

# ‘Perfidious Goth’, Holy Martyrs Cult and the Memory of Roman Troops in 5th Century Edessa

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## Abstract

The present article deals with the literary image of a Gothic man who happened to be in Edessa in the 5th century AD as a part of Roman auxiliary troops. He is reported to marry there a local girl under pretext of being a celibatarian. Having left Syria for Gothia, it turned out that he was married and had children. The Syrian wife became a slave and suffered a lot before returning miraculously back to Edessa. From the comparative study of the sources it becomes clear that the Gothic auxiliary troops were summoned to Edessa in connection with the advance of the Huns. Notwithstanding the common equation of Goths and Getae, the Gothic soldier in question was Germanic and not Getan (Dacian). The last question is the character of the marriage gift he presented for his temporary marriage.

## Keywords

Goths – Roman-Persian wars – Edessa – Syriac – hagiography – miracles – Gurias, Shamon and Habib – shrine of the martyrs in Edessa

## 1 Introduction

The hagiographical text containing a story of Euphemia and the Goth (*taš<sup>ʿ</sup>ūtā d-ʿal qaddištā Sūpīyā w-ʿal ʿEwḫemīyā bartā dīlāh hānēn d-men ʿUrhāy mdittā*)<sup>1</sup> published in 1913 by Francis Burkitt (and in 1910 by François Nau) in Syriac

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1 Var.: ܩܘܪܝܐ ܕܥܘܦܗܝܡܝܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܬܐ ܕܫܘܦܝܝܐ ܘܥܠ ܐܘܚܝܡܝܐ ܒܪܬܐ ܕܝܠܐܗ ܗܢܐܢ ܕܡܢ ܐܘܪܗܝܡ ܕܡܕܝܬܐ

version and, two years earlier, by Ernst von Dobschütz in Greek (Θαύμα τῶν ἁγίων ὁμολογητῶν Γουρία, Σαμῶνα καὶ Ἀβίβου) is a typical representative of edifying stories relating the miraculous deeds of holy martyrs in 5th century Edessa (Syriac *ʿUrhāy*). There are two Syriac manuscripts containing the story: one is from Deir es-Suryān (British Library Add. 14649) dated to the 9th century and copied by a certain Shemʿon the monk. The volume is a collection of edifying stories, of which 'Euphemia story' is number 17. The second manuscript is another collection of such edifying stories which is now kept in Paris, BNF syr. 234. It is dated to the 13th century and was copied on Mount Izla (*Tūr ʿAbdīn*) where contacts with the Nitrian monastery were quite possible. On the other hand, the Greek version published by von Dobschütz is slightly different from both Syriac witnesses. The interrelation of then three witnesses is not very entangled: the earliest witness (Deir es-Suryān manuscript) seems to be the earliest, the Paris manuscript is a 13th century copy from a lost original, and the Greek one is a secondary translation. Burkitt (1913: 49–56) proved convincingly against von Dobschütz that the Syriac version represents the original story.

The fact that the story is related by an Edessan paramonarius (*paramōnārā*) in 430 is usually understood as a proof of its documentary character. However, this is not the only story from the paramonarius' depot. The next such story is that of the Man of God (ed. Armiaud, 1889), whose ascetic endeavour was described by the paramonarius. This may point to a certain commonness of the two stories. Euphemia is another story of a person coming to Edessa but, contrarily to the Man of God, the Goth's intentions were clearly opposite.

According to Burkitt, the text is of Syriac rather than Greek origin. It betrays a quite tight connection between the story of Euphemia and the Martyrdom of Gurya, Shamona and Habib. The plot is laid in 392 AD in Osrhoene and somewhere in 'the Gothic land', and then back in Edessa. The story has thus two plans: one is a story of a popular devotion where the central figure is Sophia and her connection with the shrine of the martyrs, and the second – an adventurous and somewhat romanesque story of the parting and reuniting between Sophia and her daughter Euphemia. The soldier Goth comes in between. His role is of a mere villain who acts as to allow the Holy Edessene Martyrs to perform a great miracle.

## 2 The Ethnonym in Syriac

Syriac-speaking people did not get much in contact with the Goths before the 4th century, when the Goths started to appear as a part of auxiliary forces of

the Roman army. The very term was borrowed from Greek Γότθος and adopted into Syriac as *Gōtāyā* following the typical model of ethnonyms PA<sup>ʿ</sup>LĀYĀ. This term had already been used in Syriac for another ethnic group – Getae. The Getae who were Thracians, had very little in common with Germanic Goths. However, there was a lot of mixture at this point in the Late Antiquity. Not only the Emperor Julian but also Jordanes tended to mix up the Germanic Goths with the Getae. Later Syriac lexicologists made another conjecture: according to Bar-ʿAlī (Payne-Smith, 1981: 693), *Gōtāyā* equals اهل برجان او جرجان, “people of Burġān or Ġurġān (sic!)”. It is interesting to note that in the Nitrian manuscript of the ‘Euphemia Story’ the word *Pārsāyē* (ܦܪܫܝܝܐ) was written over an erasure in the place of *Gōtāyē* (ܓܘܬܝܝܐ) (Burkitt, 1913: 52). Apparently the scribe was not sure about the ethnonym in the 9th century.

### 3 Βοήθεια τῶν Γότθων

The historical setting seems not very clear at first glance. The text mentions *stratelates* Addai and Eulogius (ܐܘܠܘܓܝܘܣ), the bishop of the city who remained in office until 387. Gothic presence in Syria and Mesopotamia is reported on several occasions. After the collapse of Gothic kingdoms in 375, the Emperor Valens stayed in Antioch, and Gothic envoys went to Syria (Heather, 1994: 1). Later, after the agreement and the subsequent battle of Adrianople, a new agreement under Theodosius was concluded. According to it, the Goths were granted lands in return for military service. Honorius and Ataulf concluded *foedus*, and from that time on Gothic *hospitalia* (if not *foederati*, see Sivan, 1987: 759–772, esp. 765ff.) were quite often used by the Romans in military operations (e.g. on the Catalaunian fields in 451). The situation on the Eastern frontier got alarming after the advance of the Hephthalites who in Syriac and Greek sources were referred to as *Hūnāyē*, or White Huns. To hold the frontier between the two powers, Rome dispatched forces to the East. Our text, the story of Euphemia, mentions *bo<sup>ʿ</sup>ēti<sup>ʿ</sup>ā* (ܒܘܥܝܬܝܐ, ܒܘܥܝܬܝܐ) which is usually (Burkitt, 1913: 184) translated as *auxilia* or *foederati*. John Malalas mentions Γοθηκή βοήθεια (369, 374), e.g. in 369 the governor of Antioch sent those Gothic *auxilia* to take the corpse of Simeon Stylites.

Pollard (2000: 28) mentions *Legio Parthica IV* based in the 4th century in Circesium (Notitia Or. 35.24) and comprising six *alae* (one *Parthorum*) and four cohorts including one *Gotthorum* (p. 30). The Goths mentioned by Procopius and Theophanes may have been the equites V, VI and IX *Dalmatae*, and the palatine legions and *auxilia* (Pollard, 2000: 64). Since the mid-5th century, Gothic soldiers became a regular part of the Syrian paysage. Rioting



#### 4 The 'Perfidious' Goth as a Literary Character

The Gothic officer in the Euphemia story is described as a 'man of a bitter soul' (*marrīr napšā*), who as a part of the Roman army (*ḥaylā d-Rhōmāyē*)<sup>8</sup> came to stay at the house of an Edessene widow, Sophia by name,<sup>9</sup> whose daughter attracted his unwanted attention. Sophia tried to hide her daughter Euphemia from 'that perfidious Goth' (*Gōtayā haw ʿawwālā*). What was the reason to call the Goth 'perfidious' from the blank? There were two main reasons for that: the subsequent affairs (unlawful second marriage) and his possible religious un-orthodoxy (Arianism). The story tells us that the Goth began to desire (*ʿetgawzel*)<sup>10</sup> the girl and started softly and gently to persuade the mother to give him her daughter (*lam b-nešē d-tehwē lēh l-attā*). The Goth was using all sorts of cunning approaches, but the mother was a believing woman and refused to yield. The 'bad man' (*hū dēn gabrā haw bīšā*) continued to persuade and flatter (*šaddal*) her. Further on, the Goth is described as deceitful (*nāklā*), and the dialogue between him and Sophia corroborates it. The widow asked the Goth if he had got wife and children in Gothia (*b-atrēh*, lit. 'in his country'). But the man was very cunning (*mḥarrʿā*) and made an oath before God, stating that he had neither wife nor children (*mḡazzāyā*). The author uses a word-play with the Goth: he is called perfidious (𐩦𐩣𐩪, *ʿawwālā*) for he was hiding a baby (𐩦𐩣𐩪, *ʿulā*) twice: first time in Edessa and, later, in Gothia.

There follows an interesting episode: finally, the Goth brought gifts, engraved and carved objects (*dahbā saggiʿā ḥešlātā*) and finally got her consent. Wedding (and prayers) follow, the peace (*šaynā*) is concluded and the Gothic soldier gets leave 'with all his Gothic people' (*ʿam šarkā d-hānnōn d-ʿammēh gōtāyā*). Before leaving Edessa with his newly married wife for Gothia, the man promises to return back. Feeling deep distrust, Sophia goes to the Martyrs' shrine and forces the Goth to bring an oath before the coffin of the Holy martyrs Gurya, Shamona and Habib.

It is clear that the anonymous Goth is a faceless literary figure of a villain who could be in fact anyone. But for some reason the hagiographer, probably a contemporary of Ps.-Joshua, used his memory of the Goths. Another possibility is that some distant echo of a story of this kind had been preserved around the Confessors' shrine as part of the etiological halo. The shrine was built by

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9 𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩣𐩪𐩪𐩣𐩪 𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩣𐩪𐩪𐩣𐩪 𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩣𐩪𐩪𐩣𐩪 𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩣𐩪𐩪𐩣𐩪 𐩦𐩣𐩪𐩣𐩪𐩪𐩣𐩪

10 This is a quite typical distortion in the hagiographic texts where a villain is depicted as luxurious libertine.

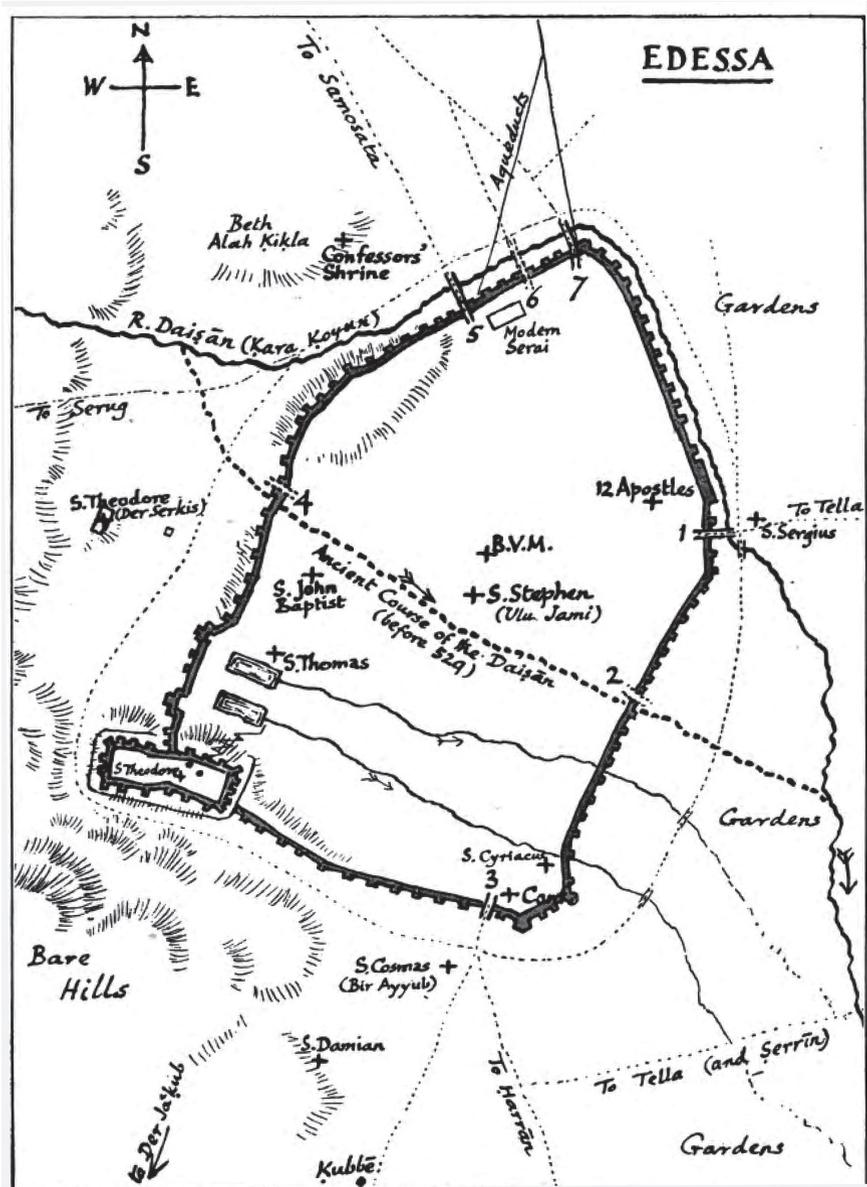


FIGURE 1 The map of Edessa with the Confessors' shrine  
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bishop Abraham mentioned in the Edessene Chronicle of the 6th century<sup>11</sup> in this connection:

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In the year 657 Abraham became bishop, who built the shrine of the confessors.

Mar Eulogius of the Euphemia story is also mentioned in the same source under the year 689 (of the Greeks). Both bishops made effort to propagatate the new cult of the Holy Martyrs.

### 5 Gothic Customs as Seen by Syrians

The next episode takes place in Gothia (“his country”) where Euphemia suffers a lot and is maltreated und humiliated, her social status of a free-born is taken away from her and she is reduced to a level of a slave-girl, literary – prey of a warrior. The land is described very briefly and mainly with neutral expressions. The wife of the Goth got jealous and turned her harsh side to Euphemia. Finally, after the baby (*dekrā*) of the Goth was born, the Gothic woman (*Gōtītā*) did the dreariest thing and poisoned him with some unspecified chemical substance. But the Edessan lady was not a simple one, and after the burial of her son she prayed to the Holy Martyrs and poisoned the Goth’s wife in return with the saliva of her murdered toddler! After that the family and kindred of the Gothic woman (who were mentioned before as very hard-to-deal-with) “woke up like lions” as they understood that their relative had been poisoned. And they decided to deliver Euphemia up to the judge (this is a clear sign that these Goths either had their own judges or invited Roman authorities to judge on their affairs). But the judge was “far from that city” (?) and the council (a kind of *ping*?) decided that they should bind her in the tomb by the stinking corpse and shut the door with “a great and mighty stone.” From the description, their further plan was to impale her on a stake and shoot at her with arrows. This was a usual way to kill people used by Huns, Goths (e.g. St. Ursula in Colonia) and sometimes Romans. The text tells us:

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11 Chronicon Edessenum, Anno 657, 1903: 4 (text), 5 (transl).



and the protection granted to the city from above by the intercession of the Holy Martyrs Gurya, Shamona and Habib, whose cult was propagated by local bishops beginning from mar Abraham, the constructor of the shrine outside the walls. There is a probability that under mar Eulogius there started a collection of miracles of the Martyrs which included the piece about Sophia and Euphemia reported by a witness. The figure of the paramonarius may point to the likewise witness from the Edessan 'Man of God' (*gabrā d-alāhā*) story, where the paramonarius is close to bishop Rabbula, the famous champion and predecessor of the above-mentioned clerics.

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