

The Christianization of the Germanic Tribes

Hannah Sanders

Whether Rome fell due to the barbarian invasions or the spirit of Rome was transformed into the new Germanic kingdoms, the role of Christianity was instrumental in the progression of European civilization. Christianity has a turbulent history; from its very beginnings, followers of this obscure religion faced persecution from the Roman Empire under almost every emperor for a few hundred years. Things changed in the fourth century, however, with Constantine issuing edicts of toleration towards Christians and Theodosius I proclaiming Christianity the official religion of the empire. In the meantime, the Germanic tribes on the borders of the Roman Empire were encountering Christianity and eventually converting. This did not mean that the barbarian invaders felt more solidarity with the Romans; indeed, Rome itself fell to the Christian Ostrogoths in 476 CE. If not for the Christianized Germanic tribes, Christianity may have fallen into obscurity, at least in the West, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The intent of this essay is to chronicle the pre-Christian customs of the Germanic tribes as related to their susceptibility to Christianity, their preliminary conversions to Arian Christianity as encouraged by the Goths, the eventual role of Catholic Christianity and the Franks, and the effects of Christianity on the fledgling Christian Germanic kingdoms. All of this supports the theory that the Christianization of the Germanic tribes allowed for the continuation and spread of Christianity in Western Europe in the following centuries, up until the present day.

Several primary sources are utilized in this paper. The first that will be encountered is *Germania* by Tacitus, an ethnography of the Germanic people by a Roman senator and historian. This work deals with the origins, land, and customs of the Germanic tribes, some of which are described in detail. Material regarding their spiritual customs has been used in this paper. Another primary source used is the Bible, the collection of sacred Christian texts. This paper utilizes sections of the Bible regarding Christian doctrine, beliefs, and customs. Two works by Gregory of Tours are referenced

in this essay: *Glory of the Confessors* and *History of the Franks*. *Glory* is a collection of stories on Christian miracles and the people, confessors, responsible for them. *History* is a chronological account of the Franks, from creation to Gregory's own time. It is mostly used here for its sections on Clovis and the Frankish kingdom. Another primary source is *The Origins and Deeds of the Goths*, or *Getica*, by Jordanes. This chronological account of the Gothic people is used here mainly as a reference for their spiritual customs. Ammianus Marecellinus' work, *Res Gestae*, a history of the late Roman Empire, is used in the paper for information on the Germanic tribes with relation to Rome. This paper also utilizes the works of Martin of Braga and Maximus of Turin, bishops of the west, for references regarding the conversion to Christianity among the Germanic peoples.

It is important to understand that Germanic paganism was not a single entity; the various tribes naturally held various beliefs and carried out differing rituals. "Paganism" is not an adequate term either, as the Christians used this word for any of the vastly differing groups of non-Christians.¹ Paganism is not a religion; it is the absence of Christian belief. As such, it is more fitting to refer to this particular belief system as pre-Christian or "traditional" Germanic spirituality. Additionally, it was possible, even normal, for people to retain their ancestral beliefs while incorporating worship of the Christian god at the same time.² The modern understanding of religion tends to focus on belief in a particular god; traditional Germanic spirituality, however, cannot be understood this way. It was characterized more by a system of rituals, social conventions, and customs.³ Religious practices in reality were quite complicated, and Germanic traditional beliefs can be hard to reconstruct. The only written records of pre-Christian practices among the Germanic tribes were written by strong Christian believers; the Germanic peoples themselves did not write down their traditional beliefs in their own, undoubtedly more sympathetic, words.⁴ Though Christian writers protested this, there are many parallels

between characteristics of traditional Germanic spirituality and those of Christianity. This certainly facilitated the later conversions of the Germanic tribes.

One of the most important aspects of Germanic spirituality, and indeed many belief systems in Europe and around the world, was sacrifice of both animate beings and inanimate objects.⁵ Animal sacrifice provided a thrilling event that would serve as an outlet for aggression as well as unite the group of sacrificers. The group was further united by the feast of the sacrificial animal that inevitably followed.⁶ Sacrifice was not confined to animals, either. Certain Germanic tribes in the north, after defeating an army, would sacrifice their weapons and booty to fire and then water. The impracticality of this action suggests that it was a ritual, perhaps an offering to the gods.⁷ The fact that these practices were performed in public reinforced the community and public ownership of the ritual; private sacrifice was much less common.⁸ Private sacrifice took the form of tossing tokens, such as ceramic pots filled with food or hair, brooches, precious metals, or swords into springs, bogs, or rivers as an offering to the gods.⁹ Shrines to the gods exist today with names that suggest a private owner. These cases, however, were few and far between compared to the regular public ceremonies. Sacrifices can also be considered as a gift to the gods, appeasements so that they would look favorably upon the offering population.¹⁰ Whether this was a gift or payment is up for debate.

Themes of sacrifice run though Christianity as well. Christians gave up animal sacrifice upon the crucifixion of Jesus, as they believe him to be the ultimate sacrifice, rendering all other sacrifice unnecessary. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the author asserts, “Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood, [Jesus] entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”¹¹ Here the author of the letter to the Hebrews is dismissing animal sacrifice, saying that animal sacrifice had nothing to do with and is in fact inferior in function to Jesus’s sacrifice. Though Christians looked down on animal sacrifice, Jesus ultimately serves the same function: an offering of death to the god(s) to the improvement of the human condition. The difference is that Jesus represented the sole and final sacrifice, whereas animal sacrifice was carried out continuously.¹²

It would not be unfair to characterize the pre-Christian beliefs and practices of the Germanic tribes as violent and literally bloodthirsty. The violence associated with animal sacrifice is a given, but traditional Germanic spirituality prescribed a fixation and veneration of blood. Blood was used as a kind of holy water, thought to have strengthening and cleansing properties; our word “bless” comes from the word *bloedsian*, which means to sprinkle with blood. The northern Germanic groups collected the blood after a sacrifice in a container for this purpose.¹³ The Scordisci tribe of Illyria was known to drink blood from skulls, and the northern Germanic tribes drank the blood from meat during feasts.¹⁴ Another violent practice is difficult to talk about with certainty. Writers have dictated stories of human sacrifice and cannibalism among various “barbarian” peoples for as long as people have been writing. Did the Germanic tribes practice human sacrifice before conversion to Christianity, or were Christian writers sensationalizing their culture for shock value? Whatever the answer, records of human sacrifice among the Germanic tribes remain. It was said that they would use criminals or other social undesirables for this purpose, as well as the ill and wounded.¹⁵ According to the *Gutasaga*, the old population of Gotland sacrificed their children to the gods.¹⁶ Tacitus claims that they reserve human sacrifice for their highest god, Mercury/Woden.¹⁷ There exists records of “sacrificial kings” in Anglo-Saxon England; it seemed that warriors and kings found honor and glorified their gods by sacrificing themselves in battle.¹⁸ Whether these stories were the ancient version of yellow journalism or factual accounts, the subject of human sacrifice among the Germanic peoples is worth noting.

Although the consumption of blood is actually forbidden in the Bible, members of the early Christian church practiced the sacrament of the Eucharist.¹⁹ During the Last Supper, the night before Jesus was crucified, he offered his disciples bread and wine: “And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.”²⁰ Instead of interpreting it as a metaphor, Christian leadership took these verses literally and established the sacrament of the Eucharist to partake in Jesus’s flesh as a tribute to his sacrifice. As Pope John Paul II explains in the Catholic Catechism, “At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to

his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection.”²¹ They believed that the bread and wine they consumed was transformed and that they were literally eating Jesus’s flesh and blood. As such, the Eucharist carries an interesting association with cannibalism. As Jesus was part man and part god, his crucifixion seems like human sacrifice. These Christian establishments, as well as the bloody language used in the New Testament regarding Jesus’s sacrifice, in some ways parallel the blood-stained rituals and customs of the Germanic tribes. The sacrifice of a great king and the drinking of his blood made instinctual sense to them, and therefore increased their receptiveness to Christian conversion.

Another central characteristic of Germanic spirituality was communal outdoor worship; nature provided the sacred fixtures, making temples and buildings largely unnecessary. As Tacitus relates in his ethnography, “For the rest, from the grandeur and majesty of beings celestial, they judge it altogether unsuitable to hold the Gods enclosed within walls.”²² Springs were highly venerated; the pagan Germanic tribes worshiped at springs and other bodies of water so much that Christian writers thought that there were devils in the water.²³ Spring water was very pure, and the traditional Germanic belief system valued its cleansing and healing properties. Prayers would be held at springs, and people would wash themselves of impurities, almost like a baptism.²⁴ The people made periodic pilgrimages to certain springs due to the water being more pure at certain times of year.²⁵ As previously mentioned, people would also toss items into springs and other bodies of water as offerings to the gods.²⁶

Gregory of Tours considered veneration of bodies of water to be foolish and ridiculous. In his works he relates an interesting account of a Gabali festival held at the lake of St Andeol: the people would travel to the lake to throw in their offerings, sacrifice animals, and then feast for three days. The local Christian leaders were disturbed by this, but upon their building of a basilica nearby and their assertions that lakes have no religious power, the “rustics” converted to Christianity: “They left the lake and brought everything they usually threw into it to the holy church. So they were freed from the mistake that had bound them.”²⁷ It is interesting that Gregory dismissed the spirituality of bodies of river so readily considering the holy association that Christianity also has with bodies of water. The Jordan River in particular was the site of many miracles in the Old Testament; its waters were considered to have healing and cleansing properties. Elisha, the prophet of Israel, guided a sick man to the Jordan for healing by God: “Then went he down, and dipped

himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”²⁸ There is also the obvious association between bodies of water and baptism. Baptism is the Christian sacrament of admittance to the faith by a ritual bath in water; this action sanctifies the recipient, and Jesus himself stated that it was necessary for Christians: “Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”²⁹ Though Christians did not make offerings to bodies of water, it is clear that they had much in common with the Germanic tribes when it came to their sanctity.

Trees and stones were likewise centers of traditional Germanic spirituality. Trees outlive humans by a considerable amount; indeed, some are hundreds of years old. The pre-Christian Germanic peoples respected their age and steadfastness, and venerated them with prayer and offering. Trees also represent fertility, as they bear fruit or nuts and therefore provide sustenance.³⁰ People would sacrifice at trees, anoint them with oil, and light candles in their vicinity.³¹ The Goths, according to Jordanes, hung arms of their slain foes from trees as an offering to their god of war.³² Stones, too, captured the imagination and respect of the pagan Germanic peoples. They were large, heavy, and immovable; like trees, they represented permanence. Stones were anointed with oil and were often believed to have healing properties.³³

Sacred trees were considered a threat to Christian missionaries to the Germanic peoples. St. Boniface, a Christian missionary to Anglo-Saxon England, led the cutting down of an important tree called the Oak of Donar (Thor). The natives had been worshiping this tree, so Boniface and his colleagues decided that it had to go, and they used the timber to build a church nearby dedicated to Saint Peter.³⁴ Though Christians did not worship trees or rocks as holy, St. Boniface’s reaction seems excessive considering the language of reverence used in the Bible itself for trees and rocks. Trees are used as similes for steadfastness and fertility: “And he [the blessed man] shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”³⁵ Here, the reader is advised to emulate the tree and its positive qualities, the same ones invoked by Germanic spirituality. Rocks too are used to invoke permanence and stability: “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat

upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.”³⁶ This shows that Christians and the Germanic tribes held a similar reverence for trees and rocks. Such language used in the Bible must have appealed to the Germanic peoples, making Christianity a bit less alien to them.

As in many ancient belief systems, one aspect of traditional Germanic spirituality was polytheism, the belief in a plurality of gods. Unlike the modern “high” religions, like Christianity and Islam, with which most people are currently familiar, much less emphasis was placed on gods by the pagan Germanic people.³⁷ The multitude of gods represented different aspects of human experience, so the Germanic peoples would pray or sacrifice to the god corresponding to their concern. For example, the god known as Tyr/Tiw represented war, the god Donner/Thor represented war and fertility, the god Freyr represented virility and wealth, and the god Woden/Odin represented war and wisdom.³⁸ Germanic peoples in the first half of the first millennium also venerated several mother goddesses, praying to them for health, fertility, and good fortune.³⁹ In contrast to certain monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam, the Germanic peoples had no qualms about fashioning idols of their gods for worship. These took the form of wooden figures, branches, wooden poles, and carvings.⁴⁰ Clearly, the Germanic peoples were used to the idea of several gods and did not see them as vying for the top position. God veneration in traditional Germanic custom was much more flexible and relaxed.

This perhaps presents the biggest problem for Christians: monotheism is probably the most important aspect of Christianity. Paul states it clearly in his address to the Corinthians: “As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many); But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.”⁴¹ Here he is rejecting all other gods as idols and venerating the Christian God above all. The Germanic tribes, with their worship of a multitude of gods and their fashioning of wooden idols or veneration of swords, represent a fundamentally different worldview. Christian missionaries, in their efforts to convert the Germanic peoples, found it relatively easy to get the pagans to worship the Christian God. The difficult part was inducing them to give up all other gods.⁴²

Far from being unaware brutes, the pre-Christian Germanic tribes had an acute sense of time that dictated

their festivals and special days. While Christians observe the Sabbath on Sunday as a day of rest and reflection on God, the Germanic pagan people seem to have observed a day of rest from work on Thursday, as it was the day of Donner/Thor.⁴³ Other days of the week in English and other Indo-European languages betray a pagan origin: Monday comes from *Moenan* and means Moon’s Day, Tuesday comes from *Tyr/Tiu* and means Tyr’s Day, Wednesday comes from *Woden* and means Woden’s Day, Thursday comes from *Donner/Thor* and means Thor’s Day, and Friday comes from *Freyr/Frija* and means Freyr’s Day. Excluding the moon, which was important to the timing of traditional Germanic rituals, these days correspond to Germanic gods. Other Germanic languages have similar names, due to the words being of the same root.⁴⁴ The Germanic pagans held festivals and rituals based on the equinoxes as well; the Yule celebration in particular was important to them. Sacrifices and feasts were held during midwinter, during the Gothic month known as *giuli* or yule, to honor dead ancestors and invoke fertility.⁴⁵ This celebration, as well as *modraniht* (night of mothers), which occurred at the same time of year, of course coincided with the Christian celebration of Christ’s birth, Christmas.⁴⁶ This doubtless made transition to Christianity easier.

The Germanic tribes did not live in a vacuum, oblivious to alternate belief systems; many had come into contact with Roman Christians by the first couple centuries CE. In 251 CE, the Goths defeated the Roman forces at the Battle of Abritus and made their first contact with Christianity in the form of Roman Christian prisoners of war.⁴⁷ As the Angles and Saxons invaded and settled Britain after the fifth century, they encountered the previously converted Christian Romano-Britons.⁴⁸ Though these first encounters did not produce mass new converts for the Christian faith, it is likely that some Germanic people became Christians not long after the first contact. When Ulfila, the famed missionary and bishop to the Goths, was sent on a mission to the Visigoths by Emperor Constantius II, an Arian sympathizer, in the fourth century, he did not encounter a fully heathen tribe; some were already Christians.⁴⁹ This is not to say, however, that these Christians were representative of the beliefs of the Germanic tribes; most were pagan upon entering the Roman Empire.⁵⁰ The Goths were the first Germanic tribe to convert to Christianity, in part due to Ulfila’s efforts. This likely occurred after 376 CE among the Goths that crossed the Danube River.⁵¹ John Chrysostom felt a degree of responsibility for the Goths under his jurisdiction in Constantinople, furnishing them with a completely Gothic church hierarchy in the late fourth century. He even gave

sermons claiming biblical figures, like the three wise men, were of Gothic ancestry.⁵² These presumably Catholic Goths were quite in the minority, however; the Christianity preached by Ulfila and adhered to by the (non-urban) Goths was not orthodox Catholicism, but Arianism.

In the early fourth century, an Alexandrian priest named Arius had been struggling with the nature of Jesus Christ as related to God the Father. Eventually he prevailed against these challenging concepts and published his beliefs in a work called *Thalia*; though this work does not survive in its entirety, Arius’s views are known from the plentiful writings of his opponents, like Athanasius. Arianism has three basic concepts: Jesus Christ and God the Father are not of the same essence, Jesus Christ was created, and there was a time when Jesus Christ did not exist.⁵³ Essentially, Jesus Christ was considered first among creatures, but not divine like God. Of course, this position had many opponents and sparked a great controversy, which ultimately resulted in the calling of the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. With Constantine presiding, Arianism was officially declared to be heresy; this enabled the destruction of Arian materials and persecution of not only Arians, but any who were not staunch anti-Arians.⁵⁴ However, Arianism clearly did not disappear after the edicts from the Nicene Council. In the Roman establishment itself, several later emperors such as Constantius II were Arian sympathizers and the controversy continued after the Council of Constantinople in 381 codified the orthodox views of the Catholic Church.⁵⁵ Most importantly, some of the Romanized ethnic Goths, like Ulfila, picked up Arianism and brought it back to their home tribe, leading to the adoption of Arian Christianity by the Gothic peoples.

Clearly, Christianity and Arianism in particular appealed to the Germanic peoples. As demonstrated in the first few pages of this paper, many aspects of traditional Germanic rituals matched up with some Christian practices. The cleansing properties of bodies of water, the reverence for trees and rocks, the holiness of blood, and the importance of sacrifice are all points of similarity between the two belief systems. Further, Christianity represented the way to a new, better life; one could have their sins forgiven and be able to start afresh.⁵⁶ The Church also provided protection against demons, a serious concern for people of late antiquity; members of the church could assist those possessed by demons, for example.⁵⁷ Arianism especially appealed to the Germanic peoples due to their spiritual backgrounds. Since traditional Germanic spirituality was polytheistic, it was more intuitive to think of God the Father as the highest god, with Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost being inferior. The

concept of the trinity in Catholicism, with holds that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are all the same, equal being is more complex and therefore harder to accept. As Gothic society followed a strongly paternalistic hierarchy, the preeminence of God the Father over Christ the Son in Arianism was more intuitive and appealing to the new converts.⁵⁸ Maintaining their Arian beliefs was also a way for the Goths to separate themselves from and stay independent of the Roman Empire, whose citizens were intended to be fully Catholic.⁵⁹

The Visigoths were strong believers in Arian Christianity; so much so, that they converted other Germanic tribes to Arianism as well. They were not wholly responsible for the conversion of other groups, but their missionary efforts certainly helped increase the amount of Arians. Excluding the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks, the other Germanic peoples were gradually converted to Arian Christianity in the years following the conversion of the Visigoths in the fourth century.⁶⁰ This included the Sueves in northwest Spain, the Burgundians in Gaul, the Ostrogoths in Italy, and the Vandals in North Africa.⁶¹ Arianism ruled among the Germanic tribes until the defeat of the Visigoths at the Battle of Vouillé in 507 by the Franks.⁶² The Franks were unique among the Germanic peoples because they converted directly from paganism to Catholicism, without the “middle man” of Arianism as was usually the case. As the Visigoths lost their influence, Arianism lost its preeminence to Catholicism among the Germanic societies. The Burgundians converted less than a decade later, and the Visigoths themselves abandoned Arianism for Catholicism after the Council of Toledo in 589.⁶³

The measure of independence and separation from Roman culture that Arianism gave to the Goths ultimately helped bring about their fall from power. The dichotomy between the Arian Germanic rulers and Catholic Roman subjects created great religious tension and this divide prevented feelings of unity and patriotism, inhibiting the society’s growth.⁶⁴ The Franks, on the other hand, recognized that assimilation with their Catholic subjects would only strengthen their power base. To this end, the Frankish king Clovis converted to Catholicism, which enabled the conversion of the rest of the Franks.⁶⁵ As the Visigoths, the main proponents of Arianism among the Germanic tribes, declined in power and influence with their defeat by Clovis and the Franks, Catholicism took hold of more and more barbarian societies. During the sixth century, most of the previously Arian Germanic peoples accepted conversion to Catholicism: the Ostrogoths were decimated by Roman

forces, the Vandals surrendered to the Empire, and the Burgundians converted after the defeat and death of their king Gundobad.⁶⁶ The most noteworthy was the conversion of King Recared of the Visigoths, which occurred around 587, and that of his people afterwards.⁶⁷ This shift of power from the Visigoths to the Franks and from Arianism to Catholicism set the stage for the next phase of European history, that of the Christian Germanic societies.

The Franks were unique among the Germanic peoples in that their process of Christianization skipped the phase of Arianism and went directly to Catholicism. The future king of the Franks, Clovis, recognized this as more beneficial to his power base. In the late fifth century, the Roman state was essentially dead in the west, leaving only the Church to treat with the Germanic kings. At this time, Clovis was just one of several kings in northwest Europe vying for power, and he began accomplishing this by annexing formerly Roman provinces into his realm. He was acutely aware of the religious situation and tensions present in these areas; he kept correspondence with Catholic Church leaders as well as Arian Germanic kings.⁶⁸ Though both “sides” wanted him, Clovis ultimately decided to convert to Catholicism.⁶⁹ There are several reasons for this. Orthodox Christianity was associated with the prestige and power of the former Roman Empire as opposed to the “barbaric” Germanic kingdoms, which increased its appeal. The Germanic peoples were fascinated with and admired Roman culture, and Catholicism was part of that.⁷⁰ Additionally, the Germanic rulers represented about 5 percent of the population of the new kingdoms; the rest were Romans, and therefore Catholic.⁷¹ Accommodation of Catholic beliefs was a much better idea politically because it prevented divides between the rulers and the subjects and encouraged a spirit of religious unity. The religious dichotomy between the Arian Germanic rulers and the Catholic Roman subjects under Ostrogoth and Vandal leadership was one of the reasons for those societies’ ultimate failures.⁷²

The policy of religious accommodation utilized by Clovis represented a turning point in Christian history: a shift of the center of Christianity from the south in Rome to the northwest in North Gaul and Germany.⁷³ The administration of the religious bodies was different, however. The new western religious power base had a simpler organization, was less well-funded, and was not considered as venerable or prestigious.⁷⁴ The Western Church’s power largely depended on the king’s power, and vice versa. Additionally, the roles of the king and church official were largely fused together. In Spain, the king acted as supreme Judge of the Church,

maintaining the rules of the faith and punishing dissenters.⁷⁵ Christianity acted as a consolidating and unifying agent, giving birth to a kind of Christian-related nationalism in the new Germanic kingdoms. The new convert to Catholicism, King Recared of the Visigoths, affirmed the unity of the Goths under Catholicism in his celebratory conversion speech.⁷⁶ Likewise, the prologue to the Salic Law, a collection of many Frankish laws from the eighth century, celebrates the Franks as a most Christian race, strong under their “founder,” God.⁷⁷ Clearly, both the Goths and the Franks found a sense of pride with their new strong Catholic faith. This unity was clearly a positive thing for the new kingdoms and their leaders, but it did not come easily.

Church leadership, with the cooperation of the monarchy, legislated against any who were not Orthodox Christians. King Childebert I, Clovis’s successor, legislated strongly against pagan practices: “Whoever shall dare to perpetrate these sacrileges, We order he shall receive a hundred blows.”⁷⁸ In Spain, the Visigoths forbid pagan “magical” practices such as tempest invocation and sacrifice to devils and would punish them with lashes, scalping, and public humiliation.⁷⁹ The Visigoths also legislated the forced baptism of non-Christians.⁸⁰ Such legislation was difficult to enforce, however. The rural areas of the Germanic kingdoms remained largely out of the church’s reach for centuries after Constantine converted to Christianity. Though it was hard to penetrate the countryside, some of the resistance apparently also came about due to negligent officials. Maximus of Turin condemned those officials who neglected their duties to enforce Christian worship: “You, therefore, brother, when you observe your peasant sacrificing and do not forbid the offering, sin, because even if you did not assist the sacrifice yourself you gave permission for it.”⁸¹ Martin of Braga greatly simplified Christian beliefs and history for the peasants so that they could understand better and therefore practice in the correct way.⁸² This legislation and attitude of accommodation eased any remaining pagans’ conversion to Christianity and the new Germanic kingdoms became mostly, if not fully, Christianized.

Because of the Germanic conversions to Christianity, the history of Western Europe and Christianity became inseparable. The pre-Christian customs and beliefs of the Germanic tribes had similar themes to Christianity, facilitating an easier conversion. The “middle man” of Arianism was also instrumental to the full conversion of the Germanic tribes to Catholicism. This version of Christianity was enforced in the new German kingdoms and eventually became Catholicism as it is known today. The entrenchment

of Christianity in Western Europe was made possible after the fall of the Western Roman Empire due to the Germanic “barbarians” and their enforcement of Christianity in their new kingdoms. The rest is history.

Endnotes

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⁸ Dowden, *European Paganism*, 31-32.
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⁴⁶ Dowden, *European Paganism*, 204-5.
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⁶² Simek, “Germanic Religion and the Conversion to Christianity,” 155.
⁶³ Ibid.
⁶⁴ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 73-74.
⁶⁵ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1974), II.29-31.
⁶⁶ James, *Europe’s Barbarians*, 224.
⁶⁷ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, IX.15.
⁶⁸ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 74-75.
⁶⁹ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.20-2.
⁷⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, trans. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1986), 18.2.17.
⁷¹ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 72.
⁷² Ibid.
⁷³ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 85.
⁷⁴ Ibid.
⁷⁵ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 89.
⁷⁶ Ibid., 90-92.
⁷⁷ K. A. Eckhardt, ed., *Lex Salica*, 100 Titel-Text (Weimar: 1953), 82-84.
⁷⁸ Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism*, 108.
⁷⁹ S. P. Scott, trans., *The Visigothic Code* (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2009), VI.2.6.
⁸⁰ Ibid., XXII.2.6.

⁸¹ Maximus of Turin, *Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Long Prairie, MN: Neumann Press, 1989), 107.
⁸² Martin of Braga, *On the Castigation of Rustics*, 183–203.

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Monstrous Races on the Central Tympanum at Vézelay: Constructing “the Other” in Medieval Society

Caitlin Green

Beginning in 1095, the Crusaders made it their mission to reach the “monstrous” groups of people and restore Christian faith to holy places in and near Jerusalem. The notion of “the other,” a barbaric, deformed, un-Christian group of people, swept across Europe. Pope Urban II initiated the first Crusade at the council of Clermont in 1095 with a powerful speech urging all to go forth and recover Palestine from the hands of the Muslims. In an account provided by Robert the monk, Urban vehemently stated that “a race from the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God, a generation forsooth which has not directed its heart and has not entrusted its spirit to God, has invaded the lands of those Christians and has depopulated them by the sword, pillage and fire.”¹ This retelling from Robert the Monk reveals that there was a considerable degree of animosity toward the Muslims. They were not Christian, so were therefore “the other.”

A popular pilgrimage church en route for crusader missions was Vézelay Abbey in northern Burgundy, France. Vézelay’s intricate iconographic program on the tympanum and lintel sets it apart as one of the great masterpieces of Romanesque art and architecture (Figure 1). In comparison to other tympana erected at the time of the Vézelay tympanum, it is clear that there is a unique depiction at Vézelay not to be found elsewhere — the Pentecost. Even more fascinating are the depictions of the “monstrous races” encompassing the central scene of the Pentecost that Pope Urban II and other medieval figures outcast as “the other.” By studying the iconography of the Vézelay tympanum, an understanding of the monstrous races, or “the other,” in medieval society can be constructed.

In eleventh century France, there was a revival of monumental sculpture that had been neglected since the end of the classical period.² The central tympanum at Vézelay is an early example of the reemergence of monumental sculpture in France constructed between the



Figure 1: Central tympanum. Vézelay Abbey, Burgundy, France, 1130.



Figure 2: Tympanum, Autun, France, 1130.

years 1120–1132. Scholars have often compared the Vézelay tympanum to other contemporary tympana to exemplify the advancement in skill present on the Vézelay tympanum.³ In comparison to other tympana erected at the same time as the Vézelay tympanum, there is a unique depiction, a scene depicting the Pentecost, also known as the Descent of the Holy Ghost. Many tympana scenes present the Day of Judgment, such as the tympanum contemporary with Vézelay at Autun, France (Figure 2). Not only is the subject at Vézelay distinct from its contemporary at Autun, but the artistic quality is as well. Whereas the neighboring Autun tympanum is static and rigid, the Vézelay tympanum seems to move and breathe. At Autun, Christ’s knees point in opposite directions to keep him frontal; however, at Vézelay, the sculptor has twisted Christ’s body into an eloquent contrapposto