

The Letter of the Church in Gothia, about St. Saba the Goth

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Summary:

The life of St. Saba the Goth was a subject in many Romanian theologians' work, and continues to preoccupy us because it reveals a piece of the history of the penetration and consolidation of the Christianity in the area inhabited by our antecesors.

This article comprises the presentation of the Greek text of the *Letter of the Church in Gothia to the Church in Cappadocia*, with the Latin version of *Acta sanctorum*, a translation to Romanian and one to English, as well as some commentaries at the end. This Letter was partially published, the Greek text and a translation, in *Fontes Historiæ Dacoromanæ*, vol. II. It was also presented earlier, by the H. E. Bishop Gherasim of Timiş (1891). I considered that this text deserved a new full presentation, so it could be used in the light of the advancements of the historical knowledge. The final commentaries in this article are just a preamble that invites ulterior discussions.

Keywords:

Saba the Goth, The Letter of the Church in Gothia, hagiography

Translation from Greek to English

The Greek and Latin texts of *Acta sanctorum* are given in the Romanian version of this article.

Title: "The Martyrdom of the Saint Saba the Goth (Ex Ms. Bibliothecæ Vaticanæ num. 1600)." Prologue: "The Church of God, which is in Gothia, to the

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Church of God which is in Cappadocia, and to all the local Churches of the universal Church: the mercy, the peace, and the love of God the Father and of our Lord Jesus Christ shall increase."

"1. The word of the blessed Peter, that «in every nation, he that fears» the Lord «and works righteousness, is accepted by him»,² now it is utterly fulfilled. For this became true also in the case of the blessed Saba, who is the martyr of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Because, being Goth by his kind, and spending his life in Gothia, in the middle of some twisted and perverted³ peoples, he showed himself as a luminary⁴ into the world, imitating the saints and, like them, he remarked himself triumphing in those in accordance with Christ. Because he became zealous from his childhood in no other things but in his devotion for our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ. He led himself by this perfect virtue to become a perfect man, through the full knowledge of the Son of God.⁵ He also cooperated, in everything, for good, with those who love God, reaching the reward of the calling from above, as he longed from his youth; and he fought openly against the enemy, prevailing over the wickedness of life, being in peace with everybody."

"2. The grace of the commemoration and of the work of those devoted, as well as his conclusion into the Lord, do not let us to pass them over in silence, but we shall record his excellence. For he was righteous in his faith, pious, ready for all the correct submission, fair, unskilful in his speech, but not in knowledge, speaking the truth, silencing the idolaters, without prouiding himself, but, as it is proper for the humble ones, being obedient, peaceful, and not audacious in his

² Acts 10:35: «But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.»

³ The Latin translation *perversæ* is good for *διεστραμμένης*, so it could be translated also in Romanian with "perverse". I avoided, however, this neologism in the Romanian translation, because the traditional word "stricate" (broken, spoiled, corrupted) gives enough all the semantic shades necessary for the understanding of the text.

⁴ The word *φωστήρ* can also be translated with "star" (like in the Latin version, *stella*), but I preferred the generic term "luminător" (luminary, light), as it was traditionally translated it into Romanian in *Genesis* 1:14. Notice that the original text also prefers there **מְאֹרֹת**, and *φωστήρες*, "luminaries" (KJV: "lights", but I wanted to be even more specific), and not the usual words for the "star" (**כּוֹכַב**, and *ἄστρον*, cf. *ἀστήρ*, as in *Numbers* 24:17), because it is included the Moon, too, and other celestial objects that can reflect the light towards the Earth (e. g. Venus or other planets).

⁵ Cf. *Ephesians* 4:13: «μέχρι κατανήσωμεν οἱ πάντες εἰς τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον, εἰς μέτρον ἡλικίας τοῦ πληρώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ» = «Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:»

speech, earnest for all the good work,⁶ singing in the Church, being very skilled doing this, without wealth, without possessions, except of some who are thought to be necessary, sober, moderated in everything, uninitiated with the women, retreated, observing the fastings, insisting in prayers without vanity, and subjecting everything to the good reason, working those which are proper, without being interested in those which are useless, having a faith entirely without reproach, working through love,⁷ and nothing could disturb him to speak always freely in the Lord."

"3. Because not just once, but many times, before his passing, working with faith, proved devotion. For when they starter, for the first time, the rulers of Gothia to turn against the Christians, forcing them to eat from those that were sacrificed to the idols, some of the heathens from the village where Saba was living, advised to make the Christians among them, which were present, to eat from the meat that was not sacrificed, instead of that which was sacrificed to the idols, for those which were persecuted among the people, for those which were keeping themselves pure, to deceit the persecutors. But, finding this out, the blessed Saba, not only he didn't eat from the mentioned foods, but coming among them, he confessed to everyone, saying: «If someone eats these meats, he cannot be a Christian.» And he stopped everybody to fall into the trap of the devil. Because of that, those who plotted that fraud banned him from the village, but, after a while, they convinced him to come back.

The cunning being committed again, according to the custom of the Goths, some heathens from the mentioned village, giving sacrifices to the demons, they were just about to swear to the persecutor that there is no other Christian in their village. But Saba, showing himself again, and, coming in the middle of the gathering, said: «Nobody should swear for me, because I am a Christian.» Then, standing in front of the persecutor, the villagers swore, hiding them, that there is no other Christian in their village. Hearing this, the prince of the iniquity ordered to be brought Saba to him. When they have brought him, he asked those which were present if he had any more goods. But, being answered that he had nothing else to swaggar with, they mocked him."

⁶ Cf. 2 *Timothy* 2:21: «εις πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ἡτοιμασμένον» = «prepared unto every good work». 2 *Timothy* 3:17: «ἵνα ἄρτιος ἦ ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος, πρὸς πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ἐξηρτισμένος.» = «That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.». *Titus* 3:1: «πρὸς πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ἐτοιμὸς εἶναι» = «to be ready to every good work».

⁷ *Galatians* 5:6: «ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ οὔτε περιτομή τι ἰσχύει οὔτε ἀκροβυστία, ἀλλὰ πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη.» = «For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but **faith which worketh by love.**»

"4. Later, starting a big persecution, from the part of the wicked ones in Gothia, against the Church of God, before the holy day of the Easter, he wanted to go to another city, to the priest Gutthica, to celebrate the feast along with him. Getting out, on the way, he saw a man, very big and bright in his appearance, who said to him: «Return and go to the priest Sansala». But Saba answered, saying: «Sansala had gone away from home». For Sansala ran away because of the persecution and stayed into the Roman Empire.⁸ But then, for the holy day of the Easter, he turned back recently. Because Saba didn't know about his return, this is why he answered that way to him whom appeared to him, and, fighting against it, he continued towards the priest Gutthica. Not willing to subject himself to that commandment, suddenly, having a good weather in that moment, an endless amount of snow appeared on the face of the earth, and it was blocking the way, as no one could pass through it. Then, understanding that the wish of God is to stop him to go further, but to let him go to the priest Sansala. And, blessing God, he went back, and when he saw Sansala he rejoiced, and he told, to him and to many others, the vision that he had on the way. And he spent the Easter day with him. And in the third night, after the feast, behold that, from the party of the wicked, Atharid, the son of the chief Rhotheos, rading with the army of the wicked, he stopped in that village, and, finding the priest sleeping in his house, he ordered to be bound. The same for Saba, who was pulled out naked from his bed, and thrown into ties. They tied the priest of the chassis of the chariot. They got Saba, naked as he was born, dragged through thorns, then, again, they burnt him, chased and hit him with woods and whips. They have done these, without mercy, against the servants of God."

"5. But enduring the cruelty of the enemy and faith are interweaved in the righteous man. And, once that day had come, he said, praising himself in the Lord, facing his persecutors:⁹ «Not to torment me, pushing me over the edges of the thorns, you dragged me naked and barefoot? Notice if my legs are stumbling, and if I have on my body the traces and the wounds that you have inflicted to me!» Therefore, after they have seen that nothing shows on his body, of which they have done to him without mercy, they raised the axle of the chariot and, putting it on his shoulders and they stretched his hands on the ends of the axle, the same with his feet, stretching them on another axle, they tied them. And, after they bonded him on the axles, they laid him down, on his back, on the ground, and,

⁸ In text: ἐν τῇ Ῥωμανίᾳ.

⁹ Cf. *Galatians* 6:14: «But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.» - «Ἐμοὶ δὲ μὴ γένοιτο καυχᾶσθαι εἰ μὴ ἐν τῷ σταυρῷ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, δι' οὗ ἔμοι κόσμος ἐσταύρωται καὶ γὰρ κόσμῳ».

almost all the night, they didn't stop torturing him. And when the public¹⁰ went to sleep, a woman came and untied him, for he was awoken all the night, to prepare the food for those which were in the house. But he, being untied, stood in his place, without fear, doing her job, together with the woman. And, coming the morning, the faithless Atharid learnt this out, and he ordered to be tied on his hands and hung on the beam of the house."

"6. Not long afterwards they come some emissaries from Atharid, bringing foods that were sacrificed to the idols. Then they said to the priest and to Saba: «Atharid ordered for this to be provided to you, for you to eat them, and to save your souls from the death.» Answering, the priest said: «We shall not eat these, because this is not allowed to us. But urge Atharid to order for us to be crucified, or any other way in which he would like to destroy us.» And Saba said, too: «Who sent these?» They said: «The master Atharid!» But Saba said: «The only Master, God, is in heaven, and Atharid is a faithless and accursed man. Also, these foods are impure, unholy and to be doomed, as the one who sent them, Atharid.» After Saba said these, one of the servants of Atharid burnt by anger and, taking the mace¹¹, he hit it on the chest of the saint, piercing him with the point of the spear, so the public thought that, for the multitude of his wounds which were inflicted to him, he was going to die on the spot. But, triumphing through the passion of his faith over the torture of the persecutors, he said for the hearing of the public:¹² «Now you think you wounded me with the mace, but you must understand that this didn't hurt me, as if I would be stung by a thread of wool.» And, as a seen sign of his words, he demonstrated it by deeds: for he didn't cry out, neither did he groan, as in torments, and there was no trace of a wound on his body."

"7. Then, seeing this Atharid, he ordered him to be killed. Thus, the servants of the misdeed tortured the priest Sansala tied, and they took Saba and got him to be drown into a river, called Mouseos (Musæus). And the blessed, remembering the command of the Lord, and loving his neighbor as himself,¹³ said: «What sin did the priest, that he could not die with me?» But they told him: «It is not up to you to be concerned about these.» After they said these, he cried in the joy of the Holy Spirit and he said: «Blessed be Thou, Lord, and The One Who is hallowed in Thy name, Jesus, for ever, Amen. Because Atharid stocked himself still into the eternal death and destruction, but he is sending me to the ever lasting life. For thus Thou

¹⁰ τῶν δημίῳν – "the public, the audience".

¹¹ Or: *bludgeon*.

¹² *Ad litteram*: "he said to the public". But it is clear that he addressed to the one who wounded him, in the hearing of the public.

¹³ Cf. *Matthew* 19:19; 22,39 etc.

findest confort¹⁴ in Thy servants, Lord, Our God.» And walking all the way, he thanked God that, through the undeserved passions he suffered in this time, He led him to the glory which reveals itself in the saints. When he was taken on the riverside, those who held him said to each other: «Let's untie this innocent man! For where would Atharid learn this from?» But the blessed Saba said to them: «Why do you talk nonsens and do not what you were ordered to do? I see what you cannot see. Behold, how they stood forward, in grace, those who came to welcome me.» Then, they got him down, into the water, and he was thanking and blessing God. For his spirit served God¹⁵ until the end. They therew him and, putting a wood¹⁶ on his neck, he had sunk to the deep. And so he passed away,¹⁷ in the Thursday of the week after the Easter, in the day before the ides of April,¹⁸ under the emperors Valentinianus and Valens, consuls being Modestus and Arintheus."

¹⁴ Here, *εὐδόκησας* (ind., aor., act., 2nd, sg.). The Romanian Orthodox translations preferred the expression "am binevoit" (I am well pleased) for *εὐδόκησα* (*Matthew* 3:17; 17:5; *Mark* 1:11; *Luke* 3:22; *2 Peter* 1:17). Cornilescu used "îmi gădesc plăcerea" (I found my pleasure), and the Protestant versions follow his example. The fact is that the Greek verb *εὐδοκέω* is not easy to be translated in any other language. The Orthodox translations tried to avoid a hedonist interpretation, because the pleasure evoked by the verb in this case is rather a joy. This is why I followed myself the Orthodox version, which I consider to be appropriate for the Romanian language and the context. Where the verb is used in negative sentences, referring to the disapproval of some sins, the Orthodox translations use also "a plăcea" - "to please / like" (*Hebrews* 10,6 – cf.: *Psalms* 39/40,10/7; 50/51,18/17). Investigating the problem in the Hebrew Bible (the *Psalms* 51:18 is, in the Hebrew Bible: «כִּי לֹא-תִהְיֶה עֹלָה לֹא תִרְצֶה», *lit.*: "For Thou are not delighted by the sacrifice, and Thou are not pleased by the whole burnt-offering"), we could notice that the ambiguity (productive, otherwise) starts here, as well, with words that express the will, the desire and the pleasure in the same time. The word רָצָה means "desire, want, wish, purpose...", and, in verbal form, רָצִיתִי / רָצִיתָ, "to want, to be interested in, to take pleasure in". The second Hebrew verb in the quoted verse is רָצִיתָ, from רָצָה, "be pleased with, enjoy, accept favorably". The noun of the same word family, *εὐδοκία*, is also used in the Bible (*Matthew* 11:26).

¹⁵ Greek *ἐλειποδρῆσεν*, Romanian "a liturghisit".

¹⁶ *ξύλον* "an instrument of punishment, a wooden collar, put on the neck of the prisoner; stocks, in which the feet were confined; gallows". However, if the collar would have been really made of wood, floating on the water, only placing it in a certain position that would force the had to stay below, would explain how would this make him drown.

¹⁷ The Latin version expresses here very well the Greek meaning, even if as an interpretative translation: "Martyrio coronatus est", "he was crowned as a Martyr".

¹⁸ The ides (Lat. *idus*) were marking middle of the month: the fifteenth day of March, May, July, and October; the thirteenth of every other month. Thus, the martyrdom took place in the 12th of April.

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"8. Then, dragging him out of the water, the killers disbanded him unburied and they retired from there. But no dog and no beast attacked him at all. And the brothers sought to take the relics, to remove and wrap them. Junius Soranus, the most enlightened commander¹⁹ of the Scythia, worshiper of the Lord, sent trustworthy men to carry him across from the lands of the barbarians into the Roman Empire²⁰. And he offered him as a precious gift to his homeland, and as a glorious fruit of the faith for Cappadocia, he sent him for your devotion, through the will of the clergy,²¹ these being arranged by God for those who stand by Him and for [His] worshipers²². Completing thus, in the day he took the crown for his martyrdom²³, the spiritual gathering, announce the brothers that are far away, so that, in all the universal²⁴ and apostolic Church, so they could fulfil [the service] rejoicing, praising God, Who chose His own servants by Himself.²⁵ Salute all the saints; you are saluted by all those who were persecuted along with us. To Him, Who can always lead us with His grace and gift to the kingdom above the heavens, glory, devotion, power, [and] majesty, together with The Only Born Son and with the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen."

Commentaries

The letter translated in this paper belongs to a correspondence that most probable was preserved only partially, between Saint Basil the Great and some officials of "Gothia" and "Scythia" – names which designated, in the 4th century AD, the territories around the lower Danube, to the north, and to the south, respectively. The author of this letter was, most likely, the one identified by Fr. Prof. M. Păcurariu: the bishop Betranion of Tomis.²⁶ Junius Soranus is mentioned at the end. The letter was written in the name of the Church, thus, by a bishop, which couldn't be Ascholius of Thessalonica, but only the bishop of Tomis, the only one close enough of Gothia, to consider himself its shepherd.

¹⁹ Δούξ "duke, military commander".

²⁰ Romania: εἰς τὴν Ῥωμανίαν.

²¹ τοῦ Πρεσβυτερίου, presbyterium, clergy".

²² Lit.: φοβούμενοις "fearing".

²³ Lit.: ἀγωνισάμενος, "fighting", "in the day he took, fighting, the crown". The meaning is, however, well captured in the text, as in the Latin version: " quia die Martyr coronatus est".

²⁴ Greek καθολικῆ, but without the confessional meaning in the modern use of the word.

²⁵ Lit.: "τὸν ἐκλογὰς ποιούμενον τῶν ἰδίων δούλων αὐτοῦ", "Who made the choice of His own servants".

²⁶ Păcurariu, 1992, p. 112, 144-145.

St. Basil wrote to the governor of Scythia Minor, Junius Soranus, "also a Cappadocian and maybe a relative of him",²⁷ among others, these words: "You'll do a good work if you'll send to their home the relics of the martyrs. According to your writings to us, the persecution makes there martyrs of the Lord even today."²⁸ He referred, as the Romanian editor put it (*Letter CLV*, to Ascholius), to those "Deceased during the persecution of Athanaric, in 372, when died also Saba the Gothian, in the 12th of April."²⁹ The editor of the Loeb Classical issue noted for this letter: "Written in 373. According to the Benedictine edition the person addressed [by *αὐτοῦ*, n. n.] is Junius Soranus, a relative of Basil and a duke of Scythia. The sub-title may have been added by a copyist. It applies to Soranus, inasmuch as he was «a trainer» (*ἀλείπτης*) and encourager of martyrs. In *Letter CLXIV* Basil calls Ascholius «trainer» of the martyr Sabas. On the present letter and *Letters CLV*, *CLXIV*, and *CLXV*, which have to do with transferring the remains of the Gothic martyr Sabas (died April 372) to Caesarea in Cappadocia, of G. Pfeilschefter ...³⁰ This letter is one of the earliest references to the preservation of the relics of martyrs."³¹

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From the Apostolic century to the time of Constantine the Great, the Christianity was spreading gradually, but constantly, both inside and outside the Roman Empire, especially in provinces and countries neighboring the empire. To shorten the speech about such developments in Dacia, we take, for now, a brief conclusion of I. D. Mureşan: "The archaeologists may debate if a certain object has or has not a Christian function; but the long series of martyrs at the end of the third century in the towns of the Lower Danube is indisputable proof that the new religion already had a solid foothold in the region (...). The list begins with Epictet

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 112. Cf. id., 2009, p. 21-27.

²⁸ Letter 155, in *PG* 32, 613-614. Mihăescu *et alii*, 1970, p. 88-89.

²⁹ Mihăescu *et alii*, 1970, 89. Saint Basil, 1928, note to Letter CLIV (p. 376-380), pp. 380-381: „Written in 373. According to the Benedictine edition the person addressed [by *αὐτοῦ*, n. n.] is Junius Soranus, a relative of Basil and a duke of Scythia. The sub-title may have been added by a copyist. It applies to Soranus, inasmuch as he was "a trainer" (*ἀλείπτης*) and encourager of martyrs. In Letter CLXIV Basil calls Ascholius "trainer" of the martyr Sabas. On the present letter and Letters CLV, CLXIV, and CLXV, which have to do with transferring the remains of the Gothic martyr Sabas (died April 372) to Caesarea in Cappadocia, of G. Pfeilschefter, *Ein neues Werk des Wulfila, Veröffentlichungen aus dem Kirchenhistor*, Seminar, München, 1907, p. 192-224. This letter is one of the earliest references to the preservation of the relics of martyrs.”

³⁰ Editor's note: G. Pfeilschefter, *Ein neues Werk des Wulfila, Veröffentlichungen aus dem Kirchenhistor*, Seminar, München, 1907, p. 192-224.

³¹ Saint Basil, 1928, note to Letter CLIV (p. 376-380), p. 380-381.

and Astion, martyred in 290 at Halmyris; the same source also provides the name of the first bishop of the region, Evangelicus of Tomis (Constanța). The historicity of this source was confirmed when the *martyria* of Niculițel and of Axiopolis (Cernavodă) were unearthed: all of the martyrs found there were also recorded in written testimonies."³² Thus, the archaeological data completes, by the time it grows, and if carefully examined, in this and many other cases, the historiographical information.

The Goths, coming from the shores of the Baltic Sea, reached the northern shores of the Black Sea in the first part of the third century AD. In the middle of that century, the Visigoths conducted, from their base in the Chersonesus Tauricus (Crimea) plunder expeditions, to Moesia and Asia Minor. They took prisoners from the Roman Empire, among whom a significant number of Christians. Some of the Goths became Christians even while they were stationed in Crimea.³³ Some of those prisoners were taken to Moldova and Muntenia, along with the penetration of the Germanics towards west. The Visigoths penetrated in Moldova (understood in its historical borders, from the Eastern Carpathians to Dnister river) in the 3rd century, and then in the east of Muntenia (Walachia, from the Southern Carpathians to the Danube), over a Dacian population with rare Sarmatian intrusions: "Regarding the extra-carpathian space, starting with the 3rd century, at first in Moldova and then in the east of Muntenia, one can notice, on archaeological grounds, the penetration in the local, Dacian and Sarmatian environment, of the German elements, among whom the major role was played by the Visigoths (...). These changes generated, at the beginning of the 4th century, the cultural synthesis of Mureș-Cerneahov (...)." ³⁴ Thus, "the Christian communities from the north of the Danube remained, the entire fourth century, strongly connected to the Church in Cappadocia and Phrygia." ³⁵ In their raids south of the Danube, the Goths continued to bring north of the river prisoners, among whom many Christians. The Goth soldiers also made contact with the Roman world, already significantly Christianized, while the Roman traders brought with them north of the Danube not only pots, jewelry and Roman cloths, but also their beliefs, some of them contributing to the spread of the Christianity.

As I wrote in another paper: "The first penetrations in the Dacian *province*, after the Aurelian's retreat, were of some Dacians (Ciplău-Gârle, Stolniceni), and a few relocations of some Roxolan Sarmatians (Ploiești-Triaj, Târgșor, Smeeni, Dorobanțu, Râmnicelu). Only later, after 350, it could be seen a sporadic

³² Mureșan, 2012, p. 142.

³³ Robinson, 2016, p. 15.

³⁴ Opreanu, 1995, p. 228.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

penetration of Goths and Alans from their preferred lands in Moldavia, in specific and restrained areas in the south-east Transylvania and Muntenia, but not west of *limes transalutanus* until the 5th century AD. This means that Aurelian's criterion was rather a strategic retreat than the coming of the Goths, seen in the perspective of a better restoration, the forts on the left bank of the Danube being kept. While some sites north of Danube, in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, show a clear Roman influence (e. g. Bratei ...), others show no such influence, mostly in sites of the Gothic penetration (Palatca, Sântana de Mureş). The German populations in Dacia are associated from the 4th century AD on with the culture of Sântana de Mureş. This culture shows, however, in other circumstances, an evident influence from the surrounding Daco-Roman population (e. g. Smârdan, Gherăseni, Hărman).^{36,37}

An important change regarding the Christianity in the Roman Empire and in the surrounding regions took place with the ascending of Constantine the Great to the throne. He granted to the Goths north of the lower Danube the statute of *foederati* in 332 AD.³⁸ This agreement between the Empire and the Goths allowed a peaceful period for the Christians north of Danube, until the persecution of Athanaric.³⁹

Constantine the Great (ruled over the entire empire 324-337 AD) reoccupied, in 336 AD, for the empire, important territories north of Danube: a great part of Banat, Oltenia, Muntenia and even of the south of Moldavia.⁴⁰ The Constantinian policy marked so pregnant the beliefs of the eastern Romance population, that the Romanians, its main cultural descendants, are the only ones to use *basilica* (> Romanian: *biserică*) for the name of the Church, both for the institution and for the building, when other European people derived the name(s) from the Greek *ekklesia*. D. I. Mureşan shows that the only place and time when this could have occurred were the lower Danube region, during the fourth to sixth centuries. Constantine gave the imperial buildings called *basilicae* to the Church in the fourth century, and after the sixth century the Greeks ceased to use the word in this manner. This means that the ancestors of the Romanians were profoundly influenced by the activity of the empire and of the Church in their space in the time of Constantine the Great.⁴¹

"The Christianity spread in Dacia from cities to villages (e. g. the late pagan character of the cemetery Bratei 1), and from the Roman and Romanized

³⁶ Bârzu, 1980, p. 56-60.

³⁷ Drugaş, 2016, p. 105.

³⁸ Opreanu, 1995, p. 228.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 229. Popescu, 1994, p. 162.

⁴⁰ Mureşan, 2012, p. 142.

⁴¹ Mureşan, 2012, p. 142.

population first to Dacian and then to the German population. The lack of Christian evidences among the sites of Sântana de Mureș culture, the most associated with the German population, in parallel with some written witnesses which support the diffusion of the Christianity to those populations (e. g. Ulfilas, the martyrdom of St. Sabbas), shows that this phenomenon doesn't always have a thorough archaeological cover – principle applicable to the Daco-Roman population as well.^{42,43}

The Church was well organized along the lower Danube, from Pannonia to Scythia. The bishops residing in the cities on the south bank of the Danube and further south, in the Balkan Peninsula, exerted an active role in spreading the Christianity north of Danube. The government of Constantine the Great, which expanded, again, the direct and active rule of Rome north of Danube, had a catalytic role in this respect. However, the mission of the mentioned bishops and their delegates, *chorepiscopi*, continued under the rule of the Germanic *foederati*, these being either sympathetic or persecutors of the Christians. Each Roman province had one or more bishops. Scythia had, at first, just one bishop, in Tomis (Constanța),⁴⁴ and then appeared others.⁴⁵

According to *Acta sanctorum*,⁴⁶ after 319, the Christianity flourished in Gotthia, Theophilus became Metropolitan, while other bishops were under his jurisdiction. The editor wrote that “the series [was] maybe uninterrupted since the times of St. Apostle Andrew, who drew the lots of the provinces of Scythia, as it is believed in the common tradition of the Church.”⁴⁷ Because of the last persecutions of the Roman emperors, especially that of Diocletianus, many Christians moved from Thracia to the neighboring Gotthia (“ex Thracia in proximam Gotthiam”),⁴⁸ multiplying there the faith of the local barbarians. After the Orthodox Theophilus, came Ulfilas and then Philostorgius, both Arians.⁴⁹

"Ulfilas, who was born about 311 and was brought up amongst Goths, was sent by them, in 332, either as an envoy, or as a hostage, to Constantinople, where

⁴² Bârzu, 1980, p. 66-67.

⁴³ Drugaș, 2016, p. 109. Cf. Opreanu, 1995, p. 230.

⁴⁴ Bingham, 1845, Book IX, Ch. 7, 375-376: “For the bishop of Tomi was the sole bishop of this whole region, as is noted by Sozomen (lib. 6. c. 21. lib. 7, c. 19), and Theodoret (lib. 4. c. 35), and other ancient writers (...)”. Păcurariu, 1992, p. 115-116.

⁴⁵ Păcurariu, 1992, 116.

⁴⁶ Bollandus, vol. 11, Aprilii, II, Editio nova, 1866, p. 87: Anno CCCLXXII, XII Aprilii, "De S. Saba Gottho, Martyre in Cappadocia".

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Cf. Bollandus, vol. 9, Martii, III, Editio nova, 1865, 617: Aerae Christianae CCCLXX, XXVI Martii.

he learnt Latin and Greek. After working as a missionary amongst his own country-men in Constantinople and its neighbourhood, he was consecrated as a bishop in 341, and for the next seven years he served as a missionary in Dacia, which includes modern Romania, but in 348 so bitter a persecution was raised against the Christians that Ulfilas sought and obtained permission for the Christian Goths to cross the Danube and settle within the borders of the Roman Empire (...)"⁵⁰ Some authors argue that Eusebius of Nicomedia, who had become bishop of Constantinople in 338, consecrated Ulfila ⁵¹ in 338 or even in 336 AD "as a bishop «of all the Christians on the Getian soil»."⁵²

According to the *Letter* of Auxentius of Durostorum (381-397), Ulfilas became a bishop at the age of 30. Auxentius "was probably a local man, from the Romanized population near the lower Danube, and about 380 he became a bishop in Durostorum, after he lived for a while on the left side of the Danube, as an apprentice of the bishop Ulfilas. Between 381-397 he wrote a *Letter* about the faith, the life and the death of Ulfilas, in a simple and coherent enough Latin language."⁵³ He wrote in Latin, in a vulgar manner, i. e., using simple constructions, and replacing *Christus, Graece* or, at least, *graecam, ecclesia* etc. with *Cristus, greca, ecclesia* etc. The same contemporary witness wrote that Ulfilas, after being ordained as a bishop in Constantinople, he served in this position for the Goths north of Danube for seven years, where "he preached, through the apostolic grace, without interruption, in the Greek, Latin and Gothic tongues..."⁵⁴ He did a great work as a bishop, attracting many to the Church, and traducing the Bible in Gothic – of which there remained the four Gospels.⁵⁵ After that, he crossed the Danube, with a lot of followers, because of a persecution that made many martyrs, being received with honor by the emperor Constantius, and served as a bishop for other 33 years, "in the mountains" (*in montibus*).⁵⁶ At the end of his 40 years as a bishop, he fought, by the order of the emperor, in Constantinople (surnamed as *Cristianopolis*), against the *pneumatomachi*, the heretics that didn't recognized the divinity of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Robinson, 2016, p. 15.

⁵¹ Cf. Mureșan, 2012, p. 142.

⁵² Opreanu, 1995, p. 229: "ca episcop "al tuturor creștinilor de pe pământ getic" (Thompson 1963, p. 63; Wolfram, 1990, p. 89)."

⁵³ Mihăescu *et alii*, 1970, p. 111.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 110-111: "apostolica gratia grecam et latinam et goticam sine intermissione in una et sola ecclesia Christi predicavit..."

⁵⁵ Bollandus, vol. 11, Aprilii, II, Editio nova, 1866, 87: Anno CCCLXXII, XII Aprilii, "De S. Saba Gottho, Martyre in Cappadocia".

⁵⁶ Mihăescu *et alii*, 1970, p. 112-113.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 112-113.

The Letter of the Church in Gothia, about St. Saba the Goth

Eusebius of Nicomedia had clear Arian influences, and thus, it is supposed the same for his apprentice, Ulfilas, from whom we have a partial translation of the Bible in Gothic. The name of Ulfilas is a clear Germanic one, coming from *Wolf*. He was sent to watch over the Christians that were already present among the Visigoths and the local populations (mainly Dacians and Sarmatians). However, his zeal to convert much more people, and a conflict between the Visigoth chieftain Aoric and the Constantinople, led to his expulsion south of Danube in 348.⁵⁸

The Goth lord Athanaric conducted, north of Danube, between 369 and 373 AD, another persecution against the Christians. This means that the Christianity was still vivid north of Danube after the time of Ulfilas, and the Orthodox community continued there, under the leadership of the bishop Athanasius. Many of his followers suffered martyrdom during this persecution, among whom also St. Saba, in 12 April 372.⁵⁹

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Saint Saba, is called "the Goth". The author of the epistle that narrated his life wrote that "being Goth by his kind, and spending his life in Gothia, in the middle of some twisted and perverted peoples, he showed himself as a luminary into the world ..." (& 1). There are reasons to consider that St. Saba had his origins in Cappadocia, which explains the increased interest of the Cappadocians for his relics, and the choice made by Junius Soranus to end the relics of this particular martyr to St. Basil the Great – according to Pr. Prof. M. Păcurariu.⁶⁰

For the ethnic background of St. Saba "the Goth" we have the following possibilities: a Gothic, a Dacian, a generally Roman, or a Cappadocian origin. Neither of them could be completely excluded in the present state of the historical knowledge on this topic. We can, at most, speculate about what could be more plausible. If he had a Cappadocian origin, he could have been: a man conducting a Christian mission north of the Danube, a descendant of some prisoners, or one of the prisoners of the Goths from the Empire. The last version doesn't seem to me a credible one, because St. Saba lived as a free man, he traveled through the villages as he pleased and he didn't have had much contact with the Gothic authorities before the persecution. If he would have been a prisoner from the Empire, the rulers of the Goths wouldn't have let him to have a free life, being only 38 in the moment of his martyrdom. This means he was born in 333/334 AD. St. Saba could have had his origin from among the prisoners taken by the Goths from the Empire, maybe from Asia Minor, and thus maybe Cappadocians. He could have been from

⁵⁸ Opreanu, 1995, p. 229.

⁵⁹ Robinson, 2016, p. 16.

⁶⁰ Păcurariu, 1992, p. 112.

an ulterior generation: either his parents, or even his grandparents could have been such prisoners. This version seems more probable to me, especially that the relationships between the Goths and the Empire fluctuated, from a generation to another, from the plunder raids that led to the taking of many prisoners to the accepting of their role as *foederati*, given to them by Constantine the Great in 332. It would be hard to imagine that he would have been taken prisoner as a child in such a short time after the moment when the Christians became tolerated by the Goths, because of this pact with the emperor Constantine. It is rather that his parents or grandparents were among the Christian prisoners, which were liberated and tolerated for the mentioned agreement. But, in this case, nothing could guarantee that St. Saba had not a mixed origin, with one of his parents coming from the nations north of the Danube: Dacian-Sarmatians or Goths.

The version that St. Saba would have crossed the Danube in his adulthood, coming maybe from Cappadocia, for a Christian mission, is also highly unlikely. Fr. Prof. Păcurariu wrote, too, that St. Saba must have been *a descendant* of the prisoners taken by the Goths from the Empire, most probable from Cappadocia.⁶¹

St. Basil the Great didn't ever call St. Saba a fellow countryman of his. The connections of Junius Soranus with Cappadocia as his homeland are clearly revealed by this correspondence, of St. Basil, but when he expressed, to (*Letter CLXIV*), the joy to receive the relics of the martyr, he made no reference to the origin of this martyr, and wrote only this: "It is revealed to us a martyr, came to us from the midst of the barbarians from beyond the Ister [Danube, n. n.], and it is made known to us, through his own life, the strength of the faith the people live there".⁶² If St. Saba would have been a Cappadocian doing mission north of the Danube, this fact was most unlikely to be omitted by St. Basil when he referred to his provenance "from the midst of the barbarians". Also, when St. Basil just asked to receive the relics from the martyrs whose passion have had recently taken place, he expressed himself in the plural, as in the above quoted Letter CLV: "the relics of the martyrs". This shows that St. Basil had no knowledge about any fellow countryman of his to have died as a martyr during the last persecution in Gothia and he didn't interest himself, either, about any countryman of his, which would have gone into a mission in Gothia in those times. The Christians in Cappadocia, along with St. Basil the Great, are eager to receive some relics from the new martyrs – any martyrs, no matter what ethnical origins would they have had. The homeland to which St. Basil refers to is his own and of Junius Soranus, not of the martyrs, that were killed in Gothia, which were, no doubt, of diverse ethnic background.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

⁶² Mihăescu *et alii*, 1970, p. 89; PG 32, 636.

Writing that St. Saba was a "Goth by his kind" the author of the *Letter of the Church in Gothia* couldn't have made an estimation of his ethnic origin, but it shows that the saint didn't arrived north of the Danube in his adulthood. On the contrary, he lived in "Gothia" from his childhood. He was a Christian from his childhood, cel mai probabil dintr-o familie crmost probable from a Christian family, which could be related to a descendance from the prisoners from Cappadocia. We can't forget, either, the activity of the Orthodox bishop Athanasius among the Goths, or the easyness with which the Christians crossed the Danube and came back to their villages when it was possible (e. g. Sansala, *The Letter of the Church in Gothia*, & 4), thus, the active connections between the Carpathian-Danubian space and the Empire, including in this respect. We should remind ourself, also, of the detail that Ascholius, bishop of Tessalonica, was named by St. Basil (*Letter CLXIV*) the «trainer» of St. Saba, which shows the vivid relationships of the bishops in the Balkan Penisnsula and the Christian communities north of the Danube. It is most probable that St. Saba reached Thessalonica during his teenage, in a time of peace for the Christians north of Danube, being interested to grow in Christian training. The connection of Ascholius with St. Saba, and of Junius Soranus with other Christians that died as martyres in Gothia demonstrates the decisive influence, in the 4th century, of the Church centers in Dobrogea (Tomis) and even deep in the Balkan Peninsula (Tessalonica) over the Christian communities north of Danube.

This situation sends us to other witnesses about the Christianity in the 4th century, in this region – let's think, for example, only to the gift preserved from Zenovius at Biertan (the *donarium* with the inscription "Ego Zenovius votum possui"⁶³) or to the pot with Christ's monogram of Porolissum, with a similar inscription, which indicates the fact that in those places were Christian communities with churches and priests to whom those fonations could have been made. Some of such churches (*basilicae*), of the 4th century, were even unearthed by the archaeological researches, at Morisena (Cenad, Timiș), Slăveni (Olt), Porolissum (on an old heathen temple).⁶⁴ Innocens is the first Christian Dacian-Roman known by his name north of Danube, from the 3rd century, being burried with his hands crossed on his abdomen, in the inhumation grave no. 7 of Tirighina-Bărboși, oriented VNV-ESE, with mixed Dacian-Roman features, containing ivory crossed, an amphora with Christ's monogram, and a gem with his name graved on it (Ion T. Dragomir and Silviu Sanie, 1976-1979).⁶⁵ By the

⁶³ Păcurariu, 1992, p. 96.

⁶⁴ Cioabă, 2014. Teodor, 2006. Vasile, 2006. Păcurariu, 1992, p. 96-100. Bârzu, 1980, p. 64-67. Stoicescu, 1980, p. 154.

⁶⁵ Pricop, 2008.

objects around, it's very possible he could have been a priest. But also among the earliest priests known by their name, north of the lower Danube, were Gutthica și Sansala, who were mentioned in the act of the martyrdom of St. Saba (the *Letter* presented in this article), most probably Goths.⁶⁶

The persecution of the Christians in Gothia, in the time of the emperors Valentinian I (emperor 364-375) and Valens (and Gratianus) made, north of Danube, many other martyrs. Around 370, *Acta sanctorum* recorded other martyrs (celebrated on 26th of March) in the Goth land, next to Danube: "Martyres in Gotthia ad Danubium".⁶⁷ On this occasion, the editor comments: "Quando et per quos Christiana fides primum fuerit annuntiata Gotthis, non reperitur litteris consignatum: tantum scimus nationem universam ab origine gentilem et ulularum addictam cultus, aliquam orthodoxae predicationis culturum longe praesusscipisse, quam illi, qui primos tenere videbantur et Gotthici nominis terrorem per Occidentis provincias (...) postea circumtulere (...) Arianismum susciperent ab Vulphila Episcopo Arriano persuasi. Etenim S. Sabam Gothum insignis coronatus Martyrio praecipitatumque in flumen Musaei (ejus forte cum hodiernam Walachiam intersecans Missow nominatur in tubulis) videbimus ad XII diem Aprilis et passionem ipsius historiam dabimus."⁶⁸ It results from here that, although the heathens there received the Gospel orally, and Ulfilas was an Arian, the Christianity was still vivid north of Danube after the time of Ulfilas, and the Orthodox party persisted there, under the leadership of the bishop Athanasius. Many of his followers suffered martyrdom during this persecution, among whom also St. Saba, in 12 April 372.⁶⁹ The martyrs celebrated on 26th of March died around 370, in a persecution led by a local leader, named Juncheric, being burned alive in a church. They were mentioned 26: "S. Bathuses sive Anathuses et S. Vercas sive Vericas Presbyteri, SS. Filii duo, SS. Filii duae, S. Arpylas (Solitarius), S. Abepas sive Abippas, S. Constans, S. Hagnas sive Hagias, S. Rhyas sive Vias, S. Hegathrax sive Egathrax, S. Hescous sive Iscoes, S. Sylas sive Silas, S. Sigetzas sive Siditzas, S. Sverilas, S. Suimblas sive Suimplas, S. Thermas sive Thertas, S. Philgas, mulieres ... S. Anna, S. Allas sive Hallas, S. Baris / Paris sive Barka, S. Moico, S. Mamyca sive Mamica, S. Virco sive Vico, S. Animais".⁷⁰ Their names are, with a few exceptions (Constans, Anna), of a barbarian origin. To speculate how much they have a Germanic or a Thraco-Dacian origin would be a

⁶⁶ Cf. Păcurariu, 1992, p. 113.

⁶⁷ Bollandus, vol. 9, Martii, tomus III, Editio nova, 1865, p. 617, *Aerae Christianae CCCLXX, XXVI Martii*.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*. Cf. Păcurariu, 1992, p. 110.

⁶⁹ Robinson, 2016, p. 16.

⁷⁰ Bollandus, *loc. cit.*

theme for another discussion. However, it seems to me they had a mixed ethnic background, not entirely Gothic, but also autochthonous of Dacian-Sarmatian stock. A Goth Christian noble woman collected their relics (*lipsana*, from Greek *λείψανα* "remains, relics"), crossed into the empire ("in provinciam Romanorum venit"), and went with them to Cyzicus (port at Propontis, in Asia Minor). The noble woman, named Gaatha, her daughter, Dulcilla (notice the Romanization process in this name!), and a Christian named Vellas, came into the Empire, and gave some of the relics of the martyrs to the Christians in Cyzicus – among whom many were Goths. Gaatha and Vellas returned north of the Danube, were they were killed by lapidation.⁷¹

The introduction to the martyrs celebrated on 26th of March refers, as we could see, to St. Saba the Goth, and to the place where he suffered his martyrdom: "Etenim S. Sabam Gothum insignis coronatus Martyrio praecipitatumque in flumen Musaei (ejus forte cum hodiernam Walachiam intersecans Missow nominatur in tubulis) ...". The *Letter of the Church in Gothia* gave the same river name: "they took Saba and drived him to be drowned in a river, named Mouseos (Musæus)." (& 7). This river, in Wallachia, is Buzău, the two labials *m* and *b*, being often interchangeable with respect to the real pronunciation of the Greek-Latin transliterations of the Dacian names, as it happened, for instance, with Tibiscum (*river*, then *castrum* and Roman *municipium*), spelled in Romanian **Timiș**. The fact that the martyrdom of St. Saba took place so deep in the north-Danubian territory is significant, adding itself to the witnesses, some of which mentioned above, for the penetration of the Christianity on the territory of the old Dacia in the 4th century AD. The river Buzău is placed in an area upon which the maximum control was of Athanaric, the ruler of the Thervingi, the one who decided to revolt against the Empire and, thus, against its cultural values, among which, the most precious was the new religion, the Christianity.

Fritigern, also a Therving leader, confronted Athanaric at first north of the Danube (until the Gothic civil war in 375), and, defeated, crossed the Danube with his men, subjected himself to the emperor Valens, received the Christianity in Arian form, and settled in Thrace. The Huns, which have already subjected the Greuthungi (east of the Dneister), defeated the Thervingi (west of the Dneister), too, in 376, for which reason Athanaric retreated with his men in Caucaland (southeast of Transylvania). The relationships between the Goths in Thrace and the emperor deteriorating, Fritigern won the battle of Adrianople (378), where

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

Valens died, after which the Goths did plunder expeditions in the Balkan Peninsula.⁷²

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⁷² Socrates, 1893, Book IV, Chapters 33-36,37-38, p. 209-213. Socrates Scholasticus, 1853, Book IV, Chapters 33-36,37-38, p. 254-260 (cf. Sozomen, *Church History*, VI, 37. Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, IV).

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