CHAPTER 2

The Gothic Histories of Jordanes and Isidore

The De origine actibusque Getarum of Jordanes, written in the middle of the sixth century, is the first extant self-conscious history devoted to a barbarian people, and thus the first object of study in the present monograph. The second such text, the Historia Gothorum of Isidore of Seville, is similarly devoted to the history of the Goths, but arises out of a completely different context. This chapter thus not only examines the first two extant barbarian ‘national’ histories, but also demonstrates that already in these first two texts there were quite contrasting methods of approaching the problems posed by the barbarian past. The first section of this chapter is introductory, providing an overview of the historical background of Gothic history and contacts with Rome; this is followed by detailed readings of the presentation of the barbarian Gothic past in both histories, in each case preceded by introductory sections on the authors and the context of their works; the chapter concludes with a section comparing the methods and purposes of Jordanes and Isidore.

The Goths and Rome: Historical Background

From the mid-third century, the Goths regularly came into conflict with the border legions of Rome. 1 Unfortunately, most sources that refer to Goths in this period are themselves of a later date, and thus not entirely reliable. 2 Little is

2 Third-century sources mentioning Goths: the Canonical Letter of Gregory Thaumaturgus, bishop of Neocaesarea in Pontus in the mid-third century (PG 10: 1020–48; translated in Heather and Matthews, trans. 1991: 5–10; Goths at p. 8); and the fragmentary history of Dexippus (Jacoby, ed. 1926: 452–80; Martin, ed. and trans. 2006), composed c.250–c.280. The existing fragments of Dexippus speak almost always of Scythians (“Σκύθαι”); the one exception is a reference to Scythians who are spoken of as Goths attacking Histria in the reign of Decius (reigned 249–51) (Jacoby, ed. 1926: frag. 22 = Martin, ed. and trans. 2006: frag. 17: “Σκύθαι [...] οἱ λεγόμενοι Γότθοι”). This might indicate that Dexippus distinguishes Goths as a sub-group of Scythians. Dexippus is accepted by Kulikowski as referring to Goths elsewhere where Scythians are mentioned (Kulikowski 2007: 18–19, with reference to [Jacoby] frags 20; 22; 25 [= Martin S7; frags 17; 22]); cf. Christensen (2002): 110–12; 233–34, for scepticism regarding Dexippus. Dexippus is accepted by Kulikowski as referring to Goths elsewhere where Scythians are mentioned (Kulikowski 2007: 18–19, with reference to [Jacoby] frags 20; 22; 25 [= Martin S7; frags 17; 22]); cf. Christensen (2002): 110–12; 233–34, for scepticism regarding Dexippus. Dexippus was one of the principal sources of Zosimus, who, writing c.500, also refers to Scythians in his accounts of the earliest third-century events that are supposedly drawn from Dexippus and...
known about these third-century Goths; nothing is known about their origins, a lack of clarity compounded by the fact that Jordanes’s *Getica*, the principal narrative source for Gothic history, dates from the mid-sixth century, and conflates stories of Goths with narratives that in earlier sources refer to Scythians and Dacians, and also to “Gutones” and “Getae”, who might have nothing to do with the Goths. Reliable contemporary accounts sufficient for a rough narrative history of the Goths only date from the late fourth century; the most important is the history of Ammianus Marcellinus.

thought to refer to Goths (see e.g. Paschoud, ed. and trans. 1971: i,xxiii; i,xxxiv–xxxv; see also Paschoud’s note: 146, n. 49). In one passage, Zosimus explicitly distinguishes between Goths and Scythians (Paschoud, ed. and trans. 1971: i,xlii). However, elsewhere he tells us that Claudius (reigned 268–70) defeated *Scythians* in a battle that, according to three fourth-century sources, was fought against *Goths*, and earned the emperor the title “Gothicus” (Paschoud, ed. and trans. 1971: i,xlii; i,lvii; i,lviii). The fourth-century sources are Eutropius (Santini, ed. 1979: ix,11), Aurelius Victor (Pichlmayr and Gruendel, eds 1966: 34), and the *Historia Augusta* (Hohl, Samberger and Seyfarth, eds 1965–71: Claudius, xii,2). The *Historia Augusta* also refers to wars against Goths under Gordian III (reigned 238–44) (Hohl, Samberger and Seyfarth, eds 1965–71: Gordiani Tres, xxxii,1; xxxiv,v). We see thus that although the Goths do indeed first appear in the historical record in the mid-third century, it is far from clear when Scythians are Goths and not Scythians. (Scythians have, of course, a long prior history in classical writings where they were not thought of as Goths.) Other mentions of Goths before the fourth-century histories just cited are the panegyrics on Constantius Chlorus (*Pan. lat.*: vili,iv,4) and Constantine (*Pan. lat.*: vi,vii,2).
