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The Role of Arianism in the Vandal Kingdom

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A tanulmány a vandál állam történetére vonatkozó alapvető forrásokat az arianizmus és ortodoxia viszonyán keresztül mutatja be. Közismert tény, hogy a barbár államok közül egyedül a vandálok voltak mindvégig ellenségesek az ortodox rómaiakkal szemben. Vajon mi indította őket arra, hogy ilyen intoleráns magatartást tanúsítsanak a fennhatóságuk alatt élő rómaiakkal, közülük is elsősorban a papsággal és a nemeséggel szemben. Alapvetően politikai és gazdasági jellegű indítékok húzódtak meg a vandál uralkodók intézkedései mögött. A források sok szenvedésről, rémtettéről és „esettanulmányról” számolnak be, melyek alapján úgy tűnik, a vandálok kegyetlenkedéseikkel tudatosan meg akarták félemlíteni a rómaiakat. Ez az „erős kéz politikája” a nagy múltú afrikai ortodox egyház jelenlétére adott kihívó válasz volt. A kis létszámú vandál nép nem tudta volna megőrizni vezető szerepét, ha nem határolódik el az Észak-Afrikában élő római lakosságtól és nem törekszik mindenáron identitásának megőrzésére. Identitásuk legfőbb kifejeződését pedig új vallásukban, az arianizmusban látták. Az arianizmus megvilágította másságukat, biztosította összetéveszthetetlenségüket a rómaiakkal. Az észak-afrikai ortodox püspökök fizikai megsemmisítésével javaik megszerzése is együtt járt. A papság mellett a nemeség is hasonló sorsra jutott, ami azt jelzi, hogy a gazdasági motívumok legalább olyan erősek voltak, mint a vallási indíttatás.

The word ‘Vandal’ has had a long ‘career’ over the centuries. Since being used initially to denominate a people, it has been degraded, and gained negative attributes that qualify a certain attitude. Behind the changes in meaning are *topoi* developed in the historical literature of Roman and Byzantine authors. Later, these *topoi* became widespread and common knowledge. Inevitably, on the basis of these beliefs, the image of senseless devastation has been interwoven with the Vandals for all time. Is it fair for succeeding generations to remember the Vandals in this way? To answer this question fully, the history of the Vandals would have to be investigated from many viewpoints. However, my study will focus on one point: what was the role of religion in the development of the above mentioned beliefs and in the preservation of the true identity of the Vandals? In searching for the answer to my question, I have relied on the historiographical works from the Early Middle Ages, because recent church historical studies do not cover the viewpoints sufficiently, and only emphasize the religious intolerance of the Vandals. In my opinion, the contrast between Arianism and Catholicism was a dominant factor in

the development of the identity of *gens vandalorum*, and this subject requires a thorough examination.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Vandals founded their independent state with its centre in Carthage, North Africa. Although the Roman Empire lost a significant part of its territory to the Vandals, the Romans suffered a greater blow when the Vandals became adept seaman. After occupying Carthage and a part of the Proconsularis provinces, the Vandals obtained important strategic territories in Africa. The new territories allowed them to take the initiative against Rome. As a consequence, a new power evolved beside Rome on the Mediterranean Sea. The Vandals occupied significant islands, including Corsica, Sardinia and the Balearics, and ruled the Western part of Sicily. As each strategically important territory of the Mediterranean Sea fell under their military control, the Vandals became a more powerful enemy of the Eastern Roman Empire. A brand new situation arose for the Vandals and Romans when the Vandals settled in Africa. The Vandals were separated from the Western Barbarian Kingdoms in the course of their migration and had to face the challenge of the Roman Empire alone. Also, the Vandals' relationship with the native Berbers was ambivalent. They occasionally fought together against the Romans, but most of the time they remained enemies. The Vandals maintained their rule of Africa for one hundred years, only to disappear without trace after 534.

Africa was also significant from the perspective of Christianity for economic and other reasons. Alexandria, with its Hellenistic traditions, became one of the most important intellectual centres, and its theological debates had a powerful effect on other territories. When the Vandals appeared, the area had already become Christian, and the idea of monasticism was spreading out from Africa through Western Europe¹. Prominent ecclesiastics like Cyprian, Fulgentius or Facundus were active in this continent, but the most notable was Augustine. His personality and works had a lasting effect on the era of the Late Antique and the Early Medieval Catholic Church. His role and importance grew beyond Hippo and the African province. He was to be a determinative personality for the Catholic Church throughout subsequent centuries. In spite of this, paganism survived, and it is well known there were still representatives of the pagan traditions in Italy and Spain in the 7th century².

Before the Vandals arrived on the Iberian Peninsula, they had been pagans. They were acquainted with Arianism through the Visigoths, and had become followers of Arius by the time they appeared in Africa. A conversion of religions took place between 409 and 429, a very short period, and could not have made far-reaching changes in the religious rituals for members of the *gens*.

Arianism derives from Alexandria, where Arius started to preach his subordinating thesis, for which he was excommunicated by the Canons of the Council held there in 318. Soon, many people were influenced by Arianism and, as a consequence, most of the East was divided into two factions. The quarrel became so passionate that the Ro-

man Emperor had to mediate, and he called the first universal Council in Nicea in 325, where the ideas of Arius were, again, condemned. In spite of the condemnation, Arius' dogmas were still alive and, moreover, they reached the Germans. The Germans were acquainted with Arianism through the missionary work of Wulfila.³ Wulfila created the Gothic alphabet and translated the Bible into the Gothic language. In other words, he created the intellectual basis of the Arian Church. According to the sources, numerous crowds were converted by his missionary activity.⁴ Arianism was spread among Germans by the Goths. The Germans established their own church, where holy services were held in vernacular languages, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy was simple.

The adoption of Arianism provoked many changes. On one hand, the Vandals became closer to the Romans, and on the other, they became farther removed from them because of other changes. Although the Romans rejected paganism, it encompassed the possibility of conversion to Catholicism, and the chance of developing a Roman alliance. That is, it provided advantages the Romans could exploit. Although Arianism represented Christianity, it was considered a heretical form, and therefore radically separated the Vandals and the Romans. As the Arians were considered degraded Christians, whose religion could not be accepted by the officially Catholic Rome, a yawning gap was created between them, just as if the Vandals had remained pagans. Romans considered paganism a 'child's disease' which could be treated easily, but they regarded Arianism as a harmful infection. This 'illness' devastated the West. We think of St. Ambrose, and how he struggled against Arianism in Milan. Roman authors identified the figures of the Arian and the Catholic with the Barbarian and the Roman, respectively. The question is, did the Barbarians consider their religion to be as important as the Romans did? Was it a conscious limitation for them? To answer these questions, we can only seek the help of the Early Medieval sources.

SALVIAN'S *DE GUBERNATIONE DEI*

To take the first step, it is worth studying the work *De Gubernatione Dei*, written by Salvian. In this book, different people are merged into one big crowd and characterized in a general manner. The author rarely mentions a *gens* by name. The monk of Lerinum, who had personally experienced the invasion of Gaul, was surprisingly indulgent, understanding and almost cordial to the Barbarians. He thought they were heretics because their knowledge was defective. They did not have a written culture, were ignorant of all literature, and knew only what they heard from their teachers⁵. They were not knowingly heretics. On the contrary, they were heretics because they were ignorant. They lived in error, but they erred with a good heart, not in hatred, but in the love of God, believing that they trusted and loved God. The above mentioned thoughts confirm the assertion that the author did not represent the Barbarians with the usual hostility, but described them as pure and uncontaminated 'savages' in an almost romantic way. The entire book emphasized the contrast between the pure morals of the Barbarians and the corrupted Romans. Salvian commented on events of the epoch when

he interpreted the German attacks as divine punishment for the sins committed by the Romans. He thought Christians lived an improper life: they frequented the circus and theatre⁶ which embodied pagan morals, and injustice and greed were everywhere.⁷ According to him, charity should have been learned from pagans, as they believed they should live together in goodwill and purity.⁸ In Salvian's opinion, the simplicity of the Barbarians was a mark of their goodwill, and he believed they were the tool of punishment in the hand of God, and that savageness and cruelty did not originate from them although they devastated the Roman Empire. According to his interpretation, the Vandals appeared in Africa as a divine punishment to stop the sins committed by the Christians.⁹ It seems clear that Salvian did not share in shaping a negative image of the Vandals. On the contrary, he excused them for their behaviour against the Romans. His fundamental reason for not examining the attitudes of the Barbarians was his interest for the other side of the situation, in scourging the moral faults of the Christians. The Barbarians were important to him as a tool with which he could criticize the Romans. In counterpoint, his creation of the Barbarian image as a spiritual whip emphasized a more positive view of them. However, in spite of Salvian's own viewpoint, the Vandal state in Africa became synonymous with cruelty and savagery in subsequent historical works and public opinion.

THE WORKS OF VICTOR OF VITA AND PROCOPIUS

We should study Africa if we want to understand the conditions which evolved after the Vandals arrived. There were very few sources available on the Vandals. Our guides can be Victor of Vita and Procopius, who investigated the history of the Vandal state. Victor of Vita was a native African ecclesiastic, the Bishop of Vita. He experienced the Vandal invasion and the reign of Geiserich and Hunerich, and was, therefore, a witness to historical events. His personal experiences are recalled in his work *Historia Persecutionis Africanae Provinciae*. Procopius was a Byzantine intellectual and worked as a secretary to Belisarius, the commander of Emperor Justinian. He went to Africa, where his duty was to record the history of the Vandalic War. Based on their writings and on our knowledge of words and events, we can stress two important events which have influenced the opinions of contemporaries and succeeding generations. One of them is the devastation of the Roman towns, and the other is the Vandals' relentless persecution of the Catholic Church. We can get closer to the 'riddle of the Vandals' if we examine these two subjects. If we view the first topic, we can obtain more information from Procopius. He wrote that Geiserich had the walls of every town, except Carthage, pulled down. The author not only noted the demolition itself, but commented on the events surrounding it as well. We can conclude there was no hatred or sudden anger behind the destruction of the towns: rather it was a conscious act, because Geiserich wanted to prevent further resistance from the towns, by pulling down their walls¹⁰. Later, this order helped Belisarius to occupy the Vandals' towns¹¹. It is clear that Geiserich's guiding principles were deliberate and strategic, rather than aimless or random, before he had the walls pulled down. However, he did not think of everything, and did

not count on the possibility of an external attack. Procopius noted scornfully that after the successful Byzantine attacks, Geiserich became an object of contempt when what had appeared to be wisdom turned out to be foolishness¹². Despite such remarks, the author did not represent Geiserich as a blood-thirsty savage, but as a leader who erred in his military calculations. In his work, Procopius gave an explanation of the relationship between cause and effect which was missing from other medieval writers. On the basis of the Byzantine author, we can exempt the Vandals from charges of senseless devastation. In contrast, senseless devastation was represented as an aim in the work of Victor of Vita. According to him, the Vandals almost took delight in destroying the walls and buildings, and, as a token of their savageness, he remarks: "the former beauty of the towns cannot be deduced from what they look like now"¹³. It is strange that a clergyman counted the pulling down of the theatre in Carthage amongst the sad losses, while other clergy considered these institutions the bulwark of paganism¹⁴. Think of Salvian and how he spoke contemptuously of those immoral Christians who visited theatres and circuses. In all likelihood, the Bishop of Vita did not ascribe to such a love of the theatre, but was taking every opportunity to charge the Vandals with cruelty and devastation. Therefore, he was not afraid of protecting profane pagan buildings and customs. He disclosed his prejudices through this method, showing his hostility towards the Vandals. He was surely affected by the difficulties he and the other clergy met, but it is disputable whether the events took place as they were depicted in his work. Obviously, we cannot refute his work *per se*, and archaeological researchers can help to clarify the issue¹⁵.

To explore the second event, I must briefly introduce some historical facts. The Vandals were able to occupy Carthage in 439 when Aetius' interest was captivated by the Goths and the Burgundians, resulting in a new situation in which their presence in Africa became constant thereafter. In 442, Emperor Valentinian III had no other choice but to acknowledge the Vandal domination over the occupied area which extended to the territories of the Africa Proconsularis (with Carthage), Byzacena and a part of Numidia (with Hippo Regius). With the conquest of Carthage, which played an important strategic role both in supplying corn to the Roman Empire and as a significant harbour, the Vandals were able to drive Rome into a corner and close the western part of the Mediterranean Sea. Although Roman rule included some territories in Africa, the area's most important harbour and its surroundings were under the Vandals' control, and so Rome became defenceless and threatened by extortion. At the same time, the Vandals also became defenceless, as they were surrounded by Roman and Berber enemies. There is no exact data on the population of the Vandals when they settled in Africa. Sources mention about eight thousand people, but it can be hypothesised that their number must have been insignificant in comparison to that of the Romans and the natives¹⁶, a fact which would point to the Vandals, extreme vulnerability.

According to Victor of Vita, the army of Geiserich, after occupying Carthage, pulled the bishops out of their churches and the nobles out of their homes, forcing them to flee naked¹⁷. Quodvultdeus, the bishop of Carthage, and most of the priests were forced

into exile. Geiserich gave away the Restituta church and the Arians received the Celerina and Scillitani basilicas as well¹⁸. Possidius asserted that only three churches remained in the possession of the Catholics: Carthage, Hippo and Cirta¹⁹. Vandals robbed the Catholic churches and took away gold and silver devotional objects, set the holy buildings on fire, and tortured, humiliated and exiled the clergy. Victor of Vita gives accounts of the horrible tortures²⁰. According to Geiserich's orders, only Arians could fill court offices²¹. In 456/457, after the death of Deogratias, the Bishop of Carthage, Geiserich would not allow the bishopric to be filled. Only under the rule of his son, with the protection of Emperor Zeno, was it possible to fill this position in 480/481. As far as we know, Hunerich was crueler to the Catholics, because he used violence to force them to become Arians²². Those who resisted were burnt, or their tongues were cut out²³. Finally, in 483, Hunerich issued an edict for an assembly of bishops and called upon the Catholic clergy to take part in a religious debate with the Arians²⁴. This debate was held, but it was unsuccessful for the Arians because Catholic bishops kept on resisting. All these events show that, from the beginning of their settlement, the Vandals had an uncooperative attitude towards the Roman inhabitants, especially the clergy and nobles. It is obvious that the Vandals were not really interested in dogmatic issues. Rather, their guiding principle when they formed their connection with the Romans was political practicality. Their small population and limited area of rule kept them in a state of uncertainty. In spite of that, they gained a key position which gave them an opportunity for maritime expansion. The Vandals took every chance they had when crossing the sea to attack towns and seize ships which they could plunder as *pirati* on the Mediterranean. This plundering generated income for the state and, at the same time, forced Rome to realize that the Barbarians had grasped the artery of Roman wealth by controlling Eastern and Western shipping on the Mediterranean.

In investigating religious persecution, we are supported by the above mentioned works. The work of Victor of Vita assists us because, in spite of the author's bias and involvement in the events, it is a relevant and standard work. However, the influence of other writers can be seen in pieces of the text of the *Historia Persecutionis Africanae Provinciae*. I think the Vandal persecution of the bishops and nobles is an accurate representation of the epoch on the whole, albeit with some exaggeration of details which cannot always be accepted as authentic. For example, Victor of Vita described the sufferings of Romans with expressions adopted from Victor of Aquileia in the first chapter of the first book. Victor also adopted the sentences of Rufinus on the siege of Jerusalem.²⁵

THE PERSECUTIONS AND THEIR AIMS

Arianism became significant in the political development of the Barbarian Kingdoms. The importance of religion was emphasized primarily by Roman authors. I believe, after Emperor Valens had let the Goths inside the *limes*, the concepts of 'outsider' and 'preventability' could no longer be linked to the Barbarians, so Romans had to change their defence strategy against them. By ending physical separation, the conflict was

transferred to the spiritual sphere. Actually, the Romans gave a 'national' character to Arianism. The Germans accepted it and their states kept this character for a long time. It is the general opinion that the Barbarian Kingdoms pursued a policy of religious tolerance towards the Romans, save for some periods, disregarding the Vandals. What can the reason for the relentless cruelty of the Vandals be? If we review the assertions of the historical sources, we can verify that the Vandal rulers had an intolerant attitude primarily towards two groups: the bishops and the landowner nobles. While the state provided considerable support for Arianism, Catholicism was under strict state restrictions and forced into the private sphere. When Victor of Vita described these events, he almost always emphasized the brutality of the devastation. The fiercest persecutions took place between 440 and 490. The *Historia Persecutionis Africanae Provinciae* mentioned by name the bishops that had to suffer long exiles, torture or both. It is striking that most persecutions were endured by the bishops of religious orders. We can find the reason easily in the surviving practices in Africa, where bishops are regarded as the only fit servants of the Eucharist. They were the leaders of the communities and therefore their numbers were considerably bigger than those in the religious orders of Western Europe. The relentless retaliation against Roman clergy can be interpreted in many ways. By removing the bishops, the Vandals acquired their possessions and estates, and could also seize the valuable textiles and precious metals from the churches which they closed. In addition to economic gain, there was the more important aspect of eliminating and defacing the Roman intellectual elite. As a consequence of executions and deportations, the Romans were deprived of their intellectual leaders. They were symbolically beheaded. We could say that the Catholic Church built up a kind of mental wall around Northern Africa and then the Vandals collapsed it by removing its most important pillars, the bishops. At the same time, the danger of resistance to the Vandals was decreasing because the role of bishops in the administrative governance of the towns was determinant; removing them resulted in vacancies in those positions. We can say that the Vandals pulled down the town walls both in a physical and figurative sense, the latter being regarded as the greater loss. In addition to prompt economic profit, powerful representation of Arianism became an important fact of consciousness in the Vandal Kingdom. This does not mean that Arianism became a determinant spiritual experience for all of the Vandal people, but it does mean that the Vandal ruler was able to handle the religious question as useful propaganda. We can state, almost positively, that after twenty to thirty years of religious change, only an insignificant minority of people were alienated from pagan customs, and the new faith was represented primarily by the court. This does not mean that the elite were staunch adherents of the new religion, but that it seemed to be useful to them. They were not guided by dogma, but they persisted in their faith to the utmost for political reasons. We should not forget that the Vandals had to face a difficult Roman challenge because those territories in North Africa which were now under Vandal rule had had serious Christian traditions. These traditions inspired the Vandals to give a definitive response. Perhaps their firmness of purpose was exaggerated. Beside the desire to seize material goods, they were inspired by the constant struggle for their survival. The danger of a threatened existence

developed a religion, the most important means of inheriting an identity. The Vandals did not have a written literature, but their legends and myths survived by oral tradition which could be said to confirm a consciousness of inheritance and origin. These roots of the pagan past are not appropriate when applied to Arianism. The Vandals had to find a new common bond which provided a different identity from the Romans and they managed to find it in their religion.

NOTES

- ¹ Hermit settlements of Sketis and Nitria acquired such a significant reputation that the fathers of the desert were visited by many western lay persons. Among them were Cassian and Rufinus who saw this area, and their experiences were recorded in their works *Collationes* and *Lausica*.
- ² J.N. Hillgarth, *Popular Religion in Visigothic Spain*, in J. Edward (ed.), *Visigothic Spain: new approaches*, Oxford 1980, pp. 3-60.
- ³ Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. MGH AA, V, 1 53-138, p. 267.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 267.
- ⁵ Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei*, V, 2 edited by Pauly F, Vienna 1883.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, 3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, V, 11.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, V, 11.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, VII, 13.
- ¹⁰ Procopius, *De bello vandalico*, III, V, 8, in Procopius, *Wars*, ed. Dewing, Procopius 1-5, Cambridge, Mass. 1914-1928.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, V, 9.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, V, 10.
- ¹³ Victor Vitensis, *Historia persecutionis africanae provinciae sub Geiserico et Hunirico regibus. Wandalorum*, I, 8.
- ¹⁴ See Augustine, *Confessiones*; Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei* cit.
- ¹⁵ The basic literature on the history of the Vandal state: C. Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique*. Paris 1955.
- ¹⁶ Victor Vitensis, *Historia persecutionis africanae* cit., I, 1; Procopius, *De bello* cit.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 14.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 9; I, 15.
- ¹⁹ Possidius was the secretary of Augustine and later on he became Bishop of Hippo. He wrote the biography of Augustine. *Vita Augustini*, 30.
- ²⁰ e.g. I, 37: "the servants of God were to have their feet bound behind the backs of four running horses and perish together in the thorny places of the woods, the bodies of those innocent ones, as they were dragged to and fro, being cut to pieces by the thorn bushes in the woods."; I, 33: "...strong cudgels were to be made with jagged edges like palm branches,....as these beat upon their [priest's] backs they would not only break their bones but, as the spikes bored through them, would remain inside them".
- ²¹ Victor Vitensis, *Historia persecutionis africanae* cit., I, 43.
- ²² Procopius, *De bello* cit., III, VIII, 3-4.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, III, VIII, 4.
- ²⁴ Victor Vitensis, *Historia* cit., II, 39.

- ²⁵ P. Wynn, *Rufinus of Aquileia's Ecclesiastical History and Victor of Vita's History of the Vandal Persecution*, "Classica et mediaevalia", 41, 1990, pp. 187-198, p. 189.

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