Theodoric the Ostrogoth: Barbarian King or Traditional Roman Ruler?

By Ferdinand Goetzen
Was Theodoric the Ostrogoth a barbarian king or a traditional Roman ruler?

Born in Pannonia in 454 to the Amali nobleman, Theodemir, Theodoric the Great spent his youth and formative years as a hostage in Constantinople before returning to his people in 471 to succeed his father. Not the only Gothic leader in lower Moesia, Theoderic had to face Theoderic Strabo. After defeating Strabo, Theoderic united the Gothic peoples in 484. Following his victory, Theodoric was recognized by Byzantine Emperor, Zeno, as King of the Ostrogoths receiving the title of Patrician, the office of Magister Militum and the prestigious position of Roman Consul. In 488 Zeno sent Theoderic to overthrow Odovacre, the Germanic king of Italy who had previously overthrown the Emperor Romulus Augustus in 476. After years of warfare, treaties and betrayal, Theoderic finally defeated Odovacre, murdering him with his own hands in 493.

Successfully claiming Italy, Theodoric the Great became King, ruling as a representative of the Byzantine Empire. Though differing from his predecessor in loyalty to the East, he followed Odoacer’s example of maintaining the Western Roman Empire’s political infrastructure. Over the years, Theodoric’s rule has left many historians wondering whether his reign was that of a Roman ruler or rather a Barbarian king.

This essay intends to argue that Theodoric the Great was a new and unique ‘brand’ of ruler, one keen to adopt and further Roman culture without forgetting his Barbarian heritage, and can therefore not be simply labelled as either Roman or Barbarian. In order to do this, one must analyse Theodoric’s rule and explain why the King of the Ostrogoths not only to maintained many elements of Roman rule, but fostered them.
Similarly to his predecessor, Theoderic ruled as representative of the eastern Roman Emperor. Unlike Odoacer however, he remained loyal to Constantinople, allowing him to rule in peace, almost independently\(^1\). Odoacer’s short-live rule meant that little had changed in the former-empire’s governmental system. Upon acceding to power, Theoderic saw the benefit in keeping the Roman political infrastructure and those who worked most efficiently within it. Theoderic desired to restore Italy to its former glory and spread Roman Civilitas\(^2\).

Theoderic preserved much of the former court and allowed Romans to play an important part in the running of his kingdom. Under Theoderic, Romans were allowed to live under Roman law while Goths lived under their own laws. Those who occupied an important role under Romulus Augustulus such as Boethius and Cassiodorus were awarded prominent positions in Gothic Italy’s government\(^3\).

Theoderic’s court was heavily Romanized with many Roman courtiers and officials, mirroring the court in Constantinople. In 520 Boethius became Theoderic’s magister officiorum. Cassiodorus, a historian with great experience in correspondence, replaced Boethius in 523\(^4\). Faustus, another notable Roman, became Consul, Quaestor, Patrician and Praetorian Praefect under Theoderic enjoying extensive patronage. Even Liberius, a Roman who had remained loyal to Odovacre and refused to surrender to Theoderic, received a place in the administration\(^5\). The positions of rerum privatarum, patrician, censor, magistrate and patimonii were all exclusively occupied by Romans\(^6\).

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\(^3\) Ibid, pp. 69-70
\(^6\) Moorhead, J. (1983) *The Last Years of Theoderic*, pp. 111-114
Theoderic’s government was run by a Roman administration with Roman methods. Under his rule, the senate was preserved and respected as it had been during the Empire, despite the fact that only the Emperor in Constantinople held the power to nominate senators. Though Theoderic ‘tweaked’ the Roman political machine to adapt it to his people, the major aspects of his government, such as law, the court and his administration, were either inspired by or preserved from the Empire. The edictum Theoderic, for example, was entirely derived from Roman works. The Anonymus Valesianus states that Theoderic had no desire to found a new State and let the two nations coexist without being amalgamated. Ruling over a mixed populace, Theoderic’s decision to accept the Roman facet of his society allowed for relative peace. Many Romans stayed in the region and continued working for Theoderic, accepting him as their ruler and even competing for the highest positions within his administration. The willingness of Romans to continue working under Gothic rule suggests that Theoderic was in no way hostile towards Roman tradition and culture.

In addition to preserving the Roman political system Theoderic kept close ties to the Vatican, acting as arbitrator during the controversial papal elections between Laurentius and Symmachus in 498 as well as during the schism. Despite his ‘heretical beliefs’, Theoderic was a friend of the Catholics, allowing for total freedom to practice Catholicism within his kingdom.

Theoderic was also a patron of roman art and culture, dubbed one of the saviours of Roman culture. Theoderic invested significant funds into restoring and furthering Roman art and architecture. He had Pompey’s theatre restored and commissioned the

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8 Ibid, pp. 31-33
construction of the church St Apollinaire⁹. Restorations and construction were pursued in the style of Roman architecture, the greatest example of which is Theoderic’s capital, Ravenna, which throughout his reign was transformed into a vibrant city of art, culture and prosperity¹⁰.

The conservation and development of Roman society under Theoderic suggests that he was a Roman ruler. Some argue that his being raised as a hostage in Constantinople influenced his views and manner, leading him to identify with Roman culture. Certain scholars believe that it is likely that the Goths had become a ‘Romanized’ people by the time they ruled Italy¹¹. As Christians, it’s possible that they identified with Roman culture, especially if one believes, as Walter Goffart does, that there is likely no true barbarian identity. Elements of ‘Gothic-ness’ did however play an important part throughout Theoderic’s reign.

While Roman culture and tradition played an integral role in the running of Theoderic’s kingdom, one cannot claim that he was a Roman king. Theoderic introduced Gothic elements into many aspects of his society. The most significant Barbarian element to Theoderic’s reign is identity. Despite being raised in the Byzantine court, his actions and ability to unify the Ostrogoths under his leadership suggest that there must have been some sort of identification factor. The fact that Theoderic commissioned Cassiodorus to write the 12-volume ‘History of the Goths’ could suggest that he either felt or longed for a noble Gothic identity¹². Similarly, Theoderic giving his daughter a Gothic name, Amalasuntha, also hints towards

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⁹ Ibid, pp. 35-37 & 70
¹¹ Burns, T.S. (1980) The Ostrogoths: Kingship and Society, pp. 2-4
¹² Jordanes (1915) The Origin and Deeds of the Goths, Preface-II
barbarian continuity within the rule of Italy. Marrying Amalasuntha off to the Visigothic king Eutharic suggests that Theoderic identified more with his Gothic counterparts than the Romans given that a Roman alliance might have been ‘politically valuable’. Some argue that it was a deliberate choice to unify the two Gothic kingdoms rather than invest in the possibility of a future Gothic-Roman Emperor\textsuperscript{13}. Whether this choice was political or cultural can only be speculated upon. Gothic culture was present in literature, art and especially architecture. Though heavily inspired by Rome, many artistic and literary works show significant traces of Gothic society. The Basilica of Sant’Appollinare Nuovo was built to serve the Arian church. Many buildings in and around Ravenna have hints of Gothic architecture, a major example of which is Theoderic’s mausoleum, where elements of ‘Gothic-ness’ are apparent\textsuperscript{14}.

The Gothic aspects of Theoderic’s rule were not only cultural, but also political. While there was great emphasis on preserving religious and cultural harmony, there was a clear separation between Arian Ostrogoths and Catholic Romans, hinting at potential separation due to identity. Intermarriage, for example, was outlawed under Theoderic. This separation is also evident when analysing the societal structure under Theoderic\textsuperscript{15}. Both peoples lived separated under their own laws and customs and there was a clear division of labour in which Romans ran the administration while the Goths were in charge of the military. Nearly all military roles were offered exclusively to Goths\textsuperscript{16}. Other positions within the church and the administration were also offered to Goths such as Gudila and Bedculphas, who were introduced as

\textsuperscript{13} König, I. (1997) \textit{Aus der Zeit Theoderichs des Grossen [...]}, pp. 43-45
\textsuperscript{14} Hen, Y. (2007) \textit{Roman Barbarians: The Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West}, pp. 35-37
\textsuperscript{15} König, I. (1997) \textit{Aus der Zeit Theoderichs des Grossen [...]}, pp. 33-36
\textsuperscript{16} Sinnigen, W.G. (1965) \textit{Administrative Shifts of Competence Under Theoderic’}, pp. 458-461
‘overseers’ into the Roman Synods. Chroniclers of the time claim that Theoderic distributed a third of the land to his people. Though many dispute this claim, few deny the fact that the Goths must have reaped significant benefits under Theoderic, compared to their Roman counterparts.

Towards the end of his reign and despite having successfully ruled over a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse population for three decades, Theoderic’s established harmony began to collapse. With the resolution of the schism, the Vatican and the Byzantine Empire began persecuting Arians throughout the Empire. The banning of Arianism by Justinian I led to significant changes in the later years of Theoderic’s rule. Theoderic turned against many Romans in his administration, such as Boethius who was convicted of treason and executed in 425. Tensions grew as Theoderic became increasingly paranoid about the imperial threat. It is thought that Theoderic initiated a campaign against the Roman Catholics by publishing an edict ordering the ejection of all Catholics from their churches. However, these plans never came to fruition due to his death in 526.

Historians disagree on whether this late backlash was a simple reaction to Arian persecution or a genuine ‘relapse’ into barbarism. Theoderic’s reaction does suggest that the religious and cultural tolerance under his rule was primarily political rather than cultural.

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19 Ibid, pp. 113-116
When analysing the facts, it becomes clear that both Gothic and Roman elements were prominent under Theoderic’s reign. The key to understanding the nature of his rule is to analyse his intentions in order to determine which decisions were purely political and which cultural.

By most measures, Theoderic was a very successful ruler; no ruler had administered Italy with comparable efficiency since the early 5th century. Theoderic was wise and well-educated and by the time of his reign, had experienced his fair share of power politics. Though some believe that the Roman aspects of Theodoric’s rule hint towards him being a Roman ruler, it seems more plausible that he adopted Roman methods, culture and infrastructure because of their usefulness in his kingdom. The reason why Theoderic chose to keep people such as Cassiodorus and Boethius in his administration is that he knew that they were efficient and even necessary for the successful running of his kingdom. Rather than focus on culture, identity and nepotism, Theoderic appointed individuals to positions based on meritocracy. One example is that of Bishop Severus, who was put in charge of financial estimates because he had demonstrated his ability to deal with finances in the past. This would explain why Romans received most administrative posts while Goths received mainly military positions; positions were granted according to capability. Similarly, the Goths preserved Roman art, philosophy, road systems, baths and aqueducts because they were the best the world had to offer; there was no reason to change them.

This would suggest that Theoderic’s insistence upon Roman continuity was pragmatic and based on a desire to revive the old Empire under new Gothic leadership.

Theoderic made decisions in accordance with what he believed would further his

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22 Moorhead, J. (1992) Theodoric in Italy, pp. 1-4
23 Ibid, pp. 77-78
24 Ibid, pp. 242-243
kingdom. This line of thought explains why he decided to remain loyal to the Eastern Empire; it was most beneficial for the development of Ostrogothic Italy.

Similarly, Theoderic’s tolerance of various cultures and religions might be deeply rooted in his desire to rule successfully. Adopting Roman elements into his reign furthered his rule politically, creating a tolerant society allowed for social and religious harmony. Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Jews were all tolerated and treated equally in the eyes of the law. Theoderic used ideological belief to justify his claim to the throne and adapted much of his rule to the cosmopolitan nature of his society. The degree of religious liberalism under Theoderic the Great was previously unheard of at the time. Theoderic has been quoted saying “We cannot command the religion of our subjects, since no-one can be forced to believe against his will.” Religious order allowed for social tranquillity and efficient rule. It is therefore likely that Theoderic’s tolerance was more political than personal, especially given the time of his rule.

Theoderic’s backlash towards the end of his reign would support the idea that his religious tolerance was political. When efforts to preserve harmony between the peoples of his kingdom began to fail, he reacted very harshly and cracked down on those that he believed threatened his system.

Some might argue that Theoderic was neither a Barbarian, nor Roman and that he himself lacked a proper identity, which would explain his tolerance of other cultures and religions. Born a Gothic Arian, he grew up in the court of Constantinople where

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25 Ibid, p. 95
26 Ibid, pp. 96-98
he learned about and adopted much of Roman culture. Many Goths of the time would have identified with Roman culture to a certain extent and this is demonstrated by their willingness to coexist with the Romans under Theodoric.

Theoderic had a desire to revive the Roman Empire under Gothic rule and was able to incorporate ‘the best of both worlds’ into his reign. His background qualified him to create a system in which Gothic and Roman elements could flourish and where political efficacy took precedence over ethnic favouritism. It therefore seems fair to say that Theoderic was neither a Roman nor Barbarian ruler, but a new breed of ruler altogether.
Bibliography


