Millersville University

The Kings of the Visigoths:
Developments in Kingship and Government Between the Fourth and Seventh Centuries

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
The University Honors College and the Department of History
In Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the University and Departmental Honors Baccalaureate

By
Benjamin J. Perlis

Millersville University
February 2022

This is a placeholder page and not part of the original document submitted for approval.

The original page of this document containing the signatures of the parties involved has been extracted to protect their privacy.

Please contact the

Millersville University Archives & Special Collections

with any questions.

Placeholder version 1.0

The Kings of the Visigoths:
Developments in Kingship and Government Between the Fourth and Seventh Centuries

Benjamin J. Perlis

Department of History

A group largely Germanic in origin, the Visigoths played a major role in the history of the Late Roman Empire and the Early Middle Ages. What follows is an examination of Visigothic history from the fourth century CE through the seventh century. The research was focused on sources from the sixth and seventh centuries, primarily the narrative and legal texts written in the Visigothic kingdom. The findings of the research concern how Visigothic kingship and government changed over time. The first section discusses the shift from early Gothic groups to the Visigoths, and the shift from leaders to kings. The second and final section concerns the Romanization and institutionalization of kingship in the post-Roman kingdom of Visigothic Spain.

The Visigoths are remembered primarily for the infamous "sack" of Rome in 410 CE. The full story of the Visigoths, however, is not well-known. They were a subset of the group known as the Goths, and they played a significant role in the events of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.[1] The subject of this paper is the institution of kingship among the Visigoths and how it changed over time.

A brief overview of Gothic history will ground the reader in the broader context for the arguments of this paper. The term "Goths" first appeared in the second century CE in reference to a Germanic group living in Eastern Europe.[2] Gradually, these Goths traveled southeast and they came to settle in a region to the north of the Black Sea. In the following centuries, they had a complex relationship with their neighbor, the Eastern Roman Empire. At times the Goths raided and fought against the empire, and at other times, they served the Romans as a mercenary army.[3]

In the late fourth century, the Goths faced invasion by the Huns, a people from the Central Asian steppes. Many Goths were subjugated by the Huns, but many others managed to escape by relocating to the Eastern Roman Empire in 376 CE. The Goths who had fled onto Roman territory eventually merged into a single unit known to historians as the "Visigoths," or

---

[1] Terms like "Goths" and "Visigoths" are used for the sake of convenience, but the subject of ethnicity is complicated. The traditional interpretation was that the Goths (and each of the other "Germanic tribes") were a distinct ethnic and cultural group that remained stable in composition across the centuries. Recent scholarship, however, indicates that the Germanic peoples were polyethnic groups that could be fluid in composition. For example, at each stage of the Goths' movements across Europe, they absorbed new people of other ethnic groups while many Goths broke off and remained behind. So, ethnically, the Goths had a dominant Germanic element, yet they also absorbed other Germanic peoples, as well as Slavs, Sarmatians, Romans, etc., along the way. For more details, see the following sources:
Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. Thomas J. Dunlap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 6-8;
Roger Collins, *Visigothic Spain: 409-711* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 15-16 and 24;
Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), pp. 45-6.

[2] Wolfram, p. 367.

[3] Jordanes, *Getica: The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, trans. Charles C. Mierow (Delaware: Fyrnlore Bookmearsing, 2020), XVI.89.10-14 and XXI.111.1-4.

"West Goths." Here, over the next few decades, they continued to fight for the Romans as allies. This period was also marked by a number of revolts by the Visigoths, during one of which Valens, the Eastern Roman Emperor, was killed at the Battle of Adrianople. Eventually, the Visigoths marched across the Balkans and into Italy, famously "sacking" Rome in 410 CE.[4]

Finally, the Visigoths moved on to occupy the old Roman provinces of Gaul and Spain, where they developed a powerful kingdom. Visigothic kings ruled in Spain from the fifth century to the early eighth century. Then, in the year 711, the kingdom fell to the invasion of Arabs and Berbers from North Africa.[5]

It is clear that Visigothic kingship and government changed dramatically between the fourth and seventh centuries. This transition is evident in the sources in two overarching ways. First, we will discuss the formation of the Visigoths and their development of a kingship. That is, segments of early Gothic groups merged to become the Visigoths, and then the Visigoths shifted from having several "leaders" to having a single "king." Secondly, we will examine the ways in which Visigothic kingship and government became more Romanized and institutional. The focus of this paper will be on the Visigoths' early integration into the Roman world as well as on the nature of their post-Roman kingdom.

From Goths to Visigoths, Leaders to Kings

The first changes we will discuss are the following: the Visigothic group emerged and then it developed a kingship. In this section we will examine the early history of the Goths, from a few years before 375 CE to the year 415. First, we will see that the ancient Goths were a people divided into at least two subgroups, each of which had its own leader. In this era, we will focus

[4] Jordanes, *Getica* XXIV-XXXI.
[5] Wolfram, pp. 369-371.

on the reigns of Hermanaric and Athanaric. Next, we will examine how invasion by the Huns in 375 caused a portion of the Goths to flee onto Roman territory and form into a new group: the Visigoths. The invasion had disrupted the stability of Visigothic leadership, so, for a time, they had several leaders who ruled simultaneously. Then, Alaric I emerged as the first sole leader of the Visigoths. It was Alaric who led the group in the "sack" of Rome in 410. Lastly, we will discuss how his successor, Athaulph, became the first Visigothic king.

The ancient authors vaguely recognized that early Gothic leadership at some stage developed into kingship.[6] For example, one ancient historian, Jordanes, mentioned that the fourth century Goths had "princes and the leaders who ruled them in place of kings."[7] Isidore, another author, wrote, "Formerly they were led by chieftains for many centuries, and then by kings."[8] For our purposes, all of the leading Goths from before 410 CE will be referred to as "leaders," and those from 410 onward will be labelled "kings." The distinction is that "leaders" were in power when the Visigoths were not unified under a monarch but had several leading men at a given time. Also, the Visigoths had "leaders" when they were frequently on the move, not settled in any one location. Therefore, a "king," on the other hand, will be defined as a monarch over a people that was settled on a particular territory.

We will begin with the era prior to 375 CE, in the time when the ancient Goths lived north of the Black Sea. Jordanes recorded that the early Goths were divided into two major

---

[6] Jordanes and Isidore are the primary ancient historians whose works were consulted for this project. Jordanes was the author of *Getica: The Origins and Deeds of the Goths*. A man of Gothic descent, he wrote the book in Constantinople in the mid-sixth century. Isidore of Seville wrote his *History of the Kings of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi* in the early seventh century. He was the bishop of Seville in the Visigothic kingdom of Spain. Both Jordanes and Isidore provided a sweeping narrative of Gothic history. It must be noted that the two historians were often far removed in time from the events they were describing (by almost two centuries in the example above), and their accounts (especially Isidore's) are rather short. However, despite their inherent flaws, these two works are some of our most complete sources of information on the Goths.
Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 9;
Collins, pp. 162-3.

[7] Jordanes, *Getica* XXVI.134.2-4.

[8] Isidore of Seville, *History of the Kings of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*, trans. Guido Donini and Gordon B. Ford, Jr. (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1966), 2.6-8.

subgroups. He referred to them as the "Visigoths" and the "Ostrogoths." Jordanes provided little information on the subgroups except that they may have merged at some point, and that before 375, they split once more "because of some dispute."[9] The sources did not specify, but it seems possible that Gothic society was comprised of numerous such subgroups and that these "Visigoths" and "Ostrogoths" were merely the two most prominent among them. However, as will be discussed below, Jordanes applied these names anachronistically since it is unlikely that the two early groups correspond directly to the later Visigoths and Ostrogoths. So, in this study, the names Jordanes gave to the shadowy, early groups will be put in quotation marks so that they will not be confused with the historically prominent Visigoths and Ostrogoths.

Hermanaric and Athanaric were the earliest Gothic leaders whose reigns are fairly well-documented. In Jordanes' *Getica*, Hermanaric (d. circa 375) emerges as a very prominent and powerful leader.[10] Jordanes indicated that he led the "Ostrogoths," and he implied that Hermanaric may have ruled over the "Visigoths" as well for a length of time.[11] It is fair to assume that Hermanaric led one of the two major subgroups, but it seems unlikely that he governed the entire Gothic population. Jordanes also related that Hermanaric subdued many surrounding non-Gothic peoples, mentioning sixteen conquered groups by name. Hermanaric had even been likened to a Gothic Alexander the Great.[12] However far his rule extended in reality, it is obvious from Hermanaric's career that he was a powerful early leader of the Goths.[13]

---

[9] Jordanes, *Getica* XIV.82, XVII.98 and XXIV.130.
[10] In this study, the dates of the leaders of pre-410 CE are derived from Wolfram's book, and the dates of the kings of Spain are taken from Collins' book.
[11] Jordanes, *Getica* XVII.98 and XXIV.130.
[12] Jordanes, *Getica* XXIII.116-120.
[13] Scholar Herwig Wolfram argues that the extent of Hermanaric's power may have been truly extraordinary. Besides ruling Jordanes' "Ostrogoths," it seems that Hermanaric established to the north "a great barbarian kingdom that held a good many polyethnic communities in a more or less loose state of dependence." Wolfram explains that the purpose of the expansion was likely so the Greuthungi could control the trade of goods like gold, furs, and honey. Wolfram, pp. 86-9.

Athanaric (r. circa 365-375/381) was the other prominent leader of that era. Jordanes wrote that he was a leader of the "Visigoths."[14] Though Jordanes did not specify, it is logical to conclude that Athanaric led one subgroup while Hermanaric led the other: the "Visigoths" and "Ostrogoths" respectively. Isidore, on the other hand, referred to Athanaric as the first ruler of all the Goths, probably exaggerating the extent of his power.[15] Whatever the case, and however many other leaders were in power at that time, it is clear that these two men were the major authorities among the Goths. Isidore also described how, when the Goths were first being introduced to Christianity, Athanaric was infamous for his persecutions of Christian Goths.[16] The remaining details of his reign concern the events of 375 and afterward, so they will be discussed below.

This period was not well-documented and the sources contradict one another in terms of the details of the reigns of these two men. However, since both leaders were associated with events of pre-375 as well as with the Hunnic invasion of 375, they must have ruled simultaneously.[17] Therefore, from all indications, the ancient Goths were divided into at least two subgroups in this era, each with its own leader: Hermanaric ruled the "Ostrogoths" while Athanaric ruled the "Visigoths." Again, it is unclear but probable that additional, lesser Gothic

---

[14] Jordanes, *Getica* XXV-XXVIII.142.4-5.
[15] Isidore, *History of the Kings* 6.1-12.
[16] The earliest encounter of the Goths with Christianity was in the mid-fourth century; an Arian priest named Ulfila translated the Bible into Gothic and began to convert a number of the Goths. Arianism was a splinter group that was considered heretical by the Roman Church since they differed with them regarding the nature of Jesus and God the Father. When some Goths first began to adopt Christianity, their pagan leaders, most notably Athanaric and his subordinates, responded with persecutions to try to stamp out the foreign faith. An ancient author named Sozomen recorded that Athanaric had Christians executed and he also burned down churches. He also wrote that Athanaric had a wooden image taken from home to home, and those who refused to sacrifice to it were burned alive. Isidore added that, seeing how numerous they had become, Athanaric forced Ulfila and a large number of Christian Goths out of his realm and into the Eastern Roman Empire. (See note 40 for the rest of the account: religion among the Visigoths from the late fourth century on.)
Isidore, *History of the Kings*, 6.1-12 and 8.1-24;
Sozomen, "Ecclesiastical History 6.37" in *The Goths in the Fourth Century,* Peter Heather and John Matthews (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), 12-14;
Heather, *The Goths*, pp. 60-1 and 131.
[17] Jordanes, *Getica* XXIII.116-120 and XXIV.130;
Isidore, *History of the Kings*, 6.1-12.

leaders and subgroups existed as well. Presumably, Jordanes' "Ostrogoths" and "Visigoths" were the only two groups mentioned by ancient sources because, as the largest and most influential groups, they were likely the only Goths with whom the Romans had dealings.[18]

Subsequently, the late fourth century was a period of chaos and disruption for Gothic society and leadership. It all began in 375 when the Huns arrived in that region of Europe and conquered the peoples that they encountered. Jordanes reported that Hermanaric was killed, and that his death emboldened the Huns to subdue the "Ostrogoths." The defeat of their fellows prompted the "Visigoths" to flee from the Black Sea region. The "Visigoths" were then permitted by Valens, the Eastern Roman Emperor, to settle in Roman territory in 376 CE.[19] However many Gothic groups had existed prior to this point, this was the event which caused the Gothic community to officially split into two units: the group or groups that arrived on imperial territory and those that remained behind and were controlled by the Huns. They became known to history as the Visigoths and Ostrogoths respectively. The Visigoths will be our focus from here on.[20]

As mentioned above, Jordanes assumed that these two new divisions which formed in the wake of the invasion were identical to the two subgroups that existed prior to the invasion. So, he referred to them by the same names. However, the following scenario seems more likely. The

---

[18] Scholars are in agreement that early Gothic society was comprised of at least two major subgroups. The existence of Jordanes' "Visigoths" and "Ostrogoths" is confirmed in the ancient Roman sources in which the groups were referred to respectively as the Tervingi and Greuthungi. The sources also confirm that the Greuthungi were led by Hermanaric and the Tervingi by Athanaric, and that the two men were contemporaries. Also matching my interpretation, scholar Peter Heather argues for the existence of several additional Gothic subgroups, or small political units, besides the two prominent ones. He estimates that there were probably at least six subgroups in total, each with its own ruler.
Heather, *The Goths*, pp. 56-7 and 130;
Collins, pp. 19-20.

[19] Jordanes, *Getica* XXIV.130 and XXV.131-132.

[20] Here is a brief account of the Ostrogoths within the context of Visigothic history. The Visigoths were comprised of those Gothic groups that had fled onto Roman territory to escape the Huns. In turn, the groups that had remained behind and were under the subjection of the Huns became the Ostrogoths. In the late fifth century, while the Visigoths were ruling in Gaul and Spain, the Ostrogoths went on to conquer Italy. Hence the names of the two groups: the Ostrogoths (or "East Goths") were known as such since they had a kingdom situated to the east of their kinsmen, the Visigoths (or "West goths"). The Ostrogoths ruled Italy for a little over half a century before they were defeated by the Eastern Roman Empire.
Wolfram, pp. 368-71.

attacks by the Huns disrupted Gothic society and leadership, fragmenting the old groups. Then, after the period of chaos, the now geographically divided Goths reformed themselves into two large political units. Finally, centuries after the fact, the terms Visigoths and Ostrogoths came to be applied to these two post-invasion groups.[21]

In this period, political authority began to be shared between several leaders at the same time, and power also changed hands at least once. The arrival of the Huns had evidently disrupted the stability of Gothic leadership. Jordanes indicated that once the Visigoths were becoming settled on Eastern Roman territory, their foremost leaders were three men called Fritigern, Alatheus, and Saphrac. Then, in a later section, Jordanes wrote that Athanaric (who had apparently retained some power despite the chaos of invasion) eventually succeeded Fritigern.[22] Other sources go further by describing a conflict that divided the Visigoths into two warring factions: one led by Athanaric and one by this same Fritigern. Isidore recorded that the conflict took place before the arrival of the Huns and that Athanaric was the victor. Sozomen, on the other hand, claimed that it took place after the move into the Roman Empire and that it was Fritigern who triumphed. Whatever the case, one of the two men was able to push out his rival with the aid of Valens, the Eastern Roman Emperor.[23]

---

[21] It appears that scholars are in agreement that the two early subgroups were not identical to the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, contrary to Jordanes' narrative. For one thing, Roger Collins pointed out that the two subgroups were referred to by a different set of names (Tervingi and Greuthungi) in the ancient Roman sources. More importantly, the two groups do not seem to have remained intact during the Hunnic invasion; rather, fragments of each of the groups likely came to comprise both the Visigoths and Ostrogoths. (See note 24 for more detail.) As for the terms "Visigoths" and "Ostrogoths," Collins indicates that they were never used in contemporary sources from the Gothic kingdoms. Isidore, for example, writing from Visigothic Spain, only ever referred to the Visigoths as "the Goths" throughout his work. Thus, the names were coined well into the era of the Gothic kingdoms, long after the fourth century events described by Jordanes.
Collins, pp. 19-20;
Heather, *The Goths*, p. 130.

[22] Jordanes, *Getica* XXV-XXVIII.

[23] Isidore, *History of the Kings* 7.1-5 and 9.1-7;
Sozomen, "Ecclesiastical History 6.37" in *The Goths in the Fourth Century*, 6.4-7 and 7.1-6.

Despite the conflicting details of the sources, it is clear that there was a period of instability in Gothic society during which several leaders ruled at a given time. Presumably, the arrival of the Huns had provided an opportunity for Fritigern (and possibly Alatheus and Saphrac) to rise to power and challenge the authority of Athanaric. Also, at some point during the crisis, some combination of these four leaders led the group (or groups) of Goths onto Roman territory and ruled them there. It is also possible that the mysterious Alatheus and Saphrac had been leaders of lesser Gothic subgroups which fled alongside Athanaric's large and powerful subgroup. A number of such groups and leaders conceivably came together in the formation of the Visigoths. During this period, political authority among the Visigoths was unstable and was often shared between several leaders.[24]

To return to our story, the Visigoths lived in the Eastern Roman Empire for over two decades, from 376 to 401. Here their main occupation was still to serve the empire as a mercenary army.[25] However, these decades were also marked by a number of Visigothic revolts against the Romans, most famously the one against Emperor Valens in 378. It seems that the Visigoths were motivated to revolt by food shortages and exploitation by the Romans. Jordanes reported that the leaders of the revolt were Fritigern, Alatheus, and Saphrac, and that the Visigoths eventually forced the Romans to sign a truce.[26] In the midst of these events, however, all four Visigothic leaders faded into obscurity. The sources never again mention the three who

[24] Heather suggested the following sequence of events for the years 375 and 376. The Huns attacked both the Greuthungi of Hermanaric (who soon died) and the Tervingi of Athanaric, and the stability of leadership was shaken among both groups. Then, in order to flee the Huns, many of the Greuthungi broke away as a splinter group under the leadership of Alatheus and Saphrac. Likewise, Fritigern and one Alaviula drew a large portion of the Tervingi away from Athanaric (who remained behind and ruled the rest of the Tervingi until his death). Subsequently, the two Gothic splinter groups fled across the Roman border and eventually merged into a single unit: the Visigoths. Heather, *The Goths*, p. 98-100.
[25] Jordanes, *Getica* XXVIII.145.1-6.
[26] Jordanes, *Getica* XXVI-XXVII.

rebelled, and as for Athanaric, he died as the emperor's guest in Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Empire.[27]

The next leader to come to the fore was Alaric I (r. 395-d. 410). In him, the newly formed Visigothic group had its first monarch or single leader. With the period of political instability over, the Visigoths were ruled by a single leader from the time of Alaric on.

Alaric is perhaps the most well-known Visigoth because it was he who conducted the "sack" of Rome. Now to examine the events that led Alaric's Visigoths from the Eastern Roman Empire to the conflict with Italy that began in 401. Jordanes recorded that the Romans were withholding tribute from the Visigoths. So, the disgruntled Visigoths then "appointed Alaric king over them."[28] Both Jordanes and Isidore attributed the conflict to the Visigoths' desire to no longer serve under the Romans. Alaric harnessed their resentment and convinced his men that the Visigoths should set out and establish a kingdom for themselves.[29] He then mobilized his army to march into Italy.[30]

In Italy, Alaric began to negotiate with Honorius, emperor of the Western Roman Empire. Alaric demanded that the Visigoths be permitted to settle and live in the province of Italy or, he said, they would be forced to go to war over the desired territory. However, for one reason or another (Jordanes cites the treachery of the Romans), negotiations broke down and the Visigoths began to besiege and plunder various cities across Italy, including Rome itself.[31]

---

[27] Jordanes, *Getica* XXVIII.142-144;
Isidore, *History of the Kings* 11.1-5.
[28] Jordanes, *Getica* XXIX.146.1-7.
[29] Jordanes, *Getica* XXIX.147.1-5;
Isidore, *History of the Kings* 12.1-7.
[30] Interestingly, Heather noted that while Alaric was planning to advance, a second, unrelated army of Goths had just crossed into Italy from the north. The group was led by a man named Radagaisus. The Romans then defeated these Goths and executed Radagaisus. Then, once Alaric's Visigoths arrived in Italy, they became heavily reinforced as deserters from the Roman armies and a great many slaves joined their ranks. According to Heather, it is likely that most of these deserters and slaves were the Goths who had formerly been led by Radagaisus. So, Radagaisus' men were the third and last large Gothic group that came to comprise the Visigoths.
Heather, *The Goths*, pp. 147-8.
[31] Jordanes, *Getica* XXX.152-155.

Traditionally, the Visigoths' "sack" of Rome was seen as a catastrophic event that contributed to the "demise" of the Western Roman Empire.[32] However, the term "sack" is put in quotations, because according to the ancient sources, the attack was not as brutal or destructive as it has been imagined. Isidore noted that the Visigoths spared many churches and relics in Rome. Also, they refrained from harming the people who had taken refuge in the sacred places.[33] Jordanes confirmed that the holy places were not destroyed, and he added that the Visigoths did not set fire to the city.[34] After the plunder of more Italian cities, the Visigoths planned to sail to Africa and settle there. However, they were deterred by setbacks and Alaric died unexpectedly in Italy.[35]

It is clear that the Visigoths by this stage had become a unified group under a single leader. In the Eastern Roman Empire, Alaric had ruled as their monarch, and the Visigoths' decade-long conflict with the Romans likely served to unify them as well. The sources referred to Alaric as a "king" and scholars often argue that he should be considered the first king of the Visigoths.[36] However, we referred to him only as a "leader" since he did not fit the criteria for a

---

For more detailed accounts of Alaric's Italian campaign, see the following sources:
Heather, *The Goths*, pp. 146-8;
Wolfram, pp. 150-9.

[32] Recent scholarship argues otherwise. For example, scholar Christopher Wickham compared the sack of Rome to the attack of September 11, 2001 on the United States. Both attacks were a terrible shock and a symbolic defeat, but just as 9/11 did not result in the fall of the United States, the Roman Empire was not crippled by the sack of Rome.
Wickham, pp. 79-81.

[33] Isidore, *History of the Kings*, 15.11-17.10.

[34] Jordanes, *Getica*. XXX.156.1-4.

[35] Jordanes, *Getica* XXX.157.

[36] The leading scholars are in agreement that Alaric was the sole leader of the Visigoths. However, while some argue that Alaric should be seen as the first king of the Visigoths, others are ambivalent on the matter. Wolfram argues that Alaric was the first king and that he became so almost as a matter of course. That is, the Visigoths developed centralized leadership out of necessity so that they could remain unified the further they went into Roman territory. Also, because of Alaric's power, he was labelled a king and a usurper by the Romans. So, Wolfram argues that Alaric became a king because that was the type of ruler that the Roman government perceived him to be. Heather, on the other hand, is more ambivalent. He notes that throughout his negotiations with the Western Emperor, one of Alaric's chief demands was that he be permitted to keep his position as a Roman general. So, Heather holds that Alaric may have been more concerned with maintaining his Roman military career than with becoming a king.
Wolfram, pp. 143-6;
Heather, *The Goths*, pp. 139-41.

king as described on page six. Namely, though Alaric was the sole leader of the Visigoths, he did not rule a settled people living on a defined territory. Rather, the Visigoths were still an itinerant mercenary army during his rule.

After Alaric's death, the rule of the Visigoths passed to Athaulph (r. 410-415). Under him, the Visigoths plundered Rome for a second time. At that time Athaulph captured and married Placidia, sister of the Western Roman Emperor and daughter of the Eastern Emperor. The Visigoths then traveled en masse to occupy southwestern Gaul in 412, the final stage in their long journey from Eastern Europe. Here, under Athaulph, they came to establish the Visigothic kingdom.[37]

Athaulph can be considered the first king of the Visigoths. Had Alaric survived and managed to lay claim to territory in Italy or Africa, then he likely would have become the first Visigothic king. However, this title belonged to Athaulph instead since under him, the Visigoths ceased being on the move and they began to settle and build up a sizable kingdom. By our definition, a king is a single ruler over a people that is settled on a particular territory; there can only be a king so long as there is a defined territorial kingdom. Thus, with the Visigothic kingdom established, Athaulph and all of the other post-410 leaders were certainly kings.[38]

As we have seen, Gothic leadership and government underwent a marked change in that the Visigothic group formed and then began to be ruled by kings. We first examined ancient Gothic society which was divided into at least two major subgroups: the "Ostrogoths" of Hermanaric and the "Visigoths" of Athanaric. Next, the Hunnic invasion forced a portion of the

---

[37] Jordanes, *Getica* XXX.157-158 and XXXI.159-163.

[38] In looking for evidence as to whether or not Alaric was the first Visigothic king, the leading scholars tend to cite either Alaric's political and military ambitions or the way in which his reign was perceived by the Roman government (see note 36). However, rather than cite his ambitions or reputation, I argue that Alaric should not be considered a king based on the more concrete criterion of what he achieved or failed to achieve during his rule. Alaric was not a king because, during his lifetime, the Visigoths were not yet settled and the kingdom in Gaul was not yet established. Though opinions vary about Alaric, the fact that Athaulph was a king seems to be undisputed among scholars (see Wolfram, p. 143).

Goths to flee into the Eastern Roman Empire. These Goths became known as the Visigoths, and they were governed by several leaders at once. Then, the Visigoths became unified for the first time under a single leader, Alaric I. Finally, after the "sack" of Rome, Athaulph settled the Visigoths in Gaul, becoming the first in a long line of Visigothic kings.

The full journey from Goths to Visigoths and leaders to kings spanned nearly 40 years and hundreds of miles. It led the Visigoths from one end of Europe to the other: from the Black Sea in 375 to southwestern Gaul in 412. In the process, Visigothic leadership changed dramatically.

Romanized and Institutional Kingship

In the centuries after Athaulph's reign, the Visigothic kingdom expanded and flourished in the old Roman provinces of Gaul and Spain. The focus in this section will be on the Visigothic Kingdom of Spain in the sixth and seventh centuries. During this era, Visigothic kingship and government changed in a second way: namely, they became more Romanized and institutional. The two trends went hand in hand because, as the Visigothic government became modeled on the Roman system, it also became more organized and complex.[39]

We will discuss how the regalia of the Visigothic kings indicates Romanization. Visigothic government also became more Romanized and institutional in that the nobles and officials of the kingdom began to hold a variety of Roman ranks and titles. Another factor of

[39] Wickham agrees that Romanization is a key concept in understanding the nature of Visigothic Spain and the other post-Roman kingdoms. In the fifth century, as various Germanic confederacies (Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, and Ostrogoths) poured into the Western Roman Empire, the empire was divided into a number of separate kingdoms. Many Roman political practices continued in these post-Roman kingdoms. Wickham characterizes this period as the time when "'barbarian' armies occupied Roman provinces, which they ran in Roman ways." Thus, the Early Middle Ages was by no means a complete break from classical antiquity. Significantly, Wickham points out that Visigothic Spain and its kings were perhaps the most Roman in character of the post-Roman world. (See note 43 for a discussion of Roman influence on the dress and appearance of the Visigoths.)
Wickham, pp. 9, 78, and 148-9.

Romanization was that the nobles and officials were not solely of Gothic descent, but many were instead of Hispano-Roman heritage. Lastly, we will see that kingship became more institutional in that there was a proliferation in the amount of written law concerning the kings.[40]

Firstly, the regalia of the Visigothic kings indicates Romanization. The Visigothic Law Code mentioned that kings wore "the diadem and the purple."[41] Isidore confirmed this, saying that the kingdom of Spain was both "rich… in gems and in purple cloth" as well as "opulent in adorning leaders." Isidore related that the kings used a royal insignia as well.[42] Among the Romans, purple robes were a symbol of power and the office of the emperor. So, the presence of such symbols of kingship demonstrates that there came to be a marked Roman influence on Visigothic kingship. The above-mentioned are only passing references in passages praising the kingdom of Spain. However, based on Isidore's comment about the leaders being adorned in purple, it is logical to conclude that the authors were not merely using metaphors for royalty. Rather they were referring to the regalia actually worn by the Visigothic kings.[43]

---

[40] The Visigoths also Romanized in terms of religion, but there is not the space to treat the subject fully. Christianity had become known to the Goths in the time of Athanaric, but Gothic Christians seem to have been a persecuted minority. Then, in 376, when many Goths were fleeing the Huns, Emperor Valens would only allow them to settle in Eastern Roman territory as long as their leaders converted to Christianity. The Visigothic leaders complied, and many other Visigoths may have followed suit. Valens, incidentally, was an Arian Christian just like Ulfila and the early Gothic converts (see note 16). Over the centuries, it seems the Visigoths remained Arian Christians. In their Spanish kingdom, their beliefs set the Visigoths apart from those they governed since the Hispano-Roman population belonged to the Western Roman Church. However, under king Reccared, in the late sixth century, the religious differences were settled, and the Visigothic kingdom officially converted to Western Roman Christianity.
Heather, *The Goths*, pp. 60-1 and 131;
Collins, pp. 64-7.

[41] *The Visigothic Code: (Forum Judicum)*, trans. and ed. S. P. Scott (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1910), I.II.VI.27-33.

[42] Isidore, *History of the Kings* 4.1-11.

[43] On a related note, Collins briefly describes the attire of the Visigoths more generally. Interestingly, he argues that the Visigoths may have become Romanized in this respect rather early in their history since they had long served as a mercenary army for the Eastern Roman Empire. Collins states that due to Roman influence, "there was little to distinguish imperial troops from those recruited from outside the empire, either in terms of their weapons or of their dress and appearance." If true, these facts would dispel the traditional idea of the Visigoths and other such groups as being quintessentially Germanic in character and culture. Rather, it seems they were not always distinct in appearance from the Romans. (See note 1 for a discussion on ethnicity.)
Collins, pp. 19-20.

An example of Visigothic kingship becoming both more institutional and Romanized was that the nobles and officials who governed alongside the king now bore Roman ranks and titles. Since the Visigoths established their kingdom in a former Roman province, they naturally inherited many of the ranks and titles from the pre-existing Hispano-Roman government. For example, the Visigothic Code mentioned princes and bishops as well as the positions of lawmaker/judge, governor, vice-governor, and magistrate.[44] A book of saints' lives (found in *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*) added dukes and counts to the list of ranks.[45] So, the king's nobles and officials were adopting Roman titles; Roman-style offices and hierarchies were being introduced into the Visigothic kingdom. Or perhaps more accurately, the leading Visigoths, the new ruling class of Spain, were integrating themselves into the pre-existing political system. This process began at least by the sixth century since the earliest reference to these ranks and titles dates from that era.

Another aspect of Romanization concerns what the names of Visigothic officials imply about their ethnicity. While some of the officials' names recorded in the sources were Gothic in origin, others were Roman. This indicates that the kings' nobles and officials were not solely of Gothic descent, but many were Hispano-Roman in heritage. For example, the book of saints' lives mentions not only Goths in power, like Count Vildigern and bishop Athaloc,[46] but also many powerful Hispano-Romans like Count Eugene, senators Nepotian and Honorius,[47] and

---

[44] *Visigothic Code*, I.I.VII, II.I.XIII, II.I.XXII, and II.III.I.

[45] This book, *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*, is a collection of five Visigothic texts from seventh century Spain. They are comprised of saints' lives and other religious writings that mainly concern events in sixth century Spain. Despite the hagiographic bias pervading these texts, they contain some useful details about the Visigothic church, as well as about the government and monarchs of the period.
Paul the Deacon, "The Lives of the Fathers of Merida," in *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*, trans. and ed. A. T. Fear (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), 5.10.1,6.
Background information above is derived from p. xxxvii and summary on back cover.

[46] Paul the Deacon, "The Lives of the Fathers of Merida," in *Visigothic Fathers*, 5.12.2.

[47] Braulio of Saragossa, "The Life of St Aemilian the Confessor, Called the Hooded," in *Visigothic Fathers*, XIV.21, XV.22, and XVII.24.

Duke Claudius.[48] These men appear to have governed side by side in the Visigothic kingdom. Thus, the Visigothic kings were surrounded by both Gothic and Hispano-Roman officials. It seems that the most powerful of these men were from the circle of elite Visigothic families, a group that Roger Collins discusses in detail.[49]

Many of the leading Hispano-Romans must have been residents of Spain who remained in positions of authority with the incoming of the Visigoths. Beginning as foreigners and newcomers in that land, the Visigoths appear to have had an excellent strategy for taking control over Spain. The leading Visigoths cooperated with the people already in power, incorporating these Hispano-Romans into the new hierarchy rather than attempting to overthrow them completely.[50] These facts show a certain willingness on the part of the Visigothic kings to Romanize and assimilate themselves.

A final way in which Visigothic kingship grew more Romanized and institutional was in the proliferation of written law in the kingdom. Most of the extant information on their laws is contained in the seventh century Visigothic Code. The majority of the laws therein were attributed to a handful of the kings of that century, mainly Chindasuinth (r. 642-53) and Reccesuinth (r. 649-72).[51] It is fair to assume that the law code was very much influenced by

---

[48] Paul the Deacon, "The Lives of the Fathers of Merida," in *Visigothic Fathers*, 5.10.6-7.

[49] This brings us to a discussion of the most influential nobles of the kingdom: the Visigothic elite. Collins explains that Visigothic politics was dominated by this small group of elite Gothic aristocrats, and that they had strong ties to the royal court. Kingship in Visigothic Spain was actually an elected office. In fact, most Visigothic kings were members of this elite group, and the elections were also run exclusively by the group as well. The elite families worked to ensure that no one family predominated for too long over the others. The result was that Visigothic royal dynasties were always short-lived; dynasties rarely exceeded two generations throughout the history of the kingdom. Collins, pp. 113-15 and pp. 45-6.

[50] According to Collins, the Visigoths who settled in Gaul and Spain likely numbered between 20-30,000 at most. They were certainly a minority among their one million or so Hispano-Roman subjects. Though Visigothic families had become an elite part of the aristocracy, the regional nobility of Spain was still predominantly Hispano-Roman. These facts give credence to my theory: given they were few in number and could not be the sole overlords of such a vast territory, it makes sense that the Visigoths would have let many Hispano-Romans remain in power. Collins, pp. 25, 44, and 241.

[51] The *Visigothic Code*, also called the *Liber Iudiciorum*, is a collection of laws that dates from the seventh century. It is a hefty text of 400 pages, and by far the most elaborate law code of the early post-Roman kingdoms. In the edition I used, most of the laws were attributed to four kings. The majority were instituted under Chintasvintus or his

Roman law. This is evidenced by the great length and complexity of the document, and its subdivision into books, titles, and laws, all common features of Roman legal texts.[52] Also, the names of some of the kings were Romanized in the text: for example, Chindasuinth became "Flavius Chintasvintus."[53]

Also, it is important to note that besides the laws in the Code attributed to specific kings, a few of them were labelled "ancient laws." These laws dated back to a few centuries before the writing of the Code. Therefore, any law not labelled an "ancient law" was newly enacted by the seventh century kings.[54]

We will be focusing on the new laws of the Visigothic Code, those which made various aspects of kingship more complex and institutional. No longer did kings rule "by [unwritten] customs and habit" as they had traditionally,[55] but Roman-style law codes, such as this one, now stipulated the extent of their authority and rights. Kingship had become more institutional. What follows are examples of laws to demonstrate this point.

Some of the new laws were meant to limit the king's power and prevent his oppression of the populace. The Code asserted that not even the king is above the law, rather he "should be Subject to the Majesty of the Law."[56] Another law placed restrictions on exactions made by the

---

son Recesvintus, and a handful of the remaining laws came about under Wamba or Egica. The remaining category of laws is discussed in note 54.
Collins, p. 224.

[52] Collins agrees that the Visigothic Code is a prime example of Romanization among the Visigoths. He writes, "In terms of its scale, organization, and practical applicability this code matches official Roman legal compilations… in most respects."
Collins, pp. 224-5.

[53] *Visigothic Code*, II.I.VI.

[54] Many have argued that the "ancient laws" originated as longstanding customs held by the early Visigoths. Collins, on the other hand, argues that they do not represent traditional Germanic customs. Rather, scholars now agree that the "ancient laws" were derived from the law codes of Euric and Leovigild (Visigothic kings of the fifth and sixth centuries respectively). Euric's code, at least, was based on "Roman Vulgar Law," not ancient Germanic law, and Leovigild's code has not survived. Whatever their origin, the "ancient laws" certainly predated the seventh century laws.
Collins, pp. 227, 232, and 234.

[55] Isidore, *History of the Kings* 35.6-8.

[56] *Visigothic Code*, II.I.II.

king, in recognition that his avarice might need to be curbed. The law forbade the king to use extortion to take a person's property.[57] Also, the Code said that any unjust royal decrees were to be invalid, particularly if they were "prompted by fear of the throne."[58] Kingship was becoming a more complex and institutional office. This is evidenced by the increase in these laws that were made to limit abuses of royal authority.[59]

Other laws made kingship more institutional by aiming to protect the king and make his reign secure. Three such laws allowed the king to stamp out treason and other threats. The first was written against whoever deserted to the enemy, conspired against the nation, or plotted the death or harm of the king. It even forbade anyone from traveling to a foreign country, so this law was also a universal travel ban.[60] Those who broke the treason law were given the death sentence or, at the very least, were blinded.[61] Another law concerned anyone who incriminated or spoke ill of the king. It sentenced them either to lose half their property or be sent into slavery.[62] Lastly, a third law decreed that whoever attempted to usurp the throne was to be excommunicated.[63] It is probable that when the Goths had a traditional society of chiefdoms, it was merely a matter of

---

[57] *Visigothic Code*, II.I.V.1-50.
[58] *Visigothic Code*, II.I.XXVII.
[59] Collins suggests that the inclusion of provisions such as these were likely the doing of the Visigothic elite, men who often competed with the king's authority. Thus, it seems that the aristocracy used lawmaking as a tool to curb the power of the king. Another side of this theme is that kings in turn used lawmaking against their rivals in the aristocracy. For example, Collins argues that the treason laws below were likely royal assertions of power employed by kings who felt they were in a weak political position compared to the elite families. (Refer back to note 49 for details on the rivalry between kings and aristocrats).
Collins, p. 103.
[60] Collins ties this particular law of Chindasuinth to that king's substantial redistribution of power and wealth in the Visigothic kingdom. Chindasuinth had a great many elites executed, and he bestowed their possessions on his own followers. It seems that the families of those he had killed then began fleeing the kingdom. Collins argues that the king's treason law and its travel ban were intended to prevent these families from amassing outside of the kingdom and then plotting his downfall. Apparently, Chindasuinth's bloody political tactics were successful, since scholars agree that he put an end to the pattern of coups that had always marked Visigothic kingship. From his reign until the fall of the kingdom, succession among kings was much more stable.
Collins, pp. 82-4;
Wickham, p. 135.
[61] *Visigothic Code*, II.I.VI.
[62] *Visigothic Code*, II.I.VII.
[63] *Visigothic Code*, II.I.V.80-93.

course whenever one leader was deposed by another who was stronger or more popular. By the seventh century, however, this was now called usurpation and treason, and was made illegal under the highly institutional kingship.

Each of the three laws above also enhanced the power of the king. All three included an additional punishment: namely, the king or state had the right to confiscate all of a convicted person's property. Visigothic kingship became more institutional with the enactment of these treason laws. They authorized the king's right to accuse people of treason or slander, and effectively secured his hold on the throne, all while granting him the power to take the property of the accused for himself.[64]

Lastly, inheritance among the royalty also became more institutional by the seventh century. Some of the laws on the subject were "ancient laws," but the rest were new ones, written to further legislate the details of inheritance. One such law stated that all property acquired by the king (presumably that which was acquired while he possessed the throne) was to belong to his successor. The property which he had inherited, on the other hand, was to pass to his sons or other heirs.[65] Another law specified that brothers and sisters who shared both of the same parents were to share equally in the inheritance.[66] Evidently, these new provisions were made so as to leave no doubt about the fine details of inheritance, the goal being to prevent wars of succession and other such conflicts from arising. This age-old problem was addressed by new laws which made Visigothic kingship more institutional.

---

[64] Collins connects this trend to the next law mentioned below, explaining why that law created a distinction between the property of a king's successor and that of his heirs. It appears that kings such as Chindasuinth were enriching their own families with all of this confiscated property instead of enriching the royal office itself (see note 60). So, the Visigothic elite enacted the property law below to ensure that the wealth remained with the office of kingship rather than with any single family.
Collins, pp. 86-8.
[65] *Visigothic Code*, II.I.V.54-64.
[66] *Visigothic Code*, IV.II.I and V.

We have seen that Visigothic kingship became more Romanized and institutional in the era of their Spanish kingdom. The regalia of the kings points to a Romanizing influence. Many nobles and officials had Roman ranks and titles. Also, there were officials from both Hispano-Roman and Gothic backgrounds. These details show that the Visigoths were Romanizing by assimilating into the existing political system. Finally, we saw that the great increase in kingship laws reveals that many aspects of kingship had become more complex and institutional. Some laws limited the king's powers while others enhanced them.

All in all, the government and kingship of the Visigoths became increasingly Romanized and institutional in the sixth and seventh centuries. In ruling the old Roman province of Spain, the Visigoths integrated themselves into it, adopting aspects of Roman government and law.

Conclusion

To conclude and summarize the arguments above, Visigothic kingship changed dramatically between the fourth and seventh centuries. The first changes we examined were the shifts from Goths to Visigoths, and then from leaders to kings. We saw how the early Goths had at least two major subgroups, each with its own leader. Then, during a period of chaos and invasion, many Goths broke away and merged to become the Visigoths. The Visigoths then shifted from having several leaders to becoming unified under Alaric. And finally, they established a kingdom under their first king, Athaulph.

The second major change we found was that Visigothic kingship and government became more Romanized and institutional. The Romanizing trend was demonstrated by the presence of Roman-style regalia, ranks and titles, and Hispano-Roman officials in the government of that

kingdom. Finally, we saw that numerous aspects of Visigothic kingship were made more institutional by the many new kingship laws enacted in seventh century Spain.

The Visigoths were a Germanic group that left its mark on ancient and early medieval Europe, particularly between the fourth and early eighth centuries CE. The history of the Visigoths and their kings is complex and intriguing, from their journey into the Eastern Roman Empire to the flourishing of their powerful kingdom in Spain. Further studies of the Visigoths will bring more into focus the ancient Germanic groups and kingdoms of the post-Roman world.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Braulio of Saragossa. “The Life of St Aemilian the Confessor, Called the Hooded.” In *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*. Translated and edited by A. T. Fear. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997.

Isidore of Seville. *History of the Kings of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*. Translated by Guido Donini and Gordon B. Ford, Jr. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1966.

Jordanes. *Getica: The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*. Translated by Charles C. Mierow. Delaware: Fyrnlore Bookmearsing, 2020.

Paul the Deacon. “The Lives of the Fathers of Merida.” In *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*. Translated and edited by A. T. Fear. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997.

Sozomen. “Ecclesiastical History 6.37.” In *The Goths in the Fourth Century*. Translated and edited by Peter Heather and John Matthews. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991.

Tacitus. *Germania*. In *Agricola* and *Germania*, 33-57. Translated by Harold Mattingly. London: Penguin Group, 2009.

The Visigothic Code: (Forum Judicum). Translated and edited by S. P. Scott. Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1910.

Secondary Sources

Collins, Roger. *Visigothic Spain: 409-711*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Fear, A. T. *Lives of the Visigothic Fathers*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997.

Heather, Peter. *The Goths*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

Heather, Peter and John Matthews. *The Goths in the Fourth Century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991.

Wickham, Chris. *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000*. New York: Penguin Group, 2009.

Wolfram, Herwig. *History of the Goths*. Translated by Thomas J. Dunlap. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.