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Jordanes

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The Complete Works of
JORDANES

(c. 490-c. 560)



Contents

The Translations

The Origin and Deeds of the Goths
Romana

The Original Latin Texts

Iordanis de origine actibusque Getarum
De summa temporum vel origine actibusque gentis Romanorum

The Dual Texts

The Origin and Deeds of the Goths (Latin and English Text)
Romana (Latin and English Text)

The Biographies

Jordanes (1911) by Thomas Hodgkin and Ernest Barker
Jornandes (1913) by Patricius Schlager

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JORDANES OF SCYTHIA



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Complete Works of Jordanes



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The Translations



Constanța, a city in the Northern Dobruja historical region of Romania, and the site of ancient Tomis, the capital of Scythia Minor. Jordanes is believed to have lived in this Roman province, which occupied the lands between the lower Danube and the Black Sea, in the modern-day Dobruja region of Romania and Bulgaria.



Ancient ruins of Tomis

The Origin and Deeds of the Goths



Translated by Charles C. Mierow, 1908

Jordanes (c. 490-c. 560) was a sixth-century Eastern Roman bureaucrat of Gothic descent, who became a historian later in life. He composed two extant works, one on Roman history (*Romana*) and the other on the Goths (*Iordanis de origine actibusque Getarum*; or simply known as *Getica*). The latter, along with Isidore of Seville's *Historia Gothorum*, is one of only two extant works dealing with the early history of this ancient people.

We know little of Jordanes' life. He likely worked in the Eastern Roman Empire in Constantinople or Moesia. Before turning his attention to scholarship, he served as a high-ranking legal secretary (notarius) to a Gothic master of soldiers named Gunthigis. In later years, he converted to Christianity and may have become a bureaucrat-monk or even a bishop, though his exact religious title remains debated among scholars. His works were composed in Late Latin, providing a crucial, albeit complex, insider-outsider perspective on the interactions between the Roman world and the migrating Germanic tribes during the twilight of antiquity.

His two surviving historical works were both completed around 551 AD. *Getica* is by far his most significant contribution to history, serving as the only extant comprehensive narrative from late antiquity detailing the early origins, migrations and kingdoms of the Goths. Jordanes adapted his material from a multi-volume history by the Roman statesman Cassiodorus (c. 485-c. 585), who served in the administration of Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths. Jordanes was asked by a friend to write *Getica* as a summary of Cassiodorus' text, which is now lost. Jordanes was selected for his known interest in history and due to his own Gothic background. He infused his work with his own unique viewpoint, aiming to reconcile Gothic heritage with Roman allegiance. Despite centuries of debate over its historical accuracy and biases, Jordanes' work remains an indispensable primary source for understanding the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the dawn of the early Middle Ages.

The *Getica* opens with a discussion of a large island named Scandza, which faces the mouth of the Vistula river and had been described by the writers Claudius Ptolemy and Pomponius Mela. Jordanes explains that this island is the original home of many different peoples, including the Goths, who have "swarmed like bees" from there. Jordanes commences the history of the Goths with the emigration of a Gothic king named Berig with three ships from Scandza to Gothiscandza in the distant past. According to Jordanes, Herodotus' Getian demi-god Zalmoxis becomes a king of the Goths. We learn how the Goths sacked Troy just after they had recovered from the war with Agamemnon. The Goths are also said to have encountered the Egyptian pharaoh Vesosis. The less-fictional part of Jordanes' work begins when the Goths encounter Roman military forces in the third century AD. The work concludes with the defeat of the Goths by the Byzantine general Belisarius, which was recent in the time of Jordanes. The author explains that he writes to honour those that were victorious over the Goths after a history of 2,030 years.

Since Cassiodorus' source text has not survived, Jordanes' text remains one of the most important sources for the period of the migration of the European tribes, especially concerning the Ostrogoths and Visigoths from the third century onwards.

He mentions that his work, perhaps via Cassiodorus, also draws upon Gothic “folk songs” (*carmina prisca*) as an important source, and an unknown Gothic chronicler.

Like many other later classical and early medieval historians, Jordanes equated the earlier Getae to the later Goths. He specified that he did this on the testimony of Orosius Paulus. In a passage that has become controversial, he identifies the Venedi, a people mentioned by Tacitus, Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy, with the Slavs of the sixth century. Since 1844, this passage has been used by scholars in eastern Europe to support the idea that there was a distinct Slavic ethnicity long before the last phase of the Late Roman period. Others have rejected this view due to the absence of concrete archaeological and historiographical data.

A manuscript of the text was rediscovered in Vienna in 1442 by the Italian humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini. The *editio princeps* was issued in 1515 by Konrad Peutinger, followed by many other editions. The best surviving manuscript was the Heidelberg manuscript, written in Heidelberg, Germany, probably in the eighth century, but this was destroyed in a fire at Mommsen’s house in 1880. Subsequently, another eighth-century manuscript was discovered, containing chapters I to XLV, and is now the ‘Codice Basile’ at the Archivio di Stato in Palermo. The first English translation was completed in 1908 by the American academic Charles Christopher Mierow as his Ph.D. dissertation in Princeton University, and it was published as a commercial book in 1915. Mierow’s learned translation appears in this edition of the *Getica*.

Scholars have long debated whether Jordanes was an independent author or merely a derivative scribe that plagiarised. After all, Jordanes famously claims in his preface that he only had access to Cassiodorus’ 12-volume *Gothic History* for three days and had to write his abridgment primarily from memory. In spite of this claim, the text contains lengthy, highly detailed and seemingly verbatim passages from Cassiodorus. This has led many to suspect his ‘three-day’ story was a deceptive excuse to mask a total lack of originality, or that he simply copied a later, revised edition of Cassiodorus’ text. Jordanes has also been heavily criticised for inventing or distorting early Gothic history to give the tribes a more prestigious past. Modern historians, such as Arne Søby Christensen, argue that the 17-generation genealogy of the Gothic Amal dynasty, as well as a supposed ancient Gothic war against Egypt, were completely fabricated. These, Christensen suggests, were designed as senatorial propaganda to make the Gothic rulers appear as noble and ancient as Roman elites. Certainly, the authenticity of Jordanes’ narrative is compromised by shifting political agendas. Writing in Constantinople under Emperor Justinian, Jordanes’ work is viewed by some as imperial propaganda. Historians argue he heavily censored and manipulated Cassiodorus’ original material to fit a specific sixth-century political narrative—either to advocate for a peaceful reconciliation between Romans and Goths, or to justify the Eastern Roman Empire’s subjugation of the Goths.

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century historians frequently dismissed Jordanes as a source of ‘bad quality’ due to his rushed writing style, grammatical variability and frequent factual contradictions. He routinely misattributed historical events, mixed chronology and showed limited intellectual autonomy, leaving modern researchers to untangle his genuine historical facts from his errors.

In spite of these criticisms, Jordanes remains a major figure of the early medieval period, as the *Getica* is the only surviving contemporary narrative detailing the early origins, migrations and history of the Gothic people. Writing from the unique perspective of a Roman bureaucrat of Gothic descent, his writings provide an invaluable look into the Germanic tribes and the Huns during the turbulent Migration

Period. Jordanes' significance, moreover, is magnified by the fact that he preserved extensive summaries of crucial, otherwise lost historical texts. Though modern scholars debate the historical accuracy of his origin myths and ethnographic confections, his two extant works — the *Getica* and the universal chronicle the *Romana* — remain foundational resources for understanding the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the shifting politics of Justinian's era.



Cassiodorus, as depicted in the 'Gesta Theodorici': Leiden, University Library, 1177



Sixth century half-silver coin depicting Theodoric the Great, King of the Ostrogoths (471-526). As ruler of the combined Gothic realms, Theodoric controlled an empire stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Adriatic Sea.

CONTENTS

NOTE

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

JORDANES' PREFACE

I

II

III

IV

V

VI

VII

VIII

IX

X

XI

XII

XIII

XIV

XV

XVI

XVII

XVIII

XIX

XX

XXI

XXII

XXIII

XXIV

XXV

XXVI

XXVII

XXVIII

XXIX

XXX

XXXI

XXXII

XXXIII

XXXIV

XXXV

XXXVI

XXXVII

XXXVIII

XXXIX

XL

XLI

XLII

XLIII

XLIV

XLV
XLVI
XLVII
XLVIII
XLIX
L
LI
LII
LIII
LIV
LV
LVI
LVII
LVIII
LIX
LX
CONCLUSION



The Mediterranean area in c. 550 AD, when Jordanes wrote his 'Getica'. The Eastern Roman Empire is shown in pink, while Justinian's conquests are shown in green.



'Athanasius and Valens on the Danube' by Eduard Bendemann, 1860 — a nineteenth century depiction of Goths

NOTE



FOR THE FIRST time the story of the Goths recorded in the *Getica* of Jordanes, a Christian Goth who wrote his account in the year 551, probably in Constantinople, is now put in English form, as part of an edition of the *Getica* prepared by Mr. Mierow. Those who care for the romance of history will be charmed by this great tale of a lost cause and will not find the simple-hearted exaggerations of the eulogist of the Gothic race misleading. He pictured what he believed or wanted to believe, and his employment of fable and legend, as well as the naïve exhibition of his loyal prejudices, merely heightens the interest of his story. Those who want coldly scientific narrative should avoid reading Jordanes, but should likewise remember the truthful words of Delbrück: “Legende und Poesie malen darum noch nicht falsch, weil sie mit anderen Farben malen als die Historie. Sie reden nur eine andere Sprache, und es handelt sich darum, aus dieser richtig ins Historische zu übersetzen.”

ANDREW F. WEST.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE



THE FOLLOWING VERSION of the *Getica* of Jordanes is based upon the text of Mommsen, as found in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi* (Berlin 1882). I have adhered closely to his spelling of proper names, especially the Gothic names, except in the case of a very few words which are in common use in another form (such as *Gaiseric* and *Belisarius*).

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Dean Andrew F. West of the Princeton Graduate School for his unfailing interest in my work. It was in one of his graduate courses that the translation was begun, three years ago, and at his suggestion that I undertook the composition of the thesis in its present form. He has read the entire treatise in the manuscript, and has been my constant adviser and critic. Thanks are also due to Dr. Charles G. Osgood of the English Department of Princeton University for reading the translation.

CHARLES C. MIEROW.

Classical Seminary,
Princeton University,
July 1908.



End of Sample