

Valens and the Goths: a Constantinian model?

Valente e os godos: um modelo constantiniano?

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Resumo: The Goths' support for Procopius' usurpation against Valens in the eastern regions of the Roman Empire in 365 brought about a new phase in the Romano-Gothic relations. Committed to subduing them for having challenged his authority, Valens devoted the next four years to campaigns in the Danube region, which did not yield good results. In this article, I will discuss to what extent Valens' dealings with the Goths were anchored in the precedents established by Constantine and what innovations were brought by Valens upon this model.

Abstract: O apoio dos godos à usurpação de Procópio contra Valente nas regiões orientais do Império Romano, em 365, deu início a uma nova fase nas relações entre essas populações e o poder imperial. Empenhado em subjugar-los por terem afrontado sua autoridade, Valente devotou os quatro anos subsequentes a campanhas periódicas na região do Danúbio, que não trouxeram grandes resultados. Nesse artigo, discutiremos em que medida as tratativas de Valente com os godos estiveram ancoradas nos precedentes estabelecidos por Constantino e quais inovações sobre esse modelo foram trazidas por Valente.

Palavras-chave:

Valens;
Goths;
Constantine;
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Keywords:

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On 9th August 378 AD,¹ Valens succumbed to the rebellious Goths around Adrianople along with two-thirds of the Roman army from the eastern regions. Due to the turmoil of the battle, the emperor's body was never found and thus never recovered, so Valens never received a proper burial (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, 31, 13, 12; 17). To contemporaries, the episode evoked many memories of the worst moments of the previous century, when the Roman imperial apparatus was severely weakened by frontier raids. Ammianus Marcellinus (31, 13, 13) soon notes the similarities with the tragic end of the emperor Trajan Decius and his son, the young Caesar Herennius Etruscus, who in 251 led their troops through swampy terrain in the hope of intercepting the bands of the Gothic king Cniva with their spoils. Stuck in the quagmire, Trajan Decius, Herennius and their army were ambushed on all sides (*Epitome de Caesaribus*, 29, 3; Zosimus, *Nea Historia*, 1, 23, 3), making them the first emperors to die in combat.

The Roman defeat was overwhelming, the greatest since Cannae in 216 BC, according to Ammianus Marcellinus himself (31, 13, 19),² and for some later observers "it was the beginning of the evil of the Roman Empire at that time and after" (Rufinus of Aquileia, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 11, 13).³ However, as contradictory as it may seem, the consequences of the Adrianople disaster were not long-lasting. Although contemporary and somewhat later reactions⁴ oscillated between despair, calls for revenge, and resignation (Lenski, 1997), the Roman Empire mostly regained its former power under Theodosius. After a long campaign, the officers Saturninus and Ricomeres signed a treaty with the Goths in 382 that reestablished in a certain way their peaceful relationship with Rome. The settlers were allowed to cultivate fertile land, as long as men of military age could be recruited periodically. We soon find these Goths in the service of Theodosius, being successfully mobilized against the usurpers Magnus Maximus and Eugenius (Heather, 1994, p. 157-192).

The Battle of Adrianople may not have marked the end of the Roman Empire for all that matter, or even the beginning of its decadence, but it still stands as the greatest monument to the failure of Valens' Gothic policies. In this article, I will argue – rather counterintuitively, given its result – that those policies were not as misguided or ideological as they've been interpreted in recent years (Lenski, 2002, p. 136-137; Hart, 2024, p. 233-

¹ All dates are AD unless otherwise noted.

² Laurent Angliviel de la Beaumelle (1999, n. 548) argues that the comparison with Cannae is implicitly imbued with the hope that the Romans would rise again in the face of adversity. In fact, this is a central theme of Ammianus Marcellinus' last book (Lenski, 1997, p. 160-161).

³ All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

⁴ It is worth remembering that Rufinus of Aquileia would have published his translation and continuation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* in 402 or 403, when Alaric and his Goths advanced on Italy and besieged Milan (Amidon, 2016, p. 6). There can be no doubt that such circumstances weighed heavily in the author's assessment of the Battle of Adrianople.

262). On the contrary, it seems that Valens understood the intricacies of the Gothic political scene and actively intervened in it for his benefit, taking into account imperial practices of his predecessors, especially Constantine.

Formidable enemies, indispensable tools

Certainly, this is not the appropriate place to make a complete and detailed account of all the Gothic operations and Roman responses in the third century since the first contacts. However, in order to understand the Gothic policies of Constantine and their influence on Valens' Gothic ambitions, we must return to some of the main points of the long process that led the Goths to become the most formidable Roman adversary in the Danubian sector and, consequently, one of the most important tools of imperial legitimation in the eastern part of the Empire, either because of the "propagandistic" value of a Gothic victory, or because of the Gothic kings, who could mobilize their soldiers in military campaigns and internal conflicts in favor of Roman emperors.

Under the umbrella name of "Scythians" the Greeks and Romans grouped a series of populations north of the Danube, by the shores of the Black Sea and the from the plains of Central Asia. In the mid-3rd century, it was the Goths who dominated the region (Šćukin; Kazanski; Sharov, 2006, p. 13-36). Their arrival and settlement did not have an immediate effect on the Roman Empire, although the Pontic Greek cities and the Kingdom of Bosphorus were largely under the surveillance of the governor of Moesia Inferior. Nonetheless, judging from King Shapur I inscription of 262 (*Res Gestae Divi Saporis*, 6), it is possible that as early as 245 Gothic mercenaries were employed by Emperor Gordian III (r. 238-244) against the Persians. But no more than thirty years later, once their dominance in the region had been consolidated, the Herulian Goths would employ the imposing fleet of the Kingdom of Bosphorus for their expeditions against the Greek cities of the Empire, using the Pontic cities as a starting point.

Sources on the period are notoriously scarce, but we can assume that if Gothic contingents were employed by Gordian against Shapur's army, some sort of treaty involving the payment of annual stipends in exchange for military service was already in place. Philip the Arab (r. 244-249), after reasserting Roman power over the Danubian sectors in two victories against the Carpi in 246 and 248, decided to suspend payment to the Goths (Wolfram, 1990, p. 57-58 and n. 60 and 61). In response to this, perhaps in the same year or the following, a Gothic coalition besieged Marcianople (Kulikowski, 2008, p. 31 and n. 8), the capital of Moesia Inferior, showing that they could effectively carry out substantial war and siege operations within Roman territory.

Faced with a complicated situation, Quintus Decius, a military commander and then prefect of Rome, was sent to deal with the short-lived usurpation of Pacatianus and the barbarian assaults in Moesia. His success earned him an imperial acclamation from the Danubian legionaries, and the victorious commander took the name Trajan. Renan Frighetto (2012, p. 72-76) argues that this choice aimed to reduce the impact of his usurpation, associating him with an emperor reputable for his governmental action, return to traditions, the defence of Roman territorial integrity, and internal unity. It should be noted, above all, that Trajan was a very successful emperor in his military endeavours in the Danubian sectors and established Dacia, the only Roman province beyond the Danube. If this was really Decius' intention, we can assume that, from the moment the Goths became able to penetrate deep into Roman territory and to impose siege on large walled cities and even provincial capitals, victory against them and the security of Illyrian provincials became major elements of imperial legitimation.

The Goths would still take advantage of moments of political and military instability to undertake incursions into Roman territory on at least one other occasion in the third century. Between 267 and 269, Herulian Goths managed to raid many Greek cities by sea, reaching as far as southern Anatolia.⁵

It was up to Claudius II (r. 268–270), an Illyrian military man of obscure origins acclaimed emperor by officials after Gallienus' death (r. 253–268), to deal with Alemanni incursions into northern Italy and the Gothic threat on the Danube. Against the latter, Claudius succeeded where Decius had failed and effectively intercepted them as they returned from the Balkans after their raiding operations, decisively defeating them in the vicinity of Naissus, present-day Niš, Serbia (Frighetto, 2012, p. 85). By this time, victories against external enemies had already become the greatest source of imperial legitimacy, and Claudius II soon tried to publicize his triumph by turning the Goths into Rome's new enemies in official discourse. If, on the one hand, the victory in northern Italy was referred to on the coins minted in Cyzicus as the usual *Victoria Germanic(a)* (RIC V, *Claudius II*, 250), on the other hand, the same workshop innovated by distinguishing the Goths from other barbarians by celebrating the *Victoria Gothic(a)* (RIC V, *Claudius II*, 251-252), their first mention in Latin. It is worth remembering that Cyzicus was located on the coast of the Propontis, which means it was on the route of the invasions and became a target for Gothic raiders in 268 (Wolfram, 1990, p. 66).

Claudius II thus consolidated his power mainly as the emperor who managed to put an end to the Gothic attacks in the Aegean and Thrace. In addition to the messages

⁵ The best detailed account remains Wolfram, 1990, p. 56-68.

conveyed on the coins intended to circulate in the regions that suffered from the invasions, the Gothic victory was also celebrated in his imperial titles. In a Numidian inscription (CIL VIII, 4876), the title of grand victor of the Goths (*Gothicus maximus*) precedes the honorific title of grand victor of the Parthians (*Parthicus maximus*), testimony to the relevance that a victory over the Goths came to have for the glorification of the emperor as they consolidated themselves as the strongest power north of the Danube. Claudius II would have been so successful in this elaboration that, after his death as a result of the plague that ravaged the Empire in 270 and his subsequent divinization by the Senate, his memory was celebrated on a series of coins minted in Milan and Rome (RIC V, *Claudius II*, 263-264), dedicated in the obverse "to the divine Claudius Gothicus" (*divo Claudio Gothico*).

Although sources from the period and even later documents emphasize the antagonism between Goths and Romans, Ralph Mathisen (2020) reminds us that, from very early times, the Goths were part of a vast Roman network of frontier clientelism, negotiating the use of their forces with the Empire, as in the aforementioned case of the Gothic mercenaries employed against Shapur I. It was not long before other players in the political game also considered the Goths as a tool to strengthen their position and interests. This was the case of Julius Priscus, brother of the emperor Philip the Arab and governor of Thrace and Macedonia, who in order to oppose Trajan Decius had himself proclaimed emperor with the support of the Goths while they were besieging Philippopolis, according to Jordanes (*Getica*, 18, 103), but dies soon after the capture of the city. The then governor of Moesia Superior, Trebonianus Gallus (r. 251-253), in turn, followed the same strategy and achieved success, if we trust the account of Zosimus (1, 23-24).⁶ Cniva and his Goths were summoned in a conspiracy against Decius, and after the Gothic victory at Abritus, the new emperor let them go with the booty, and then reinstated the annual payment of stipends interrupted by Philip.

Constantine's Big Stick

In view of the above, we can safely argue that, when Licinius and Constantine entered in a dispute for supremacy in the Empire during the twilight of the tetrarchic model, there was already an understanding of the importance of a Gothic victory, in rhetorical terms, and, in practical terms, of an alliance with Gothic kings to use their

⁶ Zosimus and later Zonaras, who certainly drew from the former's work for the composition of his *Epitome Historiarum*, are the only sources that mention an alliance between Trebonianus Gallus and Cniva. One must be careful with the accusation, since Zosimus willingly followed a pagan historiography that was biased in favor of Decius for his persecutory attitude towards Christians (Paschoud, 2000, p. 149, n. 50). In any case, as Renan Frighetto (2012, p. 76) has noted, Trebonianus Gallus seems to have deliberately neglected aid to Decius during his campaign against Cniva in Thrace.

soldiers either in favour of the Empire against external enemies, or to fill up the ranks of the imperial pretenders. We are told by the anonymous compiler of the *Origo Constantini imperatoris* (Anonymus Valesianus, I, 27) that Licinius sought the aid of a certain prince Alica for the final confrontation against Constantine in 324, which is in line with the practices established by the emperors and usurpers of the late third century.⁷ Constantine would understand and build upon these experiences afterwards, but his endeavours were clouded by the very nature of the evidence.

In Jordanes' version (*Get.*, 21, 111), it was Constantine himself who recruited Gothic soldiers against Licinius. But his testimony must be taken with a grain of salt. In addition to being very late, Jordanes tends to emphasize that good relations between the Goths and the Empire universally involved military aid in exchange for annual allowances. Jordanes even declares that, until then, the Roman army fought its enemies only with difficulty. Within the purpose of his work, good emperors were those who "fulfilled their duties" to the Goths and bad emperors, as Peter Heather (1994, p. 108) pointed out, were those who were too greedy to pay them the subsidy. Constantine, as a good emperor in Jordanes' eyes, must have allied himself with the Goths at a very early stage of his reign. It was his willingness to weave an almost fraternal relationship between Constantine and the Goths, giving them a special status within the Roman imperial apparatus, that was at the heart of the controversy surrounding the famous treaty of 332.

Despite its supposed importance, the contemporary — or near contemporary — evidence on the treaty is disappointingly vague and elusive when it comes to the details. Some authors content themselves with mentioning a general victory against the Goths and Sarmatians (e.g., Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 41, 13),⁸ although the latter happened only two years later, while others (e.g., Eutropius, *Breviarium*, 10, 7; An. Val. I, 31-32) assert that after the victory a peace was made, the terms of which are not even mentioned. Eusebius (*Vita Constantini*, 4, 5), as one should expect, describes the operation in grandiloquent terms. For him, Constantine not only refused to pay the annual subsidies, but completely subdued the Goths and Sarmatians, compelling them to accept the Romans as their masters and making them serve Rome. Others have tried to determine some terms of the

⁷ Known only from this very late source, Alica is called *regalis* or *regulus*, depending on the modern editor's reading of *regulis* in the oldest manuscript. Both terms, however, are used in Latin sources to refer to barbarian chieftains who became clients of the Roman Empire by force of some agreement and who were bound to occasionally supply auxiliary troops to the Roman army (Mathisen, 2020, p. 265-266). If this is the case, some sort of payment benefiting Alica and his soldiers and allies must have been involved. For Gothic kings, I will further argue, such support from a Roman emperor meant more resources to amass followers and, consequently, to rise to a more prestigious place in the Gothic world.

⁸ It is important to note that, following recent research by Justin Stover and George Woudhuysen (2023), only epitomes made from the lost work of Aurelius Victor survives. However, until a comprehensive reworking of the remaining texts appears, we are compelled to resort to traditional references.

treaty from later allusions. In his panegyric to Valens, Themistius (*Or.*, 10, 135) implies that, before the restriction imposed by the emperor, the Goths enjoyed full freedom of trade with the Romans in the period of peace. This perhaps indicates that this was one of the terms of the treaty (Hart, 2024, p. 214 *contra* Wheeler, 1998, p. 91), but this interpretation is not without problem, as we will see.

The fact is that no balanced and near contemporary account of the treaty survives. Albeit a later author, Jordanes (*Get.*, 21, 112) is the only one who put a name on the agreement, and that weighed heavily on modern interpretations:

[...] having entered into agreement (*foedus*) with the emperor, they [the Goths] offered in support against various peoples forty thousand of their own, of which both units and soldiers are listed in the service of the empire up to the present, which means they are federated (*foederati*). At that time, in fact, they prospered under the rule of kings Ariaric and Aoric.

For some scholars, in the wake of Theodor Mommsen, the fact that Jordanes refers to the treaty of 332 as a *foedus* was indicative of a definitive change in the relations between the barbarians and the Empire, forecasting the further downfall of Roman power. We would be facing the precursor of a type of treaty that would become common in the final century of the Roman Empire, in which the *foederati* enjoyed legal equality, in contrast to the total submission required by surrender (*deditio*) in the republican and early imperial periods. That *foedus* would be the same that Gothic leader Athanaric claimed to be upholding when he sent soldiers at the request of Procopius against Valens (*Amm. Marc.*, 27, 5, 1), which meant that he ought to have been a descendant of Ariaric or Aoric. But the *foederati*, as understood by the authors of the sixth century, were “foreigners” employed and paid as regular troops, being legally part of the Roman imperial apparatus, often under the command of their own chiefs who would go on to hold command positions within the Roman military hierarchy. This does not seem to have been the case at all for the Goths after 332 who, as Peter Heather (2006, p. 244, with references) has shown, still had to negotiate their participation in different campaigns with each reigning emperor.

For this reason, Heather (1994, p. 108-115) considers that, although the special treatment given to the Goths by Constantine has found wide acceptance among scholars because of this excerpt, much of what Jordanes reports is “nonsense”. There was no campaign in which we find these 40,000 Gothic soldiers, who should have become part of the regular army, and, judging by later developments under Athanaric, the treaty must have involved only the Tervingians, not the totality of Gothic peoples. Michael Kulikowski (2007, p. 360-361) still points to the lack of an explicit mention to unconditional surrender (*deditio*), as well as uncertainty regarding the continuity from the Goths of 332 to the Goths

of Valens' time. If we do not retroject conceptions and developments that are posterior to it in the treaty, he concludes, the peace established in 332, although it lasted until the period of Valens, does not seem to have had any extraordinary character other than being the result of a crushing victory.⁹ Scholars such as Everett Wheeler (1998) even argue, based on Constantine's vigilant presence on the Danube in 334 and the lack of mention of a formal agreement in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*, that the emperor's involvement in the dispute between the Sarmatians and Goths was aimed solely at maintaining the balance of power in the Transdanubian regions and that there was no treaty whatsoever between Rome and the Tervingians, although any argument made from the silence of a single source is obviously problematic.

To better understand the nature of an agreement which Jordanes could only explain through a vocabulary that sounded familiar to him, we must contrast his account with independent evidence from elsewhere. Although definitely not a contemporary source, but rather a later compilation of historiographical material (Stover; Woudhuysen, 2023, p. 398-402), the *Origo* (An. Val., I, 31-32) is the only text which briefly describes what can be understood as an old-fashioned *deditio* and provides further information on the individuals involved. According to this source, after an overwhelming victory over the Goths, Constantine "received hostages, among whom was Ariaric, son of the king (*filium regis*)", and "peace was stablished (*pax firmata*)". We cannot be sure about all the sources used by the compiler of the *Origo*, but its unique information on Sarmatian and Gothic affairs – like the names of Alica and Ariaric, the only non-Roman individuals mentioned in the text – implies a source with solid knowledge on Constantine's dealings with trans-Danubian peoples. The picture that emerges from this is one of a negotiation that essentially involved Constantine and one group of Goths led by a king, the father of Ariaric, who would later become himself king of the Goths after his sojourn in Roman lands.

After the treaty, the old theme of Gothic victory continued to play an important role. It was due to this campaign that Constantine obtained his second acclamation (*Gothicus maximus II*, cf. Barnes, 1976, p. 173) and the emperor did not take long to portray its result as a complete submission of the Goths, also taking advantage of his alleged kinship with Claudius II.¹⁰ A series of aes minted in Rome (RIC VII, *Rome*, 306) between 327 and 333

⁹ The author of the *Origo* (An. Val., I, 31) reports that more than 100.000 Goths would have died as a result of the hunger and cold imposed by Constantine, without giving further details whether this occurred due to the destruction of food and arable land or "embargoes". The number seems exaggerated, but it reveals the magnitude of the campaign.

¹⁰ The veracity of this genealogy was questioned by scholars for a long time, being discredited as mere Constantinian "propaganda". In his prosopographical studies, François Chausson (2007, p. 25-95) highlights a series of particularities of this genealogical claim and emphasizes its verisimilitude. But even if the first records of Claudius II as an ancestor of the Constantinian dynasty predate the Gothic victories of Constantine, it is undeniable that the emperor later exploited to the maximum his ancestry from the great victor of the Goths of the third century.

bore on its reverse the legend *Victoria Gothica* and depicted Rome with her sceptre seated on a shield, while Victory offered her a subdued Goth. Among the gold pieces minted in Trier, one of the main imperial centres of the West, two series (RIC VII, *Trier*, 531 and 534) had on their reverse a scene of the emperor in military garb receiving a soldier who drags a captive by the hair or presents him kneeling between the two under the caption "to the conqueror of the barbarian peoples (*debellatori gentium barbararum*)". The name *Gothia* in the exergue have received some attention. It was often interpreted as an annexation – real or ideological – of Gothic territory.

For Timothy Hart (2024, p. 216-218), this is evidence that, following a tetrarchic practice, Constantine *de iure* settled the Tervingians as *laeti* or tributaries in the old territory of Dacia, which they had already occupied independently for a long time. This move allowed him to present himself as a new Trajan, restorer of the province abandoned by Aurelian. Thus, it would even be possible to understand the enigmatic "free trade" clause alluded to by Themistius, since it would not be strange for populations legally settled in Roman territory to trade freely with Roman provincials. However, there is no record of a laetic settlement in the fourth century that was established from the delivery of noble hostages such as Ariaric, nor of barbarians settled as *laeti* who maintained their chieftains and social hierarchies and who were not in custody of a Roman official specially appointed for this purpose (Benedetti, 2023). Furthermore, trade restrictions on the frontier seemed to have been the exception rather than the norm (Lee, 1993, p. 71-73). Themistius might as well have simply tried to boost Valens' bravery in his speech by highlighting his control over barbarian commercial activities which were usually – not necessarily since 332 – carried freely. Even if the later campaigns of 334 and 336 allowed Constantine to recover Dacia Malvensis and Apulensensis, albeit in an ephemeral way (Hendzel, 2023), this does not mean that these regions came to be called *Gothia* in the official discourse. This would defeat the purpose of being represented as a "new Trajan" and Constantine in fact assumed the title of *Dacicus maximus* in 336 (Barnes, 1976, p. 151). The meaning of the exergue must be understood together with the legend and iconography of the coin. *Gothia*, therefore, appears subjugated to the emperor and refers to the Goths themselves, defeated in their own land¹¹ in the context of Constantine's trans-Danubian ambitions, which also involved the reestablishment of Dacia.

¹¹ One must note the similarity with the series of Constantinian coins whose reverse bears the iconography of the captive or an allegory in a subjugated position together with the message "Happiness of the Romans (*Gaudium Romanorum*)", celebrating the victories over the barbarians with Francia, Alamannia, Sarmatia (e.g.: RIC VII, *Trier*, 362-364) or Fran(cia) et Alam(annia) (RIC VII, *Ticinum*, 28) written on the exergue. None of these coin types must be taken as evidence for the establishment of provinces in lands beyond the Rhine.

The famous Column of the Goths in Constantinople is another element of this elaboration. Dedicated “to Fortuna Redux, because of the overcoming of the Goths [...]” (CIL III, 00733), the monument may seem out of place in the new dynastic city of the first Christian emperor, but it certainly served as a reminder of Constantine’s victorious return after a Gothic campaign, possibly that of 328/9. After all, in Rome, Fortuna Redux was traditionally associated with Roman victory and imperial worship, and in the New Rome of Constantine, the last emperor to pay homage to the deity, it would be no different. These elements have led Michael Speidel (2024) to argue that the Column of the Goths was carefully designed for the commemoration of the founding of Constantinople in 330 so as to distinguish it as a political centre superior to the other imperial residences of the tetrarchic era.

But the other feature of Constantine’s Big Stick diplomacy concerning the Goths also left its mark on the new city. In a speech delivered to Theodosius, dated 381, Themistius (*Or.*, 15, 191a) employs the word ἀπεμειλίσσεται, an unusual past form of the verb ἀπομειλίσσομαι (to allay or appease), to observe that, by putting a statue of Athanaric’s father behind the new Senate, Constantine stirred the Gothic king from a hostile attitude towards a friendly disposition. With this in mind we can better understand Athanaric’s oath to his father¹² that he would never set foot on Roman soil (Amm. Marc., 27, 5, 9; 31, 4, 13). It was a way to secure that his son would never lead invading forces against the Empire (Lenski, 2002, p. 126), thus keeping Constantinian support to his clan and, consequently, their prominence and prestige within Gothic society. It must be for this reason that Eutropius (10, 7, 1) later asserts that, after peace was granted to the Goths, Constantine “imbued the barbarian peoples with an immense regard for his memory.”

Therefore, even if there is no solid evidence for genealogical continuity between Ariaric or Aoric and Athanaric, and even if the terms of the peace established in 332 have not been fully understood, it seems clear that a close bond of loyalty between the most powerful kin of the Goths near the Danube and the house of Constantine – not necessarily the Roman Empire – developed from that time onwards. Thus, the treaty of 332 must be understood as part of a series of measures by Constantine that involved both the imperial triumph over the barbarians and the establishment of a network of interdependence with the frontier communities that also included the promotion of their warrior elites, who became closely tied to the imperial house.

¹² From Athanaric’s oath, Herwig Wolfram (1990, p. 80) extrapolates a general rule that a *kindins* (who the Latin-speakers called *iudex*, as we will see) was charged with the defense of the *Gutthiuda* (Gothic homeland) and because of that he was not allowed to leave Gothic territory. However, no other source corroborates this.

The Goths did not indeed get any special treatment from Constantine, but their elites did, as did other barbarian elites. Jeroen Wijnendaele (2025) convincingly argues that Constantine innovated by elevating to the highest military positions barbarian individuals recruited from such treaties. It was precisely their origins that made them more loyal to the imperial house and less prone to support usurpation. Wijnendaele observes this phenomenon especially in Constantine's dealings with the Rhine barbarians. Frankish noble Bonitus was Constantine's faithful chief-in-command against Licinius, and his son Silvanus remained a loyal follower of the dynasty until he fell victim to a court plot (Amm. Marc., 15, 5). From the evidence that we have presented, it seems clear that a similar arrangement was also designed for the Goths after 332.

The Gothic ambitions of Valens

In 364, Valens became co-emperor in a delicate situation at the request of his brother Valentinian and against the advice of the high officials. His predecessor Jovian had succeeded Julian, the last representative of the Constantinian dynasty, for nearly eight months, having died under unclear circumstances. Despite probably having been a senior member of the *protectores domestici*, or some other elite regiment (Kelly, 2018, p. 138 and n. 6 and 7, with references), Valens lacked the martial qualities considered essential to the exercise of imperial power in the late period, since he spent most of his adult life overseeing the family estate. To make matters worse, before the brothers shared the duties of the Empire, a sudden fever fell on both during their stay in Constantinople (Lenski, 2002, p. 25; 51-52). Inexperienced and sick, Valens still lacked the foundational stone on which all Roman emperors built their legitimacy from 337 until then: the blood of Constantine.

This trump card was flaunted by Procopius, who usurped the power in the second year of Valens' rule, claiming to be a relative of Julian.¹³ From the beginning, this was not a usurpation like so many others that occurred in the fourth century. Procopius had no current position in the Roman army nor was he acclaimed by mutinous troops in a border region. Taking advantage of Valens' absence, who set out to Syria in 365, Procopius won the support of the troops passing through Constantinople on their way to the Danube by appealing to the loyalty of the soldiery to Julian and promising certain financial advantages. Certainly, discontent with Valens' fiscal policies, which sought in every way to

¹³ It is not certain how closely Procopius and Julian were related. Ammianus (26, 6, 1) only states that they are akin (*cognati*).

cover the costs left by Julian's ill-fated Persian campaign, contributed to the initial success of the usurpation.

Impressively, Procopius gained the support of senior officers and was able to assemble in a short time an army robust enough to extend his dominion across Constantinople, throughout Thrace, and northern Anatolia (Lee, 2013, p. 23-24). But the inevitable confrontation with Valens demanded that the usurper gather as many troops as possible. After all, the emperor still maintained control over most of the eastern army, assembled at Antioch and waiting for his arrival because of the tense situation with Persia (Kelly, 2018, p. 145-155). Thus, it is not surprising that Procopius used his Constantinian connection to demand that the Tervingians fulfil their oath more than thirty years later (Amm. Marc., 26, 10, 3; 27, 5, 1; Eunapius, *fragment* 37).

This advantage, however, was of no use to Procopius, since the Gothic troops arrived too late, and the usurper, abandoned by his two generals, was captured and executed in 366 (Lee, 2013, p. 24). The 3.000 soldiers¹⁴ were seized when returning to their homeland and then scattered to different towns across Asia Minor. Valens' general Victor was sent to the Goths with the mission of getting an explanation for their support for the usurper. According to Ammianus (27, 5, 1), he demanded "why a people friendly to the Romans and bound to treaties (*foederibus*) of a long-lasting peace provided aid to a usurper who waged war on legitimate emperors". Surely, unlike the authors of the sixth century, the historian calls *foedus* any type of agreement made between the Roman Empire and its neighbours, even those involving complete capitulation and subjugation, especially on the Rhine-Danubian frontier (Heather, 2006, p. 244-245).

The question, of course, avoided the very nature of the relation between the Goths and the Constantinian dynasty, perhaps intentionally, in order to provide Valens with a *casus belli*, as we will see. But the way in which the Gothic aid to Procopius was reported reveals how this dynamic developed after 332. First, Ammianus (26.10.3) speaks of multiple kings (*reges*) who sent troops to aid Procopius, but later on the narrative (Amm. Marc., 31, 3, 4) he specifically states that it was "Atharic, the judge (*iudex*) of the Tervingi" who sent soldiers to the usurper, much in accord with a sole "king of the Scythians ([...] Σκυθῶν βασιλέως)" mentioned by Eunapius (*fr.* 37). Zosimus (4, 7, 2; 4, 10, 1) characterization of the power of this individual not as king,¹⁵ but as someone who holds "the highest power

¹⁴ Zosimus (4, 7, 2) records 10.000 Gothic auxiliaries, but scholars tend to agree that Ammianus' numbers are more realistic. Zosimus (4, 10, 1-2), certainly drawing from Eunapius (*fr.* 37), mentions that Valens arrested them because they were raiding Roman territory and behaving arrogantly and violently. Ammianus (27, 5, 1) only reports that Valens aim was to confront the Goths about their aid to Procopius.

¹⁵ Zosimus does not reserve the denomination βασιλεύς solely for Roman emperors, as one might expect. He uses the term to refer to kings of yore (1, 5, 2; 2, 37, 1), to kings of Persia and Armenia (2, 27, 4; 3, 8, 2) and to barbarian kings

over the Scythians beyond the Danube ([...] ὑπὲρ τὸν Ἰστρον Σκυθῶν ἐπικράτειαν)" or as "the one who leads the Scythians (ὁ τῶν Σκυθῶν ἡγούμενος)" can help us understand this apparent discrepancy. Athanaric's denomination as a *iudex* can be how the Latin-speakers understood the role of a *kindins*. This prestigious and hereditary position appears to be higher than the *rex*, the Gothic *reiks* (Heather, 1994, p. 97-107), meaning that a *iudex* might have been the leader and arbiter – thus the higher power (ἐπικράτεια) – of an assembly of kings.

In this respect, Athanaric's kin seems to have been the liaison that maintained a well-oiled mechanism by which the Constantinian house dealt with the Gothic kings. The position of *iudex*,¹⁶ then, was the very product of this new type of diplomacy. We can suppose that the annual subsidies were delivered to the Gothic *iudex*, who then distributed it to the *reges* in such a way as to keep their allegiance to him. For the emperors, it was certainly easier to deal with only one higher Gothic authority instead of many competing lesser kings, who might be willing to raid Roman provinces, if it could serve to assert their dominance over one another. Therefore, there was an incentive for the *iudex* and his associate kings to suppress any hostility towards Rome, as long as the gold kept flowing.

This certainly explains the uneasiness that took over the Goths after the death of Julian. Already by mid-365, Ammianus (26, 6, 11) narrates that, while he was preparing to go to Syria, Valens:

[...] was notified by reports from his commanders (*ducum*) that the people of the Goths, who were left unattended during that time and, therefore, became very aggressive, were preparing to invade the borders of Thrace, once they conspired in unison.

Behind the trope of the unstable and untrustworthy barbarian lies a certain agitation that put the Roman frontier officers (*duces*) on alert. Peter Heather (1994, p. 115-116) makes it one more episode in a long grudging anger of the Goths towards their dependence on Rome, but Noel Lenski (2002, p. 148-150) stresses that the Goths had been surprisingly reliable when it came to supplying soldiers at the emperors' request, and that there is no solid evidence of Gothic dissatisfaction with Constantine's treaty

(2, 21, 1 (βασιλεύοντος); 3, 6, 3) as well. But nowhere does Zosimus mention Athanaric by name, nor does he allude to him as βασιλεύς of the Goths. The expressions he uses, which are discussed further, suggest that, although Zosimus drew on Eunapius' narrative of the period, he understood Athanaric's role among the Goths as something other than that of a king or emperor.

¹⁶ Ammianus tells us of other barbarian *iudices*, in plural, among the Quadi (17, 12, 21) and the Huns (31, 2, 25), which point to a general meaning of "nobles" or even "chieftains". But Athanaric is the only barbarian individual whom Ammianus (27, 5, 6; 27, 5, 9; 31, 3, 4) calls a *iudex*, which means that, when talking about the Goths, this term carries a very specific meaning.

before the rise of Valens. Indeed, only a small force of *comitatenses* – those who were persuaded to join Procopius – was dispatched in response to the reports.

Herwig Wolfram (1990, p. 80) assumes that the Goths felt threatened because they were expecting an attack on the Danubian sector, given that barbarian soldiers returned home with news of the Roman defeat in Persia and the premature death of Julian. In fact, the Gothic leaders did not know at the time what would be the policy of the new dynasty regarding barbarians. From a Gothic point of view, supporting Procopius in hopes of maintaining the delicate functioning of this Tervingian power structure centred on the *iudex* – or even strengthening it by improving the terms of their treaty (Heather, 1994, p. 116) – was a bet that went wrong, but the odds were stacked against them. On one hand, the new emperors might not be willing to uphold the Constantinian treaty, and on the other hand a victorious Procopius who could not count on the assistance of Gothic soldiers against Valens would have been able to punish the Goths on the grounds of a broken treaty. Either way, the *iudex*'s position and his entourage would be in jeopardy.

To mitigate the possibilities of retaliation after the usurper's defeat, Athanaric claimed that he was bound to send soldiers to Procopius "because of the alliance and treaty" (κατὰ συμμαχίαν καὶ ὄρκους, Eun. fr. 37), and the Goths even presented letters from Procopius to strengthen their case (*firma defensione*, Amm. Marc., 27, 5, 1). But Valens was not inclined to accept what he understood as "a completely empty excuse" ([...] *excusationem uanissimam*, Amm. Marc., 27, 5, 2) and argued that Procopius was not a legitimate ruler. Valens did seem to have used this diplomatic violation as an excuse for a foreign war against an enemy much less challenging than the Persians as a way to boost his imperial position (Lenski, 2002, p. 127; Kulikowski, 2008, p. 139).

The war was fought over three consecutive campaigns during which Athanaric wisely managed to use Gothic knowledge of the terrain – and a bit of luck – to avoid direct and decisive confrontation with the Roman army, thus wearing down Valens' resources. In 367, the Goths fled to the Carpathians and the season ended with no major victory. The legions were mostly kept in the camps during the second year due to unusual flooding of the Danube and, finally, Valens was able to track down his enemy in 369. Although he achieved a minor victory over a small group of Goths, this came at the cost of a prolonged chase, and the army had to retreat because of the approaching steppe winter (Amm. Marc., 27, 5; Zos., 4, 10, 11). The emperor was determined to get his *Victoria Gothica*, for he reportedly refused numerous Gothic embassies, but the fear of a Persian offensive on the Near Eastern front, after Shapur II successfully took over Armenia and expelled Pap

from the throne,¹⁷ forced him to accept the request for peace negotiations, which was famously carried on by both leaders accompanied by their bodyguards on boats, in the middle of the Danube (Amm. Marc., 27, 5, 7-9).

In fact, the terms of the new treaty differed radically from the old Constantinian one. First of all, they were established as a compromise between both parties, not after a total surrender. The Goths delivered hostages (Amm. Marc., 27, 5, 10), commerce was restricted to two points along the Danube and annual subsidies were cut. In turn, the Goths were not obliged to send auxiliary troops to the emperors any more and had their lands recognized west of the Danube, as long as they recognized Roman territory (Them., *Or.*, 10, 135a-d; Zos., 4, 11, 4). Each of these terms were taken by different scholars to highlight a particular aspect of Valens Gothic policies. Peter Heather (1994, p. 115-119) assumes that, because the Goths didn't have to provide auxiliary forces anymore, they finally got what they wanted and disentangled themselves from Roman affairs. For Noel Lenski (2002, p. 136-137), Valens closed-borders policy had an ideological overtone. Distinction between Romans and barbarians had to be clearly marked in the official discourse. More recently, Timothy Hart (2024, p. 233-262) argued that the treaty was a backward-looking agreement, based on a worldview entrenched with older Scythian topoi. Valens had moved away from the sophisticated understanding of the barbarian world displayed by Constantine, who designed different policies for different peoples. But maybe that buys too much into Ammianus (27, 5, 8; 29, 1, 11; 30, 4, 2; 31, 14, 5; 8) and Eunapius' (*fr.* 44) portraits of the incompetent semi-literate, uncultured, ill-tempered and stubbornly rustic Pannonian emperor. One must remember that, in the grand narrative scheme of Ammianus, Valens is to be contrasted with Julian, "the most expert in public affairs and matters of war" (Amm. Marc., 25, 4, 7).

Surely, we must also not go so far as to consider Valens as some sort of emperor-philosopher, like Themistius (*Or.*, 11, 144b-145c) does when he evokes the Platonic ideal, but the emperor showed interest in schools and improving the library of Constantinople (*Codex Theodosianus* 14, 9, 2; Them., *Or.*, 6, 71c; 11, 146b) and was, after all, surrounded by advisors who were well known for their expertise in State affairs (Them., *Or.*, 9, 125d-126a). Therefore, it is hardly believable that Valens would take the initiative or be advised to abandon a Gothic policy that had worked so well for so many years, especially if we consider that his Gothic victory was not very convincing, despite his best propagandistic efforts.

¹⁷ When he talks of a *metus hostilis*, Ammianus (27, 5, 7) was undoubtedly referring to the growing fear that a long stay of the emperor on the Danubian sectors might present an opportunity for the Persians to attack (Lenski, 2002, p. 134).

Throughout these years, Themistius was the one charged with the task of providing Valens with the much-needed justification for his decisions, as well as sugarcoating for the outcomes of his campaigns, before the Greek-speaking aristocrats of the Eastern half of the Empire upon whom he exerted great influence (Heather, 1994, p. 116-118; Swain, 2021, p. 18). His tenth speech, delivered in 370, was a defence of Valens' agreement with the Tervingi presented in such a way as to make the point that it was Themistius' embassy who persuaded Valens to accept a diplomatic solution instead of pursuing total victory. Its central theme revolves around Valens' *philanthropia*, his role as the saviour of mankind, which prevented him from destroying the Goths, who are portrayed as part of the Empire, and actually saving them (Them., *Or.*, 10, 131). At a certain point, Themistius (*Or.*, 10, 140c-d) claims that Valens is the most fitting to be called *Gothicus*, for he spared the Goths from massacre. Although we do not have coins that commemorate specifically this Gothic victory, a few gold and silver issues from Constantinople celebrating a *Victoria Augustorum* might be connected to it (RIC IX, p. 202), since the title *Gothicus maximus* was extended to all members of the Valentinian dynasty (CIL VI, 1175). Valens also put forward an extensive building program aimed at fortifying the Danubian frontier to reassure the Eastern elites that no further trouble would come from Gothic land (Swain, 2021, p. 229-233, with references). Inscriptions on these fortifications also boost the narrative that the "Goths were beaten and defeated in barbarian soil" ([...] *in solo barb]arico victis superatisque Gothis*. CIL III, 6159).

Critics of the emperor, however, may have been able to see right through this veil. Ammianus puts forth quite unapologetically that Athanaric "couldn't be forced" (27, 5, 9) to cross the Danube and that Valens "was coerced to make peace in the middle of the river" (31, 4, 13). On the other hand, Eunapius (*fr.* 37) says quite ironically, given his hyperbolic construction (Blockley, 1983, p. 138, n. 81), that it was Valens' decisiveness and foresight that led the Gothic problem to a calm and safe conclusion. In more concrete terms, the plot orchestrated by individuals who used obscure divination techniques to reveal the name of Valens' successor, as well as the emperor's violent and excessive reaction to this, known as the Antioch Treason Trials of 372 (Kelly, 2018, p. 155-159; Silva, 2020, p. 5-6), suggest that Valens position was not strengthened after 369.

In view of this, it is possible that the treaty of 369 was not the endpoint of Valens Gothic ambitions, but rather an important tool in a much more elaborate plan. This is hinted at by the unusual term restricting trade. The Romans gained nothing from it. In fact, many Roman aristocrats may have lost commercial opportunities, and perhaps this is why Themistius had to insist upon defending this measure (Ziche 2011, p. 215). But the restriction really aimed at destabilizing the authority as a *iudex* of Athanaric, who

benefited the most from the subsidies and the commerce with the Roman provinces. Further trade restriction seems to confirm this. A law possibly of 374 (*Codex Iustinianus* 4, 63, 2) threatened with capital punishment all those who exported gold into barbarian land, clearly aiming to deprive the Gothic leader of the very material to maintain his network of privileges. At the same time, since imperial subsidies for Greek-Gothic translators were maintained (Them., *Or.*, 10, 135a), it is clear that a communication channel was still open (Kulikowski, 2008, p. 141) and the emperor was still interested in Gothic affairs. Therefore, Valens' strategy apparently was not to isolate the Goths entirely, but to pressure Athanaric to pledge allegiance to him as his kinsmen have done to Constantine, or to provoke his downfall in favour of another Gothic leader willing to take on the role.

It is hard to know the effects of this diplomatic move. Judging by Ammianus, our best source on the period, not much happened until the Huns invaded the Gothic homeland and a mass of refugees pleaded Valens for asylum in 376, although the soldier-historian had no interest whatsoever in the internal affairs of the barbarians, if it didn't affect Roman interests. But an internal Gothic conflict caught the attention of the church historian Socrates Scholasticus (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 4, 33, 1-5), mainly because it involved the conversion of many Goths. According to him, Fritigern, another Gothic leader, challenged the authority of Athanaric, resulting in a civil war. The latter had the upper hand in the conflict, which pressed the former to ask Valens for help. Roman military aid was crucial for Fritigern's turnaround, and because of that he converted to the religion of his benefactor (εὐηργέτητο). In the following sections (Soc., *HE.*, 4, 33, 6-9), Socrates describes the missionary activities of Ulfilas, who played a major role in converting the Goths, and the ruthless persecution that followed.

Since we know from Jerome's *Chronicle* and the *Passion of St. Saba* that this lasted from the end of Valens campaigns until at least 372, some scholars have discredited Socrates' account of the civil war. He might have confused the Romano-Gothic war and the dismantle of the Gothic confederacy under Hunnic pressure, thus inventing an internal conflict to explain Fritigern's conversion. But a close reconsideration of Socrates' text (Lenski, 1995, with references) makes it clear that his account of Ulfilas' missionary activities provides the context for the conflict between Fritigern and Athanaric. If that is the right way to read it, Socrates, albeit a later author, presents us with some unique information on Gothic affairs. Athanaric's persecution of Christians – who were maybe perceived as abiding to the religion of the enemy (Kulikowski, 2008, p. 141) – was his answer to internal problems arising because of the treaty of 369. Consequently, as Christianity grew among the Goths, other leaders saw an opportunity to challenge the authority of the *iudex* by gathering the support of the Christians (Hart, 2024, p. 253).

So, although Athanaric would still play an important role afterwards, Valens succeeded in destabilizing his authority to its very core. From this major power struggle, Valens got an important ally who was willing to assume client obligations and maybe even form bonds of loyalty with the new imperial family, like Athanaric's kin once had with the Constantinian house. Christianity was thus the new element at play in Romano-Gothic diplomacy. That explains why of all Goths who pleaded asylum, only those led by Fritigern and Alaviv got the permission to cross the Danube into Roman territory (Amm. Marc., 31, 4, 8). After the Goths revolted due to unfair treatment on the part of Roman officials, Fritigern even wrote private personal letters to Valens and used Christian priests as envoys to try and remedy the situation (Amm. Marc., 31, 12, 8-9).

One might wonder why Valens did not accept Fritigern's appeals for peace and disarmed the mounting tension right before the Battle of Adrianople. Since the revolt, Gothic raids on the camps of Thrace have heavily affected the provincials and taken its toll on the public image of the emperor. Once Valens reached Constantinople, we are told by Ammianus (31, 11, 1) and Socrates (*HE* 4, 38, 2-4) that he was quickly forced to leave the city by the populace, angered at his delay in dealing with the Gothic problem. In addition to this, Gratian's victory over the Lentienses pressured Valens to pursue a feat that would match that of his much younger western counterpart (Amm. Marc., 31, 12, 1), especially if we consider that his role had been downplayed in major dynastic developments (Eun., *fr.* 42). Valens authority in the Valentinian house was shaken and problems were now happening inside the Empire. A peace without a major real victory over the Goths would not suffice this time, and no amount of Themistius' rhetoric could turn this situation around. Misled by wrong information regarding Gothic numbers near Adrianople, Valens marched to meet his fate on the torrid afternoon of 9th August 378, in the hope of finally achieving his *Victoria Gothica*.

Concluding remarks

I have argued throughout this article that, instead of a rigid, ill-informed and merely reactive policy, Valens Gothic ambitions were modelled after Constantine's dealings with the Goths on the Danubian frontier, which was itself rooted in a well established imperial repertoire that goes as far back as the third century. When put in this broader perspective, the treaty of 369 was not an end in itself. It should rather be seen as part of a bigger effort at replicating the same mechanism that much benefited Constantinian emperors and secured a lasting peace on the frontiers for decades.

In many ways, Valens was successful. Although his triumph over Athanaric during the First Gothic War was questionable at best, the emperor did manage to strangle his means of maintaining the power over the Tervingians. Consequently, once Fritigern challenged Athanaric's position, Valens was quick to offer him support and he understood that the growing Gothic Christianity could be useful in this new reconfiguration of the *kindins* system. It all fell apart, however, when Valens had to face the unpredictable and the old ways did not provide safe answers anymore.

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