked.\(^{110}\)

The *adoptio per arma* of a Herul king in the Middle Danube region nicely dovetails with Theoderic’s known political goals. There is therefore no need for an additional explanation concerning Rodulf’s relation to the Ostrogothic court. Theoderic’s second letter addressed to that same king may thus be understood better in such a light.

There is a third piece in Cassiodorus’s *Variae* that historians have used to reconstruct the early sixth-century history of the Herules. The officials of the city of Pavia were enjoined to provide transport by boat between their city and Ravenna and to offer five days’ provisions (*annonae*) to envoys from the Herules (supplices Erulos) travelling to Theoderic’s court. Some have assumed that the supplices in question were Herul refugees taken in by Theoderic after the Lombard destruction of the Herul kingdom.\(^ {111}\) But those men were mere envoys, either members of a military unit in Italy or subjects of the Herul king north of the Danube. Cassiodorus uses supplices several times in his *Variae* and often in a rather general sense. The only basis for an interpretation favouring the idea of Herul refugees is the date of the letter, as proposed by Theodor Mommsen and Stefan Krautschik: 507 to 512. However, Andrew Gillett redated the letter to before September 527.\(^ {112}\) The former date suggests that the envoys were subjects of a Herul king ruling somewhere north of the Danube, the latter that they were members of a military unit in Italy. As a matter of fact, Paul the Deacon mentions Herul warriors in Italy, under Ostrogothic rule.\(^ {113}\)

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\(^{110}\) Andrew H. Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 129.


It seems very likely that Roman diplomatic efforts were directed against the Herules by means of empowering the Lombards, in order to defeat Theoderic’s attempts to create a system of alliances with other gentes of Central Europe.\textsuperscript{114} Procopius and Paul the Deacon give different accounts of the Herul-Lombard conflict. However, neither of them mentions any Roman interference. According to Procopius, the reason for the war between Herules and Lombards was that ‘the people being exceedingly vexed began to abuse their leader Rodolphus without restraint, and going to him constantly they called him cowardly and effeminate, and railed at him in a most unruly manner’. The king thus felt compelled to wage war on the Lombards, without any real reason.\textsuperscript{115} This story is remarkably similar to what Jordanes has to say about the reasons the Ostrogoths left Pannonia. In both cases, one is left with the impression that war was a fundamental element of life in those societies. When individual warriors sought honour and booty, kings unable to meet their demands were in danger of losing face and power.\textsuperscript{116} ‘The cohesion of a group depended very largely on a leader’s success.’\textsuperscript{117} The Roman diplomacy must have been fully aware of such social and political mechanisms.

Paul the Deacon has a different reason for the Herul-Lombard conflict. Two hundred years after Procopius he ‘gives the Herules a legitimate casus belli, but turns poor Rudolf into a fool’.\textsuperscript{118} The Lombards stayed for three years in the formerly Rugian lands, and a war started up between the Lombard king Tato and Rodulf.\textsuperscript{119} King Rodulf’s brother had been sent as envoy to Tato, perhaps for the collection of tribute. During his stay at the Lombard court, a princess named Rumetruda deeply offended the Herul envoy, and this man defended his and his king’s honour. Instead of smoothing the tension, however, Rumetruda’s retainers murdered the Herul, thus causing a military conflict between Lombards and Herules. During the following battle Paul the Deacon depicts King Rodulf playing at draughts not at all wavering in his hope of victory. Two legends are then introduced about this king. In one of them, one of the King’s followers is ordered to climb a tree, in order to tell the King more quickly about the victory of his troops. Rodulf threatened to cut off the man’s head if he announced that the Herules were

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{114} Wolfram, \textit{Die Goten}, p. 322; Schwarcz, ‘Die Heruler an der Donau’, p. 511.
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Procopius, \textit{Wars}, 6.14.11–13; see Goffart, \textit{Barbarian Tides}, pp. 207–08.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Pohl, ‘Die Gepiden’, pp. 285–86.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} Goffart, \textit{Barbarian Tides}, p. 208.
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Paul the Deacon, \textit{History of the Lombards}, 1.19.
\end{itemize}
not fighting bravely. Seeing that the Herules were losing the battle, the man asked heaven for help. The King now asked whether the Herules were fleeing, and the man was saved as the King himself had spoken the awful truth. In the second story, the fighting Herules saw the green-growing flax in the fields and thought it was water fit for swimming. Therefore they stretched out their arms as if to swim and were beaten by the enemy. Following the victory, Tato captured Rodulf’s banner and helmet and the Herules lost their identity as a gens: Paul the Deacon subsumes the situation with the explanatory remark that the Herules had no king anymore (‘Herules regem non habuerunt’). Kingship was a central part of ethnic tradition and self-awareness. After a defeat, an exercitus often disintegrated into small groups of warriors who kept on plundering or moved into the empire to find better employment. This seems to be exactly what happened to the defeated Herules. The failure of their king destroyed any faith that his warriors may have had in him. There was no purpose in re-establishing the regnum. Previous ethnic identities rapidly shifted, with some Herules becoming Lombards or looking for other solutions.

Herul Soldiers in Justinian’s Wars and the Second (and Final) Disappearance of the Herules

Procopius did not like the Herules. But in his Wars they are mentioned quite often as participating in Justinian’s campaigns against the Persians, the Vandals, and the Goths and were a key component of Justinian’s military system. Procopius’s Herul excursus is therefore meant to clarify who these people were and how they came into an alliance with the Romans. At the same time the excursus is full of stereotypes and negative attitudes towards this primitive people and its archaic conventions.


121 Procopius, Wars, 6.14.1–7; trans. by Dewing, III, 403–05: ‘Now as to who in the world the Eruli are, and how they entered into the alliance with the Romans, I shall forthwith explain. They used to dwell beyond the Ister River from of old, worshipping a great host of gods, whom it seemed to them holy to appease even by human sacrifices. And they observed many customs which were not in accordance with those of other men. For they were not permitted to live either when they grew old or when they fell sick, but as soon one of them was overtaken by old age or by sickness, it became necessary for him to ask his relatives to remove him from the world as quickly as possible. And these relatives would pile up a quantity of wood to a great height and lay the man at the top of the wood,
Within the Herul excursus Procopius gives some fragments of a history concerning Herules at the borders of the empire. He has the Herules beaten by the Lombards fleeing to formerly Rugian territory, where they were, however, hardly pressed by famine. ‘Contrary to what is sometimes said (e.g., Schmidt, Ostgermanen, p. 503), the land of the Rugians to which Procopius has them momentarily withdraw is not the Rugian territory known from the Vita S. Severini, but the lands downstream (in Moesia or Dacia?) where the survivors from the Rugian defeat fled in 488.’ As a consequence, they were allowed into Gepid territory. But since the Gepids tried to subdue them, many Herules crossed the Danube, entered the Roman Empire, and were eventually settled by Emperor Anastasius in Illyricum, probably near Singidunum (Belgrade) around Bassiana, which was acquired in 510 from the
Goths, now ruling Italy from Ravenna. The Herul armed warriors shortly afterwards rose in rebellion, and a Roman army was dispatched against them. They were obviously treated as an insurgent military unit and, as a consequence, decimated. The survivors had to go through a deditio and were accepted as federates again. Procopius further ‘emphasizes the shrinkage of their numbers from successive humblings by Lombards, Gepids, and Romans.’

After Anastasius’s strike against the insurgent Herules, Justinian abandoned this policy and offered them a better deal in 527. According to Procopius, all Herules converted to Christianity, but Malalas reports that only a Herul king called Grepes converted in 528 together with some nobles and twelve of his relatives. Justinian himself is said to have been the sponsor at Grepes’s baptismal font.
in Constantinople. Malalas’s account seems to be closer to reality and can serve as a good reminder that when our sources mention a ‘people’ in Late Antiquity, they often mean the ruling elite.

For one generation, at least, the Herules remained in the Balkans as federates, and as such provided recruits for the Roman army. Herul warriors fought as separate units in the Roman armies that Emperor Justinian sent against the Persians, the Vandals, and the Goths.

The pool of Herul manpower lay open to fill Justinian’s armies. Procopius reports the presence of Herules under their own leaders in Persia, Africa, Italy, Thrace, and Lazica. A detachment even participated in the butchery of civilians at Constantinople that ended the Nika riots. Herule infantry receives a special description. A detachment of Herules under Pharas, whom Procopius personally praises, brought about the surrender of the Vandal king Gelimer (534). As Roman troops, Herules suffered casualties in Italy at the hands of the Gothic ‘rebellion’ of 541, and, at the great final battle of Narses against Totila, dismounted Herules stood alongside dismounted Lombards in the Roman centre (552). No other barbarian people compares with the Herules in contributing troops to Justinian’s wars.

‘According to Jordanes, they were the finest light infantry in the world.’ The sixth-century authors Jordanes and Procopius even mention some peculiar equipment in use by those highly specialized Herul soldiers. Jordanes describes the respective weapons and tactics of various troops participating in the battle at the Nedao River. The Alans drew up a line of battle made up of heavily armed


128 Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, p. 208. Some examples: Procopius, *Wars*, 1.13.19 (battle of Daras); 2.24.18; 2.25.20–22 (battle of Anglon); 3.11.11; 4.6.1–26 (a correspondence between the Herul officer Pharas and the besieged Vandal king Gelimer; see for this episode Steinacher, ‘Gruppen und Identitäten’, pp. 255–56); 4.14.12 (problems with Herul troops because of their Arian faith); 6.13.18 (two thousand Herules commanded by Visandus, Aluith, and Phanitheus join Narses); 8.33.19 (Herules take part in the assault of Rome). Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, p. 337 and n. 108, and Rappaport, ‘Heruli’, pp. 1164–65 list all sources for Herul soldiers in Justinian’s armies. See also Alexander Sarantis’s contribution to this volume. Also in Agathias’ histories Herul soldiers are mentioned quite often: Agathias, *The Histories*, ed. and trans. by Joseph D. Frendo (Berlin, 1975). The Herules are to be found at 1.11.3; 1.14.4–6; 1.18.8; 1.20.8; 2.7.2–7; 2.8.5–6; 2.9.7–13; 3.6.5; 3.20.10.

warriors, while the Herules lined up their lightly armed men.\textsuperscript{130} Procopius describes Herul soldiers fighting against the Persians as having neither helmet nor corselet, nor indeed any other protective armor, except a shield and a thick jacket, 'which they gird about them before they enter into a struggle.'\textsuperscript{131}

Apart from these structures and events modern scholarship has to deal with a part of Procopius's excursus which is harder to interpret. Some of the Herules beaten by the Lombards are said to have refused to enter the Roman Empire, and instead to have left their lands for 'the very extremity of the world' (τὰς ἄγχατας τῆς οἰκουμένης). This problem will be discussed again in the final section of this chapter. Procopius further offers an amazing account of Herul attempts to find a new royal family in Thule, at the end of the world. The story may be interpreted as a post-factum rationalization of the sudden collapse of the Herul polity and an ironic comment regarding barbarian political structures.\textsuperscript{132} The impression one

\textsuperscript{130} Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 261: ‘Alanum gravi, Herulum levit armatura aciem strui.’


\textsuperscript{132} Procopius, \textit{Wars}, 6.15.1–4; trans. by Dewing, \textit{III}, 415: ‘When the Eruli, being defeated by the Lombards in the above-mentioned battle, migrated from their ancestral homes, some of them, as has been told by me above, made their home in the country of Illyricum, but the rest were averse to crossing the Ister River, but settled at the very extremity of the world [τὰς ἄγχατας τῆς οἰκουμένης]; at any rate, these men, led by many of the royal blood, traversed all the nations of the Scirænæ one after the other, and after next crossing a large tract of barren country, they came to the Varni, as they are called. After these they passed the nations of the Dani, without suffering violence at the hands of the barbarians there. Coming thence to the ocean, they took to the sea, and putting in at Thule, remained there on the island.’ The story of the emigrating Herules is interrupted here (Procopius, \textit{Wars}, 6.15.5–26) by a long ethnographic description of Thule. Procopius mentions the polar night, offers a lot of information on the \textit{Scritiphini} (maybe the \textit{Saami}) as well as other peoples and religions of Thule. Finally he remarks that the emigrated Herules had settled near the \textit{Gautoi}. Rappaport, ‘Heruli’, p. 1161, and Schmidt, \textit{Die Ostgermanen}, p. 553, as most other traditional interpretations, took this as a historical account as it seemed clear that a ‘Germanic tribe’ must have originated in Scandinavia. For a critical discussion, see the final section of this chapter and Goffart, \textit{Barbarian Tides}, pp. 209–10 and n. 117. For an illustration of how widespread the traditional interpretation still is, see Barbara Niezabitowska, ‘Die Heruler’, in \textit{Die Vandalen: Die Könige, die Eliten, die Krieger, die Handwerker}, ed. by Andrzej Kokowski and Christian Leiber (Nordstemmen, 2003), pp. 387–94 (p. 390). Niezabitowska has absolutely no doubts about Procopius's account of the wandering Heruls. She refers to the story as if it were a historical account: ‘Nach diesem Ereignis kehrte ein Teil der Heruler in die alte Heimat zurück, ein anderer Teil schloß sich den Langobarden an. [...] Diese kurze Eintragung bei Procopius rief ein “Gewitter” in der archäologischen Welt hervor.’ She adds in relation to a Polish excavation at Ulów near
gets from this account is that Procopius did not take any barbarian political structures too seriously. ‘And as late as the sixth century there were peoples, like the Herules, over whom a king exercised a dominion that was as venerable as it was chaotic and ridiculous in the eyes of the Romans.’\textsuperscript{133} If a people is in need of kings from ‘the very extremity of the world’ it cannot be very evolved or cultivated compared to the Romans. Walter Goffart accurately summarized the complex story and I will cite him again at this point.

What became of the Herules is not easily deciphered from Procopius’s account. Twenty years after baptism, King Grepes and his twelve relatives had vanished, possibly as victims of the great plague of 541–42. The Herules on imperial territory “display[ed] their beastly and fanatical character” by overthrowing their king Ochus and promptly ran out of royalty. They then remembered that there was much royal blood among their brethren who had trekked north early in the century and so sent an embassy to them. While the envoys were on their long mission, the fickle Herules asked Justinian for a king and were

\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{133}} Wolfram, The Roman Empire, p. 69.\end{footnote}
given Suartuas, a reliable man, long in imperial service. The envoys returning from Thule drew near with their candidate ruler, Datus, accompanied by his brother, Aordus, and two hundred youths. The new Herule king ordered his people to go to meet the challenger and eliminate him, but they promptly defected, and Suartuas tied back to Constantinople. 

"Thereupon the emperor earnestly undertook with all his power to restore [Suartuas] to his office, and the Eruli, fearing the power of the Romans, decided to submit themselves to the Gepaedes." So Procopius closes his narrative, leaving us with open mouths: does the story of the Herules really end so abruptly? There is a follow-up in the next book. Apparently the Herules split apart; only two-thirds went to join the Gepids, and the rest stayed loyal to Constantinople. While King Datus's brother Aordus was serving with the Gepids against the Lombards (547), he came upon a Roman detachment and was killed in the ensuing skirmish. Later than this, Narses must have performed some magic of Herule relations and somehow extracted a mounted force of three thousand for the climactic Italian campaign (551–52). The next we hear is that Justinian was negotiating with the Avars, newly arrived on the Roman Danubian frontier (ca. 561): he offered them the lands that the Herules had vacated. The Herules, it seems, had indeed gone away.134

The Herul captain Sinduald fought with Narses in Justinian’s Italian war and was evidently one of the magistri militum serving under Narses. In 566, after the emperor Justinian had died, an insurgency of Herul soldiers in Northern Italy (the Trentino) is reported. Sinduald was proclaimed king by them, only to be defeated and executed shortly afterwards by Narses.135 However, after the mid-sixth century,
there is no mention of the Herules in any source. They apparently lost their identity as a separate *gens*, much like the Vandals after 533.

**Myths and Final Considerations**

Few are the issues of late antique history that stirred and still stir more interest among scholars, as well as within the general public, than that of the origin of the barbarians. To write the history of the barbarians without approaching the question of their origin and migration back and forth is hardly acceptable. The much-cited *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has the Herules as ‘a Germanic people originally from Scandinavia’, thus reproducing Jordanes’s and Procopius’s migration myths, which have otherwise seeped through the boundaries of modern scholarship. Scandinavia (*Scandza*) as the womb of nations (‘officina gentium aut certe velut vagina nationum’) is a very powerful image, whose appeal, as Walter Goffart recently noted, has not at all been eroded by decades of scholarly criticism.

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136 This is particularly true for the numerous websites dedicated to the problem that mushroomed in recent years. They all offer a bizarre mixture of scholarly opinion and non-academic penchant for sensationalism. All seem preoccupied with linking the Herules to the ancestry of some modern Scandinavian nation. See ‘Heruli the History 268–568 AD’, <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~catshaman/24erils4/0horse2.htm> [accessed 1 April 2007]; ‘The Heruls’, <http://www.gedevase.n.de/heruleng.html#C7> [accessed 1 April 2007]; ‘New Northvegr Center’, <http://www.northvegr.org/secondary%20sources/germanic%20studies/guthones/001.html> [accessed 1 April 2007].


When Konrad Peutinger first edited and published Jordanes’s *Getica* in 1515, his volume also contained Paul the Deacon’s *History of the Lombards*. Together with Tacitus’s *Germania*, first published in a modern edition in Venice in 1470, those texts represent the starting point for the study of the ‘Germanic’ past as a source of inspiration for modern national identity and as a justification for territorial claims and war. Felix Dahn (1834–1912) may have borrowed from Procopius the story of the Herul trek back ‘home’ to Thule and applied it to the Goths for his novel *A Struggle for Rome* in which a Viking jarl named Harald (*der Wiking*) arrives with a fleet of Viking drakkars (*Drachenboote*) to bring back to Scandinavia the remnants of the Gothic troops defeated by Justinian’s armies around Naples. Together with them, he also returned to the northern homeland the body of the great Theoderic and the royal treasure. Dahn even strove to create the impression of an authentic Germanic *Stabreim*: ‘Go on Freia’s wise bird, fly, my falcon. And she threw the falcon in the air. “Show us the way to the north, to Thule!” Let’s bring home the last of the Goths.’ At a time and within a generation mesmerized by Richard Wagner’s music and obsessed with the reconstruction of a heroic Germanic past as a warranty for the present glory, Dahn’s literary endeavours resonated with the political aspirations of the young German nation. But Dahn’s novel is a constant reminder of the problems involved in the invention of a national identity out of sources several times removed, in terms of both time and space, from the real historical roots of the nineteenth-century German nation. This is, after all, still a challenge for contemporary scholarship.

Ever since the early sixteenth century, the idea of a Herul migration from the north into Europe and the Black Sea region was enthusiastically embraced by many scholars and never seriously doubted. At the root of this myth is Jordanes’s account of how the Dani, who traced their origin to the same stock as the Suetidi he mentioned before, had driven the Herules from their homes, even though the Herules

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had laid claim to pre-eminence among all the nations of Scandza for their tallness.\textsuperscript{142}

A tradition described at length by Walter Goffart associated the Gothic origin with Britain. This points out the likelihood that Procopius’s association of the Herules with Thule was something like the manifestation of a third myth of ‘Gothic’ origins. According to Goffart, Procopius used the account of the Herules wandering back to Thule, at the end of the world, in order to make a point about how the Goths should be treated after their expected defeat in Italy. The most likely source for this idea would have been Procopius’s own interpretation of circulating Gothic (oral) traditions.\textsuperscript{143} Recently Goffart added a remark concerning the story of a Herul migration to Thule: ‘Intriguing though these and related questions are, they are more relevant to Procopius than to the Herules. Our information on the latter has enough substance to provide at least the whisper of a history.’\textsuperscript{144} This is so far the most likely interpretation of Procopius’s account of a Herul migration to Thule. According to Andrew Merrills, the idea of Goths originating in a large island of the Far North is an outgrowth of ancient geographical literature. The sole purpose of this idea was to find a place for the barbarians within the world as known to educated Romans. In other words, instead of a genuinely Gothic tradition, this idea is a by-product of Graeco-Roman ethnography.

Similarly, Merrills argues, ‘it seems unlikely that the historic conflict between Dani and Herules would have been included in an oral mercantile source’.\textsuperscript{145} One needs to take into consideration the tradition of the ethnographic literature written in both Greek and Latin when approaching Jordanes’s account. Procopius and Jordanes certainly assumed a Scandinavian origin of the Herules, but this is nothing more or less than the story about Goths originating in the Far North: an explanatory device introduced by Roman ethnographers, not a genuinely ‘native’ tale of origins. (Further parallels, postulated quite often for example in religious —


so called cultic — structures, between the history of Paul the Deacon and northern sagas and Middle High German epic poems may thus be explained in terms of the diffusion of manuscripts containing the History of the Lombards and, by default, the dissemination of Paul the Deacon’s work in medieval Central and Northern Europe. Writers and scholars working in Scandinavia or Iceland during the High Middle Ages like Snorri Sturluson were able to use manuscripts like we do.) Attempts by several German and Scandinavian scholars to tie the Heruls known from late antique sources to Sweden are therefore futile.

There is nothing historically true about the story of a Herul wandering from, as well as returning to, a northern homeland. Equally problematic are attempts to present the Herules as a loose group of warriors, instead of a people, a gens. Some concluding remarks regarding such arguments are therefore needed at this point. According to Procopius, Herul warriors use neither helmet nor corselet nor any other protective armor, only a shield. He also mentions that Herul slaves go into battle without any shield at all. Upon proving themselves in combat, their masters allow them to carry shields in battles to come. This account has been taken as evidence for ‘Germanic’ initiation rites and brotherhoods of warriors. In fact, denying the Herules the status of a gens implies turning them into a military brotherhood. This is exactly what Otto Höfler proposed in his work on Germanic secret societies. Moreover, Männerbünde and brotherhoods of warriors (Kriegervereinigungen) immediately invite comparison with the Vikings. At a closer examination, the only basis for such a line of reasoning appears to be etymological speculations about the name of the Herules and the rather loose use of sixth-century sources. The fact that the Herules had a reputation for good fighting is of course no indication of military brotherhoods. The Herules were a gens like any other, such as Goths or Vandals, different only on account of their smaller size.

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147 Procopius, Wars, 2.27–28.

Nevertheless, the idea that the Herules were an association of warriors, not a gens, seems to be responsible for the peculiar position accorded to them in scholarship. It is striking that exactly in books defining ‘Germanic’ ethnicity as very severe, the Herules form an exception. But also in recent scholarship, such explanations were reused when they seemed to fit in new concepts. Beginning with their very name, allegedly meaning ‘hero’ or ‘noble warrior’ (on the basis of a contested comparison with such words as erul, eorl, or jarl, translated as ‘hero’ or ‘noble warrior’), scholars have assumed that the Herules were initially groups of ‘special’ warriors known for their bravery or for particular military skills. According to Ellegård they may have been groups of warriors following a certain model rather than belonging to a well-defined people. As such, they appeared in different parts of Europe, but they eventually got together and formed both a people and a regnum on the river Morava.\textsuperscript{149} This means telling the story of a gens while at the same time treating the Herules as a special case. One gets the impression that earlier scholarly debates subconsciously influenced Ellegård and thus resulted in a tautology.

It is of course far from clear exactly what Procopius had in mind when writing about Herul ‘slaves’. But he surely provided plenty of evidence that any gens was open to newcomers. As in any other human community, both in the past and in the present, such newcomers had to prove themselves worthy before receiving full membership in that community. This must have been even truer for a community geared towards warfare. In other words, what Procopius has to say about Herul slaves earning their shields is perhaps no more than his (admittedly confused) description of a practice of accommodating new warriors within the already existing gens. An initiation rite, perhaps, but certainly not for admission into a military brotherhood. The Herules, therefore, were no different from other gentes. It is striking that tokens of gentes were and are used in the Herul case to define a special case in the rich field of identities in Late Antiquity. The discussion concerning the criteria of ethnic identity in Late Antiquity is ongoing, one of the most vivid in the field. Nothing justifies the neglect and at times distortion with which the Herules are currently treated in modern scholarship.