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Becoming Christian, becoming Roman

Hervé Huntzinger

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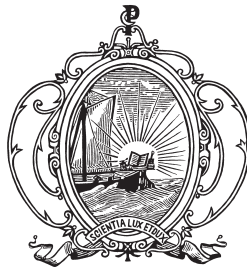
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Volume 3:
Becoming Christian in the Late Antique West
(3rd-6th Centuries)

Edited by
ARIANE BODIN, CAMILLE GERZAGUET and
MATTHIEU PIGNOT



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Becoming Christian, Becoming Roman: Conversion to Christianity and Ethnic Identification Process in Late Antiquity

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ABSTRACT

Though, at first, being Christian was not a matter of ethnic identity, the Christianisation of the Later Roman Empire, from Constantine to the Edict of Thessalonica (380), gradually connects submission to Roman authority and Christian religion. In this context, one can wonder if the barbarians' conversion to Christianity had either an ethnical or, at least, a political dimension. During the fourth century, the Empire was seen as a vehicle of Christianity (or sometimes Nicene orthodoxy), facing a barbarian pagan or Arian world. In a certain way, Christianity becomes the new expression of the Roman expansionism in a time when military expansion was over. Missions toward the *Barbaricum* embrace the language of the Roman domination. Nonetheless, this desire of ruling Christianity in the *Barbaricum* meets barbarian initiatives that recognize Roman authority over Christianity, even without any political agenda. Even when there is no episcopal hierarchy, the barbarian priests can refer to Roman authority. Two conversions, which are the best documented, show that in this context, conversion to Christianity is one of the crucial steps to become Roman. Both Fritigern around 376 and Fritigil, queen of the Marcoman in 397, while converting to Christianity, chose the faith of the current emperor. For both, also, conversion takes place in a general process of integration to the Roman world. During this process, the choice of Arian or Nicene faith does not match a 'strategy of distinction', but rather a strategy of conformity to the Roman authority. During the fourth century, being Arian is not yet a distinctive feature against Romanity. At the end of the century, Christianity turns into a new kind of *polis* religion, so that becoming Christian is now part of becoming Roman.

It is generally admitted that, even from the very beginning, belonging to the Christian church was not a matter of ethnic identity. Andrew Louth, when commenting the famous phrase of Tertullian: *Fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani*,¹ wrote that embracing the Christian faith leads to leave the world of the Roman

¹ Tert., *Apol.* 18. 4. Andrew Louth, 'Fiunt, non nascuntur christiani conversion, community, and christian identity', in Carol Harrison, Caroline Humfress and Isabella Sandwell (eds), *Being Christian in Late Antiquity: A Festschrift for Gillian Clark* (Oxford, 2014), 109-19, 109: 'For Tertullian, Christians are those who have left the world of the Roman Empire, to which they once belonged, and embraced the faith and practice of the church'.

Empire. This idea is based on the conviction that Christianity is radically different from paganism. Indeed, as paganism has a strong connection to civic institutions, at least in the ‘polis religion’ model,² Christianity would not match those civic and ethnic frameworks, and Christians would not think of themselves as a ‘people’.³ However, the process of Christianisation of the political structure of the Roman Empire during the fourth century, from Constantine to the Edict of Thessalonica (380 AD) creates a new religious framework that gradually connects submission to Roman authority and Christian religion.⁴ The idea that the spread of Christianity coincides with the territory of the Empire is increasingly attested.⁵ Therefore, with such a strong connection between political power and religion, it seems self-evident that conversion to Christianity should carry a stronger social and political connotation in Late Antiquity. Indeed, Ralph Mathisen pointed out how the mutual evolutions of Christianity and Roman citizenship meant that the possession of a full citizenship was bound to one’s Christian confessional status.⁶ Somehow, while the Empire became a *civitas* through the Antonine Constitution, the Edict of Thessalonica established Christianity as a new ‘polis religion’.

² At least in the ‘Polis Religion’ view, as developed by John Scheid or Mary Beard. See John Scheid, ‘La Religion romaine à la fin de la République et au début de l’Empire. Un problème généralement mal posé’, in Hinnerk Bruhns, Jean-Michel David and Wilfried Nippel (eds), *Die späte römische Republik. La fin de la République romaine. Un débat franco-allemand d’histoire et d’historiographie* (Rome, 1997), 127-39. The idea of ‘polis religion’ was first formulated concerning Greek cities by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, ‘What is Polis Religion?’, in Oswin Murray and Simon Price (eds), *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990), 295-322.

³ For instance, the second-century *Epistle to Diognetos* states that the Christian community does not look like the other nations of the Pagan world or the nation of the Jews (*Ep. Diognetos* 5, 1). Paul Foster, ‘The Epistle to Diognetus’, *The Expository Times* 118 (2007), 162-8. Moreover, political and religious boundaries do not always match. The mithraic cult, said to be originated in Persia, is nevertheless celebrated even by Roman soldiers in Dura Europos in the late 190s, just in front of the Persian enemy. Pierre Leriche, ‘Observations sur le *mithraeum* de Doura-Europos à la lumière des découvertes récentes’, *Topoi: Orient-Occident* 11 (2001), 195-203.

⁴ *CTh.* XVI 1, 2: *Cunctos populos, quos clementiae nostrae regit temperamentum, in tali volumus religione versari, quam divinum Petrum apostolum tradidisse Romanis religio.*

⁵ In Byzantine East, Michael Maas showed how Christian historiography led classical ethnography to a new stage, at which the definition of Romanity matched the definition of Christianity, particularly with the appearance of the word *Romania* in Christian hagiography. See Michael Maas, ‘Delivered from Their Ancient Customs: Christianity and the Question of Cultural Change in Early Byzantine Ethnography’, in Anthony Grafton and Kenneth Mills (eds), *Seeing and Believing, Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (New York, 2003), 152-88. Michel Meslin, ‘Nationalisme, État et religions à la fin du IV^e siècle’, *Archives de sociologie des religions* 9 (1964), 3-20, 4. In his study on the conversion of Isaurians by Conon, Philipp Wood stressed the fact that, in the Life of Conon, conversion implied a civilized way of life including specifically sedentary agriculture. Philip Wood, ‘The invention of history in the later Roman world. The conversion of Isauria in “The Life of Conon”’, *Anatolian Studies* 59 (2009), 129-38.

⁶ Ralph Mathisen, ‘*Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani*: Concepts of Citizenship and the Legal Identity of Barbarians in the Later Roman Empire’, *AHR* 111 (2006), 1011-40, 1017.

Consequently, this new context in the fourth century invites us to consider the process of conversion in connection to another social process: barbarians becoming Romans. While considering the conversion of foreigners to Christianity, we should take into account the links between this process and the ethnical identification to Romanity.⁷ Hence the main question of this article: does becoming Christian mean becoming Roman? In other words, does conversion from paganism to Christianity, in the case of barbarians, mean a shift of political allegiance or a shift of ethnic identity? When Theodosius I, in 389 AD, orders the defeated Goths to ‘become Romans’,⁸ does it mean that they should both become citizens and accept the Edict of Thessalonica?

Most of the last decades of sociological research discussed and criticised the Lofland-Starck causal model, which considers several causes leading together to conversion.⁹ If that sort of model can help us analyse complex narratives of conversion, such as Augustine’s, the scarcity of the late Roman sources only enables us to use this theoretical foundation cautiously. Thus only external causes and social aspects will here be taken into account. More precisely, our main indicator of conversion will be membership status, or, in other words, nominal adhesion to Christianity.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we can grasp some hints from the general attitude toward conversion and from individuals of particular importance. Having said that, we will first consider the connection between the Empire, as a political structure providing ethnical identification, and Christianity. Then, we will take a look at the institutional dimension of Christianity in the *Barbaricum*. Finally, we will try to see how efficient the Roman model may have been in promoting conversion in order to obtain integration.

⁷ As we do not possess any mention of citizenship granted to *peregrini* after 212 AD, one can discuss if *externi* settling in the Empire became citizens. Ralph Mathisen argues that the many barbarians acting as citizens during the 4th and 5th centuries must have been real citizens, even without proof of formal granting. R. Mathisen, ‘*Peregrini*’ (2006), 10-37: at least *de facto*.

⁸ Themist., *Or.*, 167, 211-2; *Pan. Lat.* 2/12.36.4: *iussisti esse Romanam*.

⁹ John Lofland and Rodney Stark, ‘Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective’, *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965), 862-75.

¹⁰ We should bear in mind that, in the cases that we consider, baptism and conversion are still separated processes, especially since we only know very little about baptism. Laurent Guichard has shown that the baptisms of the imperial family members during fourth and fifth centuries are still largely unknown. See Laurent Guichard, *Le baptême et la pourpre: initiation chrétienne et fonction impériale de Constantin à Théodose II* (to be published). The conclusions were presented in a conference entitled ‘Le baptême et la pourpre. Initiation chrétienne et fonction impériale de Constantin à Théodose II’ and held at the *Séminaire International d’Histoire Ancienne* in Nancy (November 10th 2014).

Empire, *Barbaricum* and Christianity

As a first step, we have to consider the connection between the Empire and Christianity. In fact, it is a kind of *cliché* to depict the late Roman world as Nicene and opposing the barbarian world, which is pagan and Arian. Ancient Christian writers, especially Catholic ones, already depict the world in those terms. In one of his letter to Victricius of Rouen, dated to 397 AD, Paulinus of Nola presents the Christians/heathens boundaries as matching the Romans/barbarians boundaries.¹¹ The bishop describes exactly the opposition between non-civilisation (barbarians, brigands and desert places, to be understood as places that are not under political control) and civilisation (*urbes, oppida, insulae, silua*), this latter list of features supplemented with churches and monasteries, considering that they are now part of a Roman civilised world.¹² On the opposite side, a phenomenon like the fear of conversion is often mentioned concerning Christian children fallen into captivity in the hand of heathen people.¹³

This vision seems reciprocal. Inside the *Barbaricum*, Christianity can be rejected as Roman, or at least, under Roman imperial power. There are some traces of Christian converts in the Gothic *Barbaricum* before the middle of the fourth century. But these are either fictitious or so unclear that we cannot use them. However, from the time of the conversion of Ulfila (probably between 336 AD and 341 AD), it is quite clear that there were Christians among Goths. Eike Faber lists three Christian communities: Audian's heretical Christians, Ulfila's Arian community and Nicene Goths, as the community around Saint Saba.¹⁴ In this context two episodes of persecution occurred in Gothia in

¹¹ *Epist.* 18, 4: *Vbi quondam deserta siluarum ac littorum pariter intuta aduenae barbari aut latrones incolae frequentabant, nunc uenerabiles et angelici sanctorum chori urbes, oppida, insulas, siluas, ecclesiis et monasteriis plebe numerosis, pace consonis celebrant.* Precisely, one can read, as Paulinus congratulates Victricius for his missionary work: 'Where once barbarian strangers or native brigands dwelt in deserted, equally hazardous areas of forest and shore, now cities, towns, islands, and woods with churches and monasteries crowded with people and harmonious in peace, are thronged by revered, angelic choruses of saintly men'. *Letters of Saint Paulinus of Nola*, ed. Johannes Quasten (New York, 1966), 170 and 248 n. 1.

¹² Around forty years later, Salvian of Marseilles, in a page where he compares the sins of the Romans and those of the barbarians, writes 'we, who are said Christians and Catholics'. By these words he rejects Paganism and Arianism into the *Barbaricum*. *Salv., Gub.* 4, 58: *nos, qui Christiani et catholici esse dicimur.*

¹³ Ambrose, for instance, to defend the selling of liturgical dishes to ransom captives, argues that children risk filthiness by contact with idols among heathen barbarians. *Ambr., Offic.* 2, 28, 136: *Quis autem est tam durus, immittis, ferreus, cui displiceat quod ... adulescentulae uel pueruli uel infantes ab idolorum contagiis quibus mortis metu inquinabantur?* This fear is expressed much clearly but at a later period by Gregory the Great, who described how Lombards in the second half of the 6th century, forced their captives to participate to their heathen rites. *Greg., Dialog.* 3, 27-8.

¹⁴ Faber Eike, *Von Ulfila bis Rekkared: Die Goten und ihr Christentum* (Stuttgart, 2014), 104-8.

348 AD¹⁵ and between 369 AD and 372 AD.¹⁶ In the first episode Christians were expelled to the Empire and welcomed by Constantine II. The persecution between 369 AD and 372 AD also shows that for Athanaric the conversion of Goths was clearly connected to the Roman Empire, so that the Gothic persecutors thought that converting to Christianity was a way of getting compromised with the Roman Empire.

Furthermore, this pattern, according to which political and religious boundaries seem to match, has an underlying statement. The strict opposition between the boundaries of a Roman Catholic world and those of a barbarian Pagan and/or Arian world follows the assumption that the Roman Empire is a vehicle of Christianity or Nicene orthodoxy.¹⁷ Eusebius suggested that Constantine transferred Goths from savage life to rational life under Roman law.¹⁸ While speaking to Nicetas the Dacian, bishop of Remesiana and converting the barbarians dwelling along the Danube, Paulinus of Nola wrote: 'Through you they learn to resound the name of Christ with Roman heart, and to live chastely in tranquil peace'.¹⁹ This single sentence states both the equivalence between Christianity and Romanity, in terms of ethnic identity ('with a Roman heart'), and, also, with a rather political concern for border peace, the control brought by the Christianisation of the *Barbaricum*.²⁰ Such a motif, according to which the Roman Empire is the structure through which Christianity is brought to external *gentes*, is also used by Prosper Tiro about Patrick²¹ and by Augustine.²²

¹⁵ Aux., *Ep.* 58-60.

¹⁶ Jer., *Chron. a.* 369.

¹⁷ David Lambert, 'The barbarians in Salvian's *De gubernatione Dei*', in Stephen Mitchell and Geoffrey Greatrex (eds), *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (London, 2000), 105. David Lambert shows how Salvian uses Pauline criticism of the Jewish sense of superiority built upon the Law and his vision that the Law now had passed to the Christians. In Salvian's view the Roman sense of superiority is as fragile as the Jewish one criticized by Paul.

¹⁸ Euseb., *Triakont.* 7, 13 and *V. Const.* 4, 5. Alain Chauvot, 'Les migrations des barbares et leur connaissance du christianisme', in Jean-Marie Mayeur, Charles Pietri, Luce Pietri, André Vauchez and Marc Venard (eds), *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, t. 2, *Naissance d'une Chrétienté, 250-430* (Paris, 1995), 861-82, 863.

¹⁹ Paul. Nol., *Carm.* 17, 261-4: *Orbis in muta regione per te / Barbari discut resonare Christum / Corde Romano, placidamque casti / Vivere pacem.*

²⁰ James W. Binns, *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century* (London, 2014), 117. As underlined by J.W. Binns, Paulinus of Nola shows a great interest in missionary matters and seems to bind closely mission to the heathens and pacification.

²¹ While writing that 'God's Providence has willed the expansion of the Roman empire as a preparation for His design of the nations', he doubtlessly links the Christianisation of Ireland by Patrick with the expansion of the Roman world. Prosp. Tiro, *Voc. Omn. Gent.* 2, 38. Raymond M. Keogh, 'Patrick and the Prosper Connection', *Studia Hibernica* 32 (2002), 7-34, 15.

²² Augustine talks about 'the numerous barbarian people among us, that is in Africa, to whom the Gospel has not yet been announced'. Aug., *Ep.* 199, 12, 15-9: *Sunt enim apud nos, hoc est in Africa, barbarae innumerabiles gentes, in quibus nondum esse praedicatum evangelium ex his, qui ducuntur inde captivi et Romanorum servitiis iam miscentur, cotidie nobis addiscere in promptu est.* What is interesting in Augustine's sentence is that those barbarians are said to be

Thus, it appears that Roman ecclesiastical writers conceive the relationship to the *Barbaricum* within the framework of the Christian/heathen or Catholic/Arian dichotomy. But the boundary is not meant to be fixed and starting from the middle of the fourth century a sort of mixed political and religious expansionism develops in Christian literature.

Roman authority, mission outside the Empire and barbarian initiative

That is why we now have to consider the institutional dimension of Christianity in the *Barbaricum*. Indeed, would Christianity outside the Empire have had a Roman structure, namely a Roman episcopal hierarchy depending on imperial authority, then it would have been obvious that conversion to Christianity would have meant, in some way, a kind of integration into the imperial structure of power. In fact, there is a clear imperial claim to rule Christians outside the Empire as early as Constantine's reign. Ralph Mathisen observed that Eusebius depicts Constantine as the 'bishop of those outside', talking about himself in those terms: 'You are bishops of those within the Church (τῶν εἴσω τῆς ἐκκλησίας), but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside (τῶν ἐκτοῦς)'.²³ Despite this claim, there seems to be an asymmetry between the East and the West. In the East, most of the foreign Christians have bishops appointed by the See of Alexandria.²⁴ But there is only one similar example in the West, namely Palladius, sent to the Scots by pope Celestine in 431 AD and, under less clear conditions, Patrick some time later.²⁵ Moreover, these narratives of Roman bishops bringing the faith to barbarians derive from a Roman Christian ideology of expansion, as told in the first section of this article.

As already demonstrated concerning the expansion of the imperial cult during the Principate by Simon Price,²⁶ the real question here is about initiative.

apud nos and at the same time are clearly outsiders, since they are known only by Roman captives. We must admit that the boundary is only clear for apologetical purposes.

²³ Euseb., *V. Const.* 4, 24: ἄλλ' ὑμεῖς μὲν τῶν εἴσω τῆς ἐκκλησίας, ἐγὼ δὲ τῶν ἐκτὸς ὑπὸ θεοῦ καθεσταμένως, ἐπίσκοπος ἂν εἶην. Translation by *Life of Constantine*, ed. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford, 1999), 161. Quoted by Ralph W. Mathisen, 'Barbarian Bishops and the Churches in *Barbaricis Gentibus* during Late Antiquity', *Speculum* 72 (1997), 664-97, 665 n. 6. Paul already used the expression οἱ ἕξωθεν to refer to Pagans (1Tim. 3:7). Anyway, it seems difficult to admit that, in this sentence, Constantine was considering himself as an *episcopus* of the Barbarians. Maybe we have here a clue for understanding the remaining Pagan dimension of his authority, or, at least, its justification.

²⁴ R.W. Mathisen, 'Barbarian Bishops' (1997), 666-7.

²⁵ Prosp. Tiro, *Chron.* s.a. 431 [1307]: *Ad Scottos in Christum credentes ordinatus a papa Caelestino Palladius primus episcopus mittitur.*

²⁶ This issue has already been considered for earlier periods. Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge, 1998), 356 and Simon Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984), 65-75, about the introduction of imperial

Who wants conversion? Either barbarians from the periphery or Romans from the centre? And if barbarians ask for this conversion, what is its purpose? These questions bring us to the issue of the reasons for conversion, especially external reasons, among which political or ethnical conversion to a new identity.

If we consider the case of the Goths, Ralph Mathisen proved that there was no episcopal authority in Gothia in the years 369/375, since our sources only mention priests, namely a council of priests (*presbyterion*), who asked the *dux Scythiae*, Iunius Soranus, to send the body of Saint Saba to Cappadocia. Therefore, one cannot speak of Roman control. The council of priests seems rather to act on its own, even while looking towards the Empire. There is not, in this case, a Roman bishop appointed to convert barbarian people, but barbarian Christians, whose conversion occurred independently from external pressures.²⁷

This initiative does not mean however that they had no link to the Empire. There were in fact cases of barbarian conversion where the would-be Christians requested help from Roman bishops, thus recognizing the Roman tropism of Christianity and the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy. Christians outside the Empire, on their own initiative, which however meets Roman expectations, ask for a hierarchical structure given by Roman church authority. Orosius, for instance, writes that Goths requested bishops from the emperor Valens before 378 AD.²⁸ Theodoret tells about John Chrysostom who was asked by nomadic Scythians people along the Danube to send priests.²⁹ The interesting point here

cult in Asia Minor. For a more detailed case see also François Kirbihler and Lilli Zabrana, 'Archäologische, epigraphische und numismatische Zeugnisse für den Kaiserkult im Artemision von Ephesos', *Jahreshefte des österreichischen archäologischen Institutes in Wien* 83 (2014), 101-31.

²⁷ The *Vita Sabae*, at the saint's death in 372 AD, only mentions a *presbyterion*, probably a council of priests, who asked the *dux Scythiae* Iunius Soranus (*PLRE* I 848, 'Iunius Soranus 2'), to send the remains to Cappadocia (*V. Sabae* 8: διὰ θελήματος τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου). R.W. Mathisen, 'Barbarian Bishops' (1997), 673 convincingly rebuts Peter J. Heather and John Matthews, *The Goths in the Fourth Century* (Liverpool, 1991), 109 n. 39, who consider that those priests depend on the bishop Betranio from Tomi. But they could not have taken such a decision without an episcopal agreement. Besides this mention, one can look at two Arian calendars which list several martyrs, all priests, monks or ministers. See also Knut Schäferdiek, 'Das gotische, liturgische Kalenderfragment – Bruchstück eines Konstantinopeler Martyrologs', *ZNW* 79 (1988), 116-37.

²⁸ Oros. 7, 33: *Gothis antea per legatos supplices poposcerent, ut illis episcopi, a quibus regulam Christianae fidei discerent, mitterentur. Valens imperator exitiabili pravitate doctores Ariani dogmatis misit. Gothi primae fidei rudimentum quod accepere, tenuerunt.* He adds that Valens *exitiabili pravitate* sent Arian doctors to teach them the basics of the Christian faith, but in the Arian version.

²⁹ Theod., *HE* V 31: 'On learning that some of the Nomads encamped along the Danube were thirsty for salvation, but had none to bring them the stream, John sought out men who were filled with a love of labour like that which had distinguished the apostles, and gave them charge of the work. I have myself seen a letter written by him to Leontius, bishop of Ancyra, in which he described the conversion of the Scythians, and begged that fit men for their instruction might be sent.' John Chrysostom is all the more concerned by this issue, that he really took care to carry Arian Goths back to the Nicene creed (Theod., *HE* V 30). During his episcopate (398 AD-404 AD) John Chrysostom sent a bishop to Nicene Goths in Crimea, John Chrysostom, *Epistula* 14; see

is that the request came from those nomadic Scythians, whatever this unclear ethnical name would cover in this case (probably Goths?). And it is clearly about conversion, not only about appointing a bishop. In both cases, bishops sent by Valens or priests sent by John Chrysostom, Goths follow the faith of the prevailing Roman authority, either Arian or Nicene.³⁰

It must be added that this link to the Empire does not always follow official authority, either political or ecclesiastical. Indeed a certain Audian, a heretical Syrian condemned by the council of Nicaea, went to the lower Danube, established several monasteries and ordained heretical bishops.³¹ Therefore, the main point is that Christianity is labelled as Roman, but not necessarily subject to Roman power. This implies that, rather than mere allegiance, conversion to Christianity includes intrinsic admiration for the Roman model.

Christianity and the Roman model

To support this view, we can reconsider two cases of conversion, both involving one leader and his group, thus both individual and collective conversion: Fritigern, leader of the Tervingi around 376 AD and Fritigil, queen of the Marcomans in 392 AD.

The conversion of Fritigern at the time when he asked for the right to pass the Danube has been much discussed. As scholars do not agree about the date of his conversion, we will mostly try to reconsider the reasons for his conversion. Three options are generally admitted. The first thesis claims that most of the Tervingi converted before the crossing. On the one hand, they could have converted during Valens' first Gothic War between 369 AD and 372 AD.³² The bishop Eudoxius probably pushed Valens to obtain the conversion of the Tervingi, either Catholic or Pagan, to Arianism.³³ Such a conversion would

R.W. Mathisen, 'Barbarian Bishops' (1997), 671. Later in 548 AD, the same Crimean Christians beg Justinian 'to give them a bishop' (Procop., *Bellum Gothicum* 4. 4. 11).

³⁰ This alone is sufficient to undermine any ethnical connotation of Arianism before the end of the fifth century.

³¹ Theod., *HE* 4, 9 and Epiph. Salam., *Haereseos* 70, 14. Theodoret described the heretical points, especially concerning the Easter date, but Epiphanius of Salamis pretended to have met some of them later in the East. His account is maybe fictitious, given that he said that they went further east, Clemens Leonhard, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter: Open Questions in Current Research* (Berlin, 2006), 224.

³² This theory is mainly based on the testimony of Socrates (Socr., *HE* 4, 33). Evangelios K. Chrysos, *To Βυζάντιον και οι Γότθοι: συμβολή εις την εξωτερικὴν πολιτικὴν του Βυζαντίου κατά τον Δ' αιώνα* (Thessaloniki, 1972), 109-24.

³³ Theod., *HE* IV 38, 1-5. For a dating of this event in 369 AD/370 AD see Alain Chauvot, 'L'arianisme de Fritigern, religion de l'empereur ou religion des Tervinges ?', in Georgy Sakharov (ed.), *Communio et traditio: Καθολικιστικό единство Церкви в раннехристианский период* (Moscou, 2014), 46-65.

have had two levels: a diplomatic dimension, and an act of allegiance to the Empire. On the other hand, they could have converted after the Gothic civil war, which would have lasted until 372 AD in a kind of internal process.³⁴ The disorders of civil war lead the Tervingi to seek a new identity, in a way reminding Arthur Greil's 'spoiled identity' theory.³⁵ This sociological theory states that conversion can occur when people are seeking a new identity in a time of violent social changes. Conversion to Christianity makes then sense in the new sociological framework resulting from civil war and the breakdown of Gothic society.

The second thesis postulates a more or less cynical conversion as Goths crossed the Danube in 376 AD³⁶ or just before in order to tighten the links to the Empire,³⁷ or, at least, a conversion as an act of gratitude toward the emperor.³⁸ In this case, the conversion would have been of mutual profit for both Valentinian, who could claim to have converted Goths to the Arian faith, and for Fritigern whose power was challenged by Alaviv. Alain Chauvot has shown that conversion to Christianity was a means to legitimate his power much further than only the *kuni* of which he was *reiks*, namely over all the Tervingi Goths south of the Danube.³⁹

Eike Faber suggested a third explanation, following the thesis of E. A. Thompson.⁴⁰ The mass conversion would only have occurred after the treaty with Theodosius in 382 AD, when Gothic aristocrats began to live, like the Roman elites, the life of property owners, and then saw in Christianity an alternative to the old heathen cult, dislocated by several years of serious crisis.⁴¹ In this case, Goths would have become Christians *because* they lived like Romans.

Actually, the dissenting ancient sources do not allow us to make any compelling decision. However, it is remarkable that in each theory Christianity is linked to Roman political allegiance, Roman *habitus* or the Roman way of life. Even though we should admit that conversion was a long term process, which Gothic leaders did not completely control until the widespread conversion of Goths inside the Empire around 400 AD, this religious conversion cannot be

³⁴ Knut Schäferdiek, 'Zeit und Umstände des westgotischen Übergangs zum Christentum', *Historia* 28 (1979), 90-7. Andreas Schwarcz, 'Cult and Religion among the Tervingi and the Visigoths and their Conversion to Christianity', in Peter Heather (ed.), *The Visigoths from the Migration Period to the Seventh Century. An ethnographic Perspective* (San Marin, 1999), 447-72.

³⁵ Arthur L. Greil, 'Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements', *Sociological Analysis* 38 (1977), 115-25.

³⁶ Herwig Wolfram, *Histoire des Goths* (Paris, 1990), 94-5.

³⁷ Peter Heather, 'The Crossing of the Danube and the Gothic Conversion', *GRBS* 27 (1986), 289-318.

³⁸ Soz., *HE* VI 37, 7 and Isid. *Hisp.*, *Hist. Goth.* 7.

³⁹ A. Chauvot, 'L'arianisme de Fritigern' (2014).

⁴⁰ Eike Faber, *Von Ulfila bis Rekkared. Die Goten und ihr Christentum* (Stuttgart, 2014), 172-5. Following Edward A. Thompson, 'The Date of the Conversion of the Visigoths', *JEH* 7 (1956), 1-11.

⁴¹ C. Leonhard, *Jewish Pesach* (2006), 129-57.

understood without relating it closely to the process of integration inside the Empire. At the beginning of the fifth century, Prosper of Aquitaine speaks about barbarian soldiers who converted to Christianity while serving in the Roman army and keeping their new faith when going home.⁴² Prosper also adds that they could not learn this religion in their homeland, showing again the Roman tropism of Christianity.

Let's turn to another case, for which reasons are better known: Fritigil, queen of the Marcomans. After receiving the visit of a Roman traveller, around 397 AD, the queen heard about Ambrose and converted to Christianity. Then she convinced her husband to surrender to the Romans.⁴³ This last fact is sufficient to disqualify this example as a model for conversion of individuals without any political dimension. But, her story bears enough details to let us grasp the phenomenon of conversion in its complexity, including at an individual level.

This story reveals four points of interest. First, it is remarkable that the queen converted on her own initiative. She heard about Ambrose by 'some Christian, who came to her from Italy'.⁴⁴ Paulinus clearly states that he did not purposely come to convert her. He was not part of a missionary project and was probably a merchant. Paulinus, although one can doubt his accuracy regarding facts, makes of the queen the subject of all sentences, so that she decided alone to 'believe in Christ, whose servant she recognized in him'.⁴⁵ Though we cannot deny a political dimension (see *infra*), Fritigil's travel to Milan points out the equally undeniable individual dimension, which matches Nock's classical definition of conversion emphasizing a radical change within the individual.⁴⁶

⁴² Prosp. Tiro, *Voc. Omn. Gent.* 2, 33: *At alii barbari dum Romanis auxiliantur, quod in suis locis nosse non poterant, in nostris didicere regionibus, et ad sedes suas cum Christianae religionis institutione remearunt.*

⁴³ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36: 1. *Per idem tempus Fritigil quaedam regina Marcomannorum, cum a quodam christiano viro, qui ad illam forte de Italiae partibus advenerat, referente sibi audiret famam viri, Christo credidit, cuius illum servulum recognoverat; missisque muneribus ad ecclesiam per legatos postulavit, ut scriptis, qualiter credere deberet, informaretur. 2. Ad quam ille epistulam fecit praeclaram in modum catechismi, in qua etiam admonuit ut suaderet viro Romanis pacem servare; qua adcepta epistula mulier suasit viro, ut cum populo suo se Romanis traderet. Quae cum advenisset Mediolanum, plurimum doluit quod sanctum sacerdotem, ad quem festinaverat, minime reperisset; iam enim de hac vita migraverat.* The date of 397 AD is almost certain, because Paulinus was writing after Suetonius' model and, thus, following a chronological order. See Timothy D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen, 2010), 196-7.

⁴⁴ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36, 1: *a quodam viro, qui ad illam de Italiae partibus advenerat.*

⁴⁵ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36, 1: *Christo credidit, cuius illum servulum recognoverat.*

⁴⁶ Arthur D. Nock, *Conversion, the Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford, 1933), 7: 'By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right'. See also David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, 'The Sociology of Conversion', *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984), 167-90, 169. This radical change is shown by

Secondly, the conversion happened fast. In Paulinus' words, it was not even a process: she heard, she believed: *referente sibi audiret famam uiri. Christo credidit*.⁴⁷ The way Paulinus formulates the conversion is remarkable: *Christo credidit*. By this elliptic wording, Paulinus reminds us that conversion was at this time disconnected from baptism and, if not a question of profound inner faith, at least a question of public profession of faith and not a process. Recent sociology introduced several levels of conversion, especially by distinguishing conversion and mere adhesion.⁴⁸ The same effort to conceptualize conversion also led to establish empirical indicators of conversion, as membership status, demonstration events and rhetorical indicators.⁴⁹ The profession of faith of the queen is doubtlessly such an empirical indicator.

As a third aspect, the appeal of the Roman Empire becomes clear when she convinces her husband to surrender to the Empire. Again, the question of initiative is crucial, but ambiguous. Paulinus tells us that Ambrose himself asked her, after her conversion, to convince her husband to surrender to Roman authority. What did the king do with 3 000 soldiers, after a *fœdus* with Honorius?⁵⁰ Did these soldiers convert? Was this hypothetical conversion part of the treaty? As Theodoret told about Fritigern, we can suspect a strong incitation to conversion through diplomatic means. Anyway, attraction for Roman life and allegiance to Roman power are here closely linked to conversion in a mutual process. Even if the queen converted because of personal convictions, it seems unlikely that religion did not imply political issues. If we admit that Christianity shared some features with a kind of polis religion, it follows that conversion means also a desire to integrate socially and politically the Roman *civitas*, or, in other words, the Empire.

Finally, the exact role of Roman authority, both political and religious, appears with the queen's request to be taught 'how she should believe'.⁵¹ Ambrose answered to this request in a letter by which he explained in simple words, 'as for a catechumen', how to believe. This means that, beyond the mere faith in Christ, with the simple words of Paulinus, he converted her to Nicene Christianity. One can ask if she converted to Nicene Christianity because of Ambrose or, for more political reasons, because of Honorius' own faith. If conversion simply happened on religious grounds, why didn't she convert to Arianism,

biblical Hebrew word *shub* and Greek *epistrephein*. See Virgil B. Gillespie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity: How and Why People Change* (Birmingham, 1979), 12-7.

⁴⁷ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36, 1.

⁴⁸ D. Snow and R. Machalek, 'Sociology' (1984), 169.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 171-2.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Lotter estimated that 3 000 Marcoman warriors must have migrated with Fritigil and his husband into the Roman Empire and noted that two Marcoman units appeared in the western *Notitia Dignitatum*, Friedrich Lotter, *Völkerverschiebungen im Ostalpen-Mitteldonau-Raum zwischen Antike und Mittelalter: 375-600* (Berlin, 2003), 46-7 and 100-1.

⁵¹ Paulin., *V. Ambros.* 36, 2: *qualiter credere debet*.

as it was the case in the Gothic world, much nearer than Italy? Federated Goths inside the Empire kept their Arian creed.

The question about the reason for conversion to Arianism rather than to Nicene Christianity is traditionally solved through the hypothesis of the ‘strategies of distinction’. As the conversion of the group under Fritigern’s leadership took place around 376 AD towards an evidently subordinationist form of Christianity, when the theodosian anti-subordinationist legislation eventually converted the Empire to the Nicene creed in 380 AD, the Goths kept their Arian creed, against the laws, as a way of marking their difference from the Romans, in a kind of ethnical identification process by differentiation.⁵² However, it has been shown by Viola Gheller that this framework is irrelevant for several reasons. First of all, Arianism was still very strong among Romans and Arians ready to rebel as soon as Theodosius’ position toward Magnus Maximus seemed to weaken and even until Honorius’ and Arcadius’ reigns.⁵³ The Edict of Thessalonica was not enforced systematically and Arianism was still very common among Greco-Roman populations of the Danubian area. Therefore, the Goths cannot have considered Arianism as a means of distancing themselves from Romanity once inside the Empire. Moreover, mixed Roman and Gothic Arian communities seem to have existed in Balkans, for instance near Nicopolis ad Istrum.⁵⁴ Consequently, Goths chose Arianism on the basis of the local Greco-Roman communities that they met rather than for political reasons and therefore not in order to distinguish themselves from Roman populations.⁵⁵ One can even state the opposite: at the very moment of conversion, they systematically chose the faith of the Roman authority with which they were negotiating.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, religious conversion is, at least partly, an individual choice and, therefore, has a subjective dimension out of our grasp. That being said, it seems hard to deny that, from the point of view of the *Barbaricum*, Christianity, which refers to both Arian and Nicene faiths depending on the context, has a strong Roman connotation, which often implies allegiance to the

⁵² Hagith Sivan, ‘The appropriation of Roman law in barbarian hands. Roman-barbarian marriage in Visigothic Gaul and Spain’, in Waler Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (eds), *Strategies of Distinction. The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800* (Leiden, 1998), 189-203, 190.

⁵³ Viola Gheller, ‘La conversione gotica: una questione identitaria?’, in Livio Zerbini (ed.), *Culti et religiosità nelle province danubiane. Atti del II Convegno Internazionale, Ferrara, 20-22 novembre 2013* (Bologna, 2015), 619-36, 625.

⁵⁴ V. Gheller, ‘La conversione gotica’ (2015), 629.

⁵⁵ At least until the settlement in Aquitania in 418 AD. V. Gheller, ‘La conversione gotica’ (2015), 634-5.

Roman imperial power, at least adhesion to the Roman way of life. The real framework for conversion is attraction for Romanness, especially at the end of the fourth century. People from the outside use Christianity as a means to become part of the Empire. Christians outside the Empire always keep bonds with other Christians inside the Empire, even if those bonds are not institutional. In return Roman bishops are concerned with the faith of Christians outside the Empire and imagine, like Paulinus did, that the whole *Barbaricum* will one day become Roman. However, this last phenomenon, underlying missions outside the Empire, is not sufficient to explain the attraction to Christianity in the *Barbaricum*.

Although the framework of religious and civic life underwent transformations in Late Antiquity, the idea that religion and politics are closely linked is still efficient. Faith is not a mere matter of inner consciousness, but conversion on a religious level also means a radical change in the other dimensions of life, including political, if not ethnical, adhesion. Barbarians, while becoming Christian, also think of themselves as becoming Roman. In this sense, the conversion of barbarians to Christianity is not above all a religious matter, but a social and political transformation. By parodying Tertullian's word, one could say, about barbarian converts: *fiunt, non nascuntur Romani*.

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