

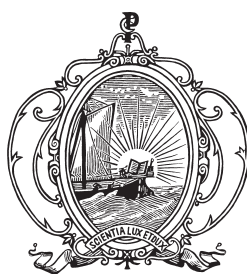
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# John Chrysostom's Gothic Parish and the Politics of Space

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last century, scholars have remained divided over the motivation behind John Chrysostom's establishment of a Gothic parish in Constantinople. Moreover, there has been some confusion over the extent of his control over the parish because of a brief remark made by Synesius. The earlier historiography asserted the orthodoxy of the parish and, as a result, dismissed Theodoret's claim that the bishop sought to win over the remaining Arian Goths. In the recent decades, Theodoret's account has been taken more seriously, even to the point of arguing that all of the Goths in Constantinople were Arian. This paper will argue that the solution – a two-pronged strategy of providing pastoral care for the Nicene Goths and converting the Arian Goths – can be found within Chrysostom's underappreciated *Homilia habita postquam presbyter Gothus* (PG 63, 499-510). It will also argue that, in addition to the strong possibility that Chrysostom utilized Nicene Gothic clergy to control the Gothic parish, Theodoret's account can be useful in discerning another means of controlling it. The mention of the bishop's frequent visits not only depicts his enthusiasm for the mission, but also can be interpreted as a means for continually exerting his personal charismatic authority. Yet, even with the force of his presence and loyal clergy, the combination of the accusation of an Arian takeover by Synesius and the strong rebuttal by Chrysostom's apologists suggests that the parish was contested, at least at some point. Therefore, since it is unlikely that Chrysostom actually made a compromise with Gaiinas, this essay will also propose two scenarios that might explain why Synesius' claim could have gained enough traction to warrant the refutation.

In the late fourth-century, John Chrysostom stood out among his fellow Nicene bishops for his sense of pastoral responsibility for the Gothic community in his city as well as beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. In particular, he is noted for assigning a church in Constantinople to the Goths, furnishing it with Gothic-speaking clergy, and preaching there occasionally with the assistance of a translator.<sup>1</sup> A contemporary, however, has problematized this depiction of orthodox activity. Synesius of Cyrene indicated that the parish was actually utilized by the Arian faction of the Gothic community.<sup>2</sup> This raises two fundamental questions.

<sup>1</sup> Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* V 30-3 (*Kirchengeschichte*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Léon Parmentier and Felix Scheidweiler, GCS 44 [Berlin, 1954], 330-3).

<sup>2</sup> Synesius, *De prov.* 114D, 121A-B (*Synesii Cyrenensis opuscula*, ed. N. Terzaghi [Rome, 1944], 63-131).

What exactly was going on in this parish? And who controlled it? Progress in sufficiently answering these questions over the past century has been slow and, more recently, it has taken a turn in the wrong direction.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the aim of this essay is to revisit these crucial issues and provide new solutions that advance our understanding of Chrysostom's contested Gothic parish. First, the Gothic liturgy was employed by Chrysostom to provide pastoral care for the Nicene Goths *as well as* to win over the Arian Goths in the city. Second, the Gothic parish was, for the most part, likely controlled through a combination of Chrysostom's personal charismatic authority and his Nicene Gothic clergy. And yet, even if Synesius' claim of an Arian takeover is judged to be an embellishment by a barbarophobe, there are several possible scenarios that might have tested the strength of Chrysostom's control over the parish and, in so doing, made the accusation appear credible enough to warrant the strong rebuttals offered by Chrysostom's defenders.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Chrysostom scholars seemed to be certain that this church was a Catholic parish for Catholic Goths based upon, as Pierre Batiffol put it, the fact that Chrysostom was preaching to them.<sup>4</sup> This assumption led both Chrysostomus Baur and Alexander Vasiliev to deem Theodoret to be mistaken in his claim that Chrysostom was concerned with converting the Arian Goths.<sup>5</sup> Midway through the century, E.A. Thompson reasserted Theodoret's account of the mission.<sup>6</sup> Since then most Chrysostom scholars have described the Gothic mission in similar terms.<sup>7</sup> The exception is the recent and unsubstantiated claim by Stanislav Doležal that all of the Goths in Constantinople were Arian and that Chrysostom sought not to convert them, but instead 'considered them to be a part of Christendom' and 'he simply looked after all of them.'<sup>8</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to presume that the former strategy of providing pastoral care for the Nicene Goths and the later plan for using a Gothic liturgy to win over Arian Goths are mutually exclusive. This is evident because both of these agendas are found within Chrysostom's homily to the Goths.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See below.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Batiffol, 'De quelques homélies de s. Jean Chrysostome et de la version gothique des écritures', *RB* 8 (1899), 566-72, 568.

<sup>5</sup> Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time* (Westminster, MD, 1959-1960), III 81; Alexander Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea*, Monographs of the Mediaeval Academy of America 11 (Cambridge, MA, 1936), 33.

<sup>6</sup> E.A. Thompson, *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila* (Oxford, 1966), 133.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops: Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom* (Oxford, 1990), 169; J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, 1995), 143; Knut Schäferdiek, 'Johannes Chrysostomos und die ulfilanische Kirchensprache', *ZKG* 117 (2006), 289-96, 289.

<sup>8</sup> Stanislav Doležal, 'Joannes Chrysostomos and the Goths', *Graecolatina Pragensia* 21 (2006), 165-85, 171-4.

<sup>9</sup> *Homilia habita postquam presbyter Gothus* (PG 63, 499-510).

On the one hand, the bishop generally praised their barbarian faith and defended their participation in the Nicene church. But, on the other hand, he included at least one anti-Arian remark and emphasized the importance of *συγκατάβασις*, or divine adaptability, which likely justifies his own use of a Gothic liturgy to convert the remaining Arian Goths in the city. Such a two-pronged pastoral strategy also makes sense in light of the demographics of the Goths living in Constantinople during Chrysostom's episcopate. As I have argued elsewhere, the evidence suggests that it was a sizeable population that consisted of a mix of Arian and Nicene Goths from the Danubian region as well as Nicene Goths from the Crimea.<sup>10</sup> The appeal, of course, for the Arian Goths would have been the convenience of worshipping in their own language within the walls of the city. And for many, this would have probably trumped their preference for a different doxology.<sup>11</sup> It certainly did for the Arian Ardaburs, who demonstrated a similar willingness to attend a Nicene Gothic liturgy in Constantinople just several decades later.<sup>12</sup> Even Chrysostom's decision to assign the Gothic liturgy to St Paul's Church may very well illustrate this two-pronged strategy. In light of his keen sense of symbolism associated with places, this choice not only provided space for his Nicene Goths to worship, but it also conceivably conveyed his hope that the Gothic liturgy might be able to rescue its Arian attendees just as the Nicene relics of St Paul the Confessor reclaimed that very building from its Arian foundations.

When Chrysostom arrived in Constantinople, he brought with him a wealth of experience in defining and controlling sacred space during his time in Antioch. But while his former city had prepared him to deal with competing Christian factions as well as the continuing attraction of its pagan institutions and a vibrant Judaism, the imperial city offered the new challenge of how to provide care for its sizeable and ethnically distinct Gothic population. Factors such as the utilization of a foreign language and the deliberate aim of winning over the heretical Goths must have increased the normal risks involved with the supervision of a church in late antique Constantinople. For example, if his plan succeeded and Arian Goths turned up in significant strength, what was the possibility that he might lose control of the parish? What could be done to prevent this from happening? Here, Theodoret provides a vital, but underappreciated clue. In light of what Wendy Mayer has convincingly demonstrated about Chrysostom's use of the medium of preaching to establish his personal charismatic authority as well as to reassert his power in the event that his audience's loyalty

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Stanfill, 'Baiting the Hook: John Chrysostom's Defense of His Barbarian Mission', paper given at the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Byzantine Studies Conference, University of Pennsylvania, October 2010.

<sup>11</sup> On the negligible difference of Gothic liturgies, see K. Schäferdiek, 'Johannes Chrysostomos' (2006), 290-1.

<sup>12</sup> Rochelle Snee, 'Gregory Nazianzen's Anastasia Church: Arianism, the Goths, and Hagiography', *DOP* 52 (1998), 157-86, 180.

has waned, Theodoret's description of Chrysostom's frequent preaching to the Goths and his use of other, presumably loyal, preachers in his absence not only conveys his enthusiasm for the endeavor, but the tremendous lengths that he took to maintain his control over this parish.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, since Chrysostom could not be present at all times, it seems reasonable that he would have also depended on his Gothic clergy to enforce Nicene control of the parish. The source of these Gothic priests, deacons, and readers remains unknown, but it is certainly possible that they were a mixture of Nicene Goths who migrated to the city from the Danubian and Crimean regions and former Arian Goths who had converted. An even likelier source is the Gothic monastic community living on the former estate of Promotus and his widow Marsa. That these monks were Nicene is evidenced by their loyalty to Chrysostom during his exile, their involvement in the ecclesiastical affairs of the Nicene Goths in the Crimea, and their association with Marsa.<sup>14</sup> In either case, it seems as though Chrysostom would not have struggled to find loyal Goths that were capable of safeguarding this parish.

Nevertheless, when the Church of the Goths was burned during the Gaïnas crisis of 400, Synesius justified its destruction by emphasizing the 'Scythianizing beliefs' of the Goths worshipping there.<sup>15</sup> Even though many Chrysostom scholars have dismissed this accusation, it seems that his defenders, especially Pseudo-Martyrius, Theodoret, and Sozomen, considered it necessary to rebut the claim by overemphasizing the bishop's refusal to concede a church for Arian worship to the Gothic general Gaïnas. Of course, it is possible that Chrysostom actually agreed to some sort of compromise with the Emperor Arcadius and Gaïnas, and his apologists are merely trying to cover it up.<sup>16</sup> But it seems unlikely that such a strong-willed and stubborn bishop would have made such a concession. There are, however, at least two other scenarios that might explain how, at some point, Chrysostom's control of the Gothic parish might have been challenged in such a way so as to enable Synesius' accusation to gain credibility and, as a result, warrant such a defense. First of all, it could have been a similar situation to that faced by Gregory Nazianzen in July 380, when some Egyptian clerics temporarily took over the Anastasia chapel and consecrated Maximus as their new bishop.<sup>17</sup> Such an event, even if it were short-lived, would have likely been a public relations disaster for Chrysostom and his Gothic mission. Secondly, it is also feasible that the Arian Gothic community in Constantinople supported one or more private house churches.

<sup>13</sup> Wendy Mayer, 'At Constantinople, How Often Did John Chrysostom Preach? Addressing Assumptions about the Workload of a Bishop', *SacEr* 40 (2001), 83-105, 102-3.

<sup>14</sup> See *Epist.* 14 (= *Ad Olymp. Epist.* 9.5, SC 13bis); *Epist.* 206-7 (PG 52, 726).

<sup>15</sup> See above.

<sup>16</sup> J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose and John Chrysostom: Clerics between Desert and Empire* (Oxford, 2011), 230-1.

<sup>17</sup> J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops* (1995), 159.

Even though these would have been outside of Chrysostom's control, his detractors could have drawn attention to them and his inability to suppress them in order to tarnish his own Gothic parish.<sup>18</sup>

What ultimately became of Chrysostom's Gothic parish, unfortunately, remains shrouded in speculation. It is unlikely that they were ever able to meet in St Paul's Church after its destruction during the Gainas' affair, but there is no further evidence of where they might have subsequently worshipped.<sup>19</sup> His correspondence from exile indicates that his concern for his Gothic mission persisted until the end of his own life, but we do not know when the Gothic liturgy was eventually suspended in Constantinople. The parish simply appears to vanish from the historical record. Nevertheless, with this preliminary foundation of what Chrysostom's Gothic parish looked like, we may begin to break new ground on our understanding of the intersection of ethnicity, religious identity, and pastoral care in the late fourth century.

<sup>18</sup> On private house churches in Constantinople, see Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2008), 103-24.

<sup>19</sup> Wendy Mayer, 'Les homélies de s. Jean Chrysostome en juillet 399: A Second Look at Pargoire's Sequence and the Chronology of the *Novae homiliae* (CPG 4441)', *ByzSlav* 60 (1999), 273-303, 297, notes the reconstruction of fire-damaged church buildings in fourth-century Constantinople required approximately ten years.