

The World of the Huns. Chapter IX. Language

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1. Speculations about the Language of the Huns

The Germans in Attila's kingdom apparently did not use the script which Wulfila had invented to translate the Bible into Gothic; they scratched their runes on swords, lance heads, brooches, and buckles as their ancestors had done. The Huns, "barbarous even in the eyes of the barbarian peoples around them," [1] had no script. Attila's scribes were not Huns but Romans: the Gaul Constantius, [2] an Italian by the same name, [3] the Pannonian Orestes, [4] and Rusticus from Upper Moesia. [5] In the middle of the sixth century Procopius described the Huns west of the Maeotis as "absolutely unacquainted with writing and unskilled in it to the present day. They have neither writing masters nor do the children among them toil over the letters at all as they grow up." [6]

All we know of the language of the Huns are names. Our sources do not give the meaning of any of them. These names have been studied for more than a century and a half. [7] Some were assigned to this, others to that group of languages, from Slavic to proto-Chuvash and Old Khvartelian. [8] The task of the historian with some linguistic training or the phil-

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ologist with a knowledge of history cannot consist of singling out this name or that and comparing it with what he happens to know. It should consist, rather, of studying the entire material in all its complexity. This has been done only once. Vámbéry listed not merely the names he thought he could explain but all he could find. [9] His list is incomplete, and many of his etymologies strike us as fantastic. Yet methodologically Vámbéry was on the right track.

Although the present studies deal with the Attilanic Huns (to use the perhaps not quite correct but convenient term coined by B. von Arnim [10]), the lists on the following pages also include names of other Huns. It has often been maintained, and I have said so myself, that the Byzantines spoke of Huns as loosely as they spoke of Scythians. This is true for later writers, but in the fifth and sixth centuries Byzantine authors definitely distinguished the Huns from other northern barbarians.

Priscus, who was interested in foreign languages, set Hunnish apart from other languages spoken at Attila's court. During his stay with the Huns, and perhaps also before, he learned enough Hunnish and Gothic to be able to distinguish between them at least by their sound. He described how Zerco, the Moorish jester, threw the guests at the king's banquet "into fits of unquenchable laughter by his appearance, his dress, his voice, and the promiscuous jumble of words, Latin mixed with Hunnish and Gothic." [11] By calling Edecon a Hun, [12] Priscus implied that the man's tongue was Hunnish. [13]

Although Procopius' definition of an ethnic group would not satisfy modern anthropologists, it is not as vague as it is sometimes presented. He wrote:

There were many Gothic peoples in earlier times, just as also at the present, but the greatest and most important of all are the Goths, Vandals, Visigoths, and Gepids. All these, while they are distinguished from one another by their names, do not differ in anything at all. For they all have white bodies and fair hair, and are tall and handsome

to look upon, and they use the same laws and practice a common religion. For they are all of the Arian faith, and have one language called Gothic; and, as it seems to me, they all came originally from one tribe, and were distinguished later by the names of those who led each group. [14]

Procopius applied to the Huns two of the four criteria of what constitutes a people in his view. Like the Goths, the *Οὐννικὰ ἔθνη* were characterized by their racial type — they were ugly and their bodies were dark; and by their manner of life — they were nomads. [15] That Procopius passed over their religion is understandable: unlike the antagonism between Arianism and orthodoxy, it played no role in the relationship with the Romans. Nor had Procopius any reason to pay attention to the language of the Huns. As Belisarius' *consiliarius* he had the opportunity to pick up some Gothic and possibly Vandalic; these were the languages of great kings and warriors. But it was not worthwhile to learn the gibberish which the uncouth Massagetic bodyguards spoke. To Procopius' ear it must have sounded, to use a Chinese simile, like "the croaking of a shrike." Yet he spoke of Hunnic peoples as he spoke of Gothic peoples. If the latter had one language, the same must be true for the former. In one instance we are explicitly told that the Kutrigur and Utigur, called Huns by Procopius, [16] Agathias, [17] and Menander, [18] were of the same stock, dressed in the same way, and had the same language. [19] "Same" does not necessarily mean identical. Vandalic was certainly close to Gothic but not the same. There may have been marked dialectical differences in the speech of the various Hunnic peoples and tribes, yet they apparently understood one another. [20]

A little-noticed passage in John of Antioch sheds more light on the early Byzantine concept of the ethnic name "Hun." In 513 Hypatius, the nephew of Emperor Anastasius, was made prisoner by Vitalian's Hunnic federates. Polychronius and Martyrius "whose office it was to deal with the envoys of the Huns" (*τάς τῶν Οὐννων πρεσβείας ἐπιτετραμέννοι*)

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were sent to the Huns with 1,100 pounds of gold to ransom Hypatius. [21] This shows that among the interpretes *diversarum gentium* [22] under the *magister officiorum* some were in charge of dealing with the envoys of the Huns. Not with this or that tribe, but with the Huns who evidently spoke *one* language.

The present investigation could not have been undertaken without Gyula Moravcsik's invaluable *Byzantinoturcica*. They lead to the sources. Only by a careful study of the literary context in which the names appear can we hope to bring the problem of the Hunnish language closer to its solution. It is of little help to know the alleged Byzantine rules for transcribing foreign names. They change from author to author and from century to century. Before the twelfth century *b* could render both foreign *b* and *v*. Sozomen has *Βαρδησάνης* [23] = Bar-Daisan, and *Βίκτωρ*, [24] Priscus Ἄρδαβούριος [25] = Ardabures in the Latin sources, and *Βαλάμερος* [26] = Valamer. *Μρ* for initial *b* appears for the first time in the twelfth century; [27] the traditional transcription *Βούλγαροι* was retained much longer. Only by lumping all transcriptions together, from the earliest to the latest, and regardless of the language of the author, ranging from classical pure Greek to vulgar colloquial, can one say that *a* stands for *a*, *o*, *u*, *e*, *ä*, *i*, and *ï*, in Turkish names. [28] What matters is the specific idiom of the writer, his dependence on earlier works, the manuscript tradition, and a number of other factors, to be discussed presently, which account for the form of a name in a text.

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1. Sidonius, *Paneg. on Anthemius* 240.

2. Priscus, *EL* 132₁₂.

3. 127₉

4. *Anon. Vales.* 37, Cessi 1913, 13.

5. Priscus, *EL* 145₃₂₋₃₄.

6. Procopius VIII, 19, 8.

7. B. F. Bergmann (1804) was the first to etymologize Hunnic names; he took them for Mongolian.

8. For a survey until 1926, see Inostrantsev 1926. Recently E. Moór (*Beiträge zur Namenkunde* 14, 1963, 63-104) suggested that the Huns spoke a North Caucasian language. His arguments are based on a misunderstanding of the Greek and Latin transcriptions of the Hunnic names; cf. O. Maenchen-Helfen, *Beiträge zur Namenkunde* 14, 1963, 273-278.

9. Vámbéry 1882, 40-50.

10. Arnim 1936, 100.

11. Τῆ γὰρ Ἀυσονίων τὴν τῶν Οὐννων καὶ τὴν τῶν Γότθων παρεμίγνυ γλώτταν (for the reading *παρεμίγνυ* instead of C. de Boor's *παραμιγνύς* see G. A. Papabasileios, *Ἀθηνᾶ* 1896, 74), *EL* 145₁₂₋₁₃.

12. Priscus, *EL* 122₆₋₇.

13. Cf. Thompson 1948, 10-11.

14. Procopius III, 2, 2-5. Part of the passage may go back to Priscus.

15. I, 3, 4-5.

16. VIII, 4, 13; 5, 23; 18, 18.

17. V. 11, Keydell 1967, 177.

18. *EL* 196, 458.

19. 170₂₇

20. The Hephthalites seem to be the only exception. The Byzantines had no direct contact with them, and it seems doubtful that they knew anything about their language. It was probably the similarity of their ethnic name to that of the Huns which earned them the name "White Huns" (Maenchen-Helfen 1959, 227-228). In all other respects the Hephthalites were, as Procopius I, 3, 25, stresses, totally different from the Huns.

21. John of Antioch, *EL* 145₃₄₋₃₅. Mommsen (*Hermes* 6, 1872, 355, n. 2)

drew attention to the passage but no student of the Huns realized its importance. It is not listed by Moravcsik.

22. *Not. dign.* [occ.] XI, 35.

23. *Hist. eccles.* III, 16, 5, Bidez 1960, 128.

24. *Ibid.*, VII, 19, 1, Bidez 1960, 330.

25. *EL* 583₁₅.

26. *Ibid.*, 152₂₁.

27. In Ioannes Kinnamos' *Epitome*.

28. Moravcsik, BT 2, 31.