

Alvar Ellegård

## Who were the Eruli?

### I. The received view

In practically all the standard handbooks covering the history of the Germanic tribes,<sup>1</sup> the Eruli, or Heruli<sup>2</sup> are represented as originating somewhere in Scandinavia. Thus A. Lippold in *Der Kleine Pauly* (1967) describes them as a Germanic tribe, expelled from Scandinavia by the Danes around A.D. 250. In all essentials Lippold agrees with B. Rappaport's long article in the unabridged *Pauly Real-Encyclopädie*, 2nd ed. 1913.

The same general picture emerges from the shorter and much less specific article by R. Much in Hoops' *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd ed. 1913. The Eruli are said to have had their original home ("Stammsitz") in Scandinavia. Following the sixth-century historian Jordanes, Much declares that the Eruli were driven out by the Danes. After this, part of the tribe settled somewhere in northwest Germany, from where they made an abortive incursion into Gaul in 287. Another part of the tribe, says Much, accompanied the Goths to the region north of the Black Sea. Much also refers to a very detailed story by the sixth century Greek historian Prokopios, in which a group of Eruli, led by members of their royal family, made a long trek from Illyricum to Scandinavia some time in the beginning of the sixth century. This is described by Much as a "return" ("Rückwanderung") of the tribe to their ancestral home.

One of the standard works on the history of the ancient Germanic tribes, by Ludwig Schmidt, has the same story and the same interpretation, both in the first edition (1910) and in the second (1933). Erich Zöllner, who wrote *Geschichte der Franken* in 1970, and Herwig Wolfram, who wrote *Geschichte der Goten* in 1980, do not indeed say anything explicitly about a Scandinavian origin of the Eruli. But both accept one of its consequences, namely, the postulation of an Erulian kingdom in Northwest Germany (Zöllner pp. 41, 42; Wolfram p. 230).

Most present French writers on the period also accept the Scandinavian origin, for instance, Émilienne Demougeot in *La Formation de l'Europe et les invasions barbares* (1969), Édouard Galletier in his edition of *Panegyriques Latins*

(1949–1955), and André Loyen, editor of the works of Sidonius Appollinaris (1960–1970).

Scandinavian writers have naturally taken a keen interest in the history of the Eruli. The Swedish philologist Otto von Friesen (1918) tried to locate the home of the Eruli in the southern Swedish province of Västergötland, seeking support from the difference between that province and other Swedish regions with regard to the laws of inheritance on the female side. In 1969 another Swedish philologist, Elias Wessén, wholly subscribed to Much's views as set forth in Hoops' *Reallexikon*. As Wessén also gave publicity to these ideas in a widely used textbook for students of Scandinavian languages (many of whom went on to the departments of history, ending up as teachers of history) they have certainly become widely current in Sweden.

In Denmark the picture appears to be similar. In Vol. 1 of *Danmarks Historie* (1962) Johannes Brøndsted more or less completely endorsed Much's article in Hoops' *Reallexikon*. In the latest big Danish History, edited by A. E. Christensen et al. (2 ed. 1978), I. Skovgaard-Petersen renders the story of the Danes and the Eruli in a very condensed form, and with some implicit signs of doubt as to its factual truth. But it still holds the floor.

A dissenting note was voiced by Lauritz Weibull, both in an article from 1925, and in the version included in *Nordisk Historia* (1948). In a footnote to a discussion of Jordanes Weibull categorically refuses to believe in the supposed expulsion of the Eruli by the Danes, and thus implicitly in the idea of Scandinavia as the original home of the Eruli. Swedish and Norwegian historians during the last few decades have on the whole held aloof from the Eruli. Erik Lönnroth, however, has taken the same critical line as Lauritz Weibull both in articles republished in a collection from 1977, *Scandinavians* (ed. p. 3, p. 9), and in a more popular one from 1982.

My intention here is to consider afresh all the evidence we possess, in the light of a radically changed view of the nature of the early Germanic tribes, due above all to the monumental work of Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung* (1961). As I have written more specifically on this subject elsewhere (Ellegård 1986), I shall say no more about it here. I start by analysing the information given by Prokopios and Jordanes, comparing it with the received view, and then go on to a detailed study of the evidence contained in other sources, roughly in chronological order.

My argument may be summarized as follows: We have no real evidence that the Eruli originated in Scandinavia. The trek of a party of Eruli to Scandinavia in the early 6th century was not seen by Prokopios, our only source for this story, as a return to ancestral homes. We have no good grounds for postulating an Erulian kingdom or chiefdom in northwest Germany at any time. Finally, it is very doubtful whether the Germanic pirates in the Black Sea and Aegean region included a group called Eruli.

I conclude that the most likely construction of the evidence is that the Eruli were a Germanic warrior band that organized itself in the third century, proba-

bly in the region north of the Roman *limes* between Passau (Castra Batava) and Vienna (Vindobona). From at least the fourth century onwards part of them were recruited into the Roman *Numerus Erulorum*, while another part maintained themselves as an independent Germanic unit which retained its identity, more or less successfully, down to around A.D. 560.

## II. Prokopios on the Eruli

“What kind of people are the Eruli?” asks Prokopios in his *History of the Wars* (6–14–11). Prokopios was indeed singularly well placed to give an answer. As staff officer under Belisarius, Justinian’s supremely able general, he had had experience of Erulian soldiers both as federates and as mercenaries in the Roman armies, and as enemies on the Gothic side.

The Germanic peoples living north of the Eastern half of the Roman Empire, on the other side of the Danube, were called by Prokopios *Gothika ethnē*, Gothic peoples.<sup>3</sup> “There were many Gothic peoples in earlier times, just as at present,” Prokopios wrote around AD 550 (3–2–2). “But the greatest and most important of all are the *Gotthoi* . . . *Bandiloi* . . . *Ouisigotthoi* . . . *Gepaides*.” At other places he includes the *Rhogoi* (7–2–1) and also the *Skiroi* and the *Alanoi* (5–1–3) among the Gothic peoples. He further notes that they speak the same language and have the same religion: he apparently assumed that they were all Arians.

Prokopios does not say explicitly that the Eruli belong to the Gothic group. But as they clearly spoke Germanic and were Arians, Prokopios undoubtedly classified them as Gothic.<sup>4</sup> That he did not include them among the “most important” Gothic peoples is not surprising: at the time when Prokopios was writing his history, they were in the process of disappearing as an identifiable, independent group.

Other writers definitely class the Eruli with the Goths. In *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, probably written around A.D. 400, we read under Claudius: “*Scytharum diversi populi: Peuci, Greuthungi, Austrogoti, Tervingi, Visi, Gipedes, Celti etiam et Eruli*” (25–6).<sup>5</sup> In this list, Greuthingi, Austrogothi, Tervingi and Visi are considered by most scholars as just variant names for Visigoths and Ostrogoths. The Gepids are said by Jordanes to be closely related to the Goths. Peuci, according to Tacitus (*Germania* cap. 46) is another name for Basternae, a Germanic people appearing in the region between the Carpathians and the mouth of the Danube as early as the 2nd century BC. We may balk at finding all these peoples described as Scythians, and to find Kelts among them. But with Greek writers, especially, (e.g. Dexippos) Scythian is a term used very generally to refer to peoples living in the region north of the Black Sea. And the distinction between Kelts and Germans was often either unknown or disregarded.

About the home of the Eruli Prokopios only says that “they used to dwell beyond the Ister River from of old” (6–14–1). That does not carry us very far,

since the same could be said about any Germanic people. Prokopios is more specific about the customs of the Eruli. In ancient times, he says, they used to appease their gods by human sacrifices. Old or sick people were supposed to seek death voluntarily. Relatives used to build a high pile of wood, whereupon the victim climbed it. Then another Erulian – not a relative, says Prokopios – also climbed the pile, armed with a dagger, with which the victim was killed. This done, the killer got down from the pile, the pile was set on fire, and the burned remains were buried. Prokopios also says that a self-respecting widow was expected to commit suicide by hanging herself beside the tomb of her husband.

As usual with ancient historians, Prokopios does not tell us what his sources are. And his chronology is vague: *to palaion* may mean anything from a generation back upwards. But his description is by no means incredible. We know of many cultures where it is considered both natural and commendable for old and sick people to voluntarily seek death. Cremation burials were common among the Germanic peoples, and the practice of suttee is known not only from India, but also from Ibn Fadlān's account of the burial of a Rus chieftain in the early tenth century.<sup>6</sup> It also seems to be inferrable from the archaeological evidence of some Scandinavian howe burials. On the other hand, Prokopios' report may be no more than one of those sensational tales that Romans and Greeks were fond of circulating about the barbarians of the North. We shall of course never know. Prokopios is intelligent, sensible, and apparently reliable, at least when he writes about what he himself has seen and experienced. Unfortunately he is clearly less so when writing at second hand.<sup>7</sup>

But let us go on with what Prokopios tells us about the Eruli. In their homeland "beyond the Ister", he says, they made themselves masters of all the barbarians around them, including the Langobards (6–14–8). Then, when Anastasios (491–518) became emperor, they lived in peace with their neighbours "for three years". The long period of peace, however, did not suit the warlike Eruli, who incited their leader (*hēgemon*) *Rhodoulphos* to start a war against the Langobards. To everybody's surprise the Eruli lost the battle, in which *Rhodoulphos* himself was killed. Most of the Eruli fell, only a few saved themselves (*hoi men pleistoi autou ēpeson, oligoi de tines diesōthēsan.*)

After their defeat by the Langobards, says Prokopios (6–14–23 ff), the Eruli were no longer able to tarry in their ancestral homes. They traversed the whole country which is beyond the Ister, settling at last in the land "where the *Rhogoi* dwelt of old" – the Rugi having joined the Goths to occupy Italy. Judging from the *Life of St Severinus* by Eugippius, written around 510, the region referred to is the the northern bank of the Danube in the Vienna region.

The Eruli do not appear to have stayed long in the Rugian lands. They left it because they found the land was "waste" (*en khorai erēmoi*), and went to settle "near the Gepids", presumably in the Danubian region north of present-day Belgrad. After some conflicts both with the Gepids and the Romans, they were accepted by Anastasios as Roman federates, apparently on Roman soil, south of the Danube. According to the annalist Marcellinus Comes, this took place in

A.D. 512. Eventually Justinian (527–565) “bestowed upon them good lands, and persuaded them to become Christians” (6–15–1).

Summing up, Prokopios takes a rather dim view of these Illyrian Eruli, considering them as violent and unruly: “the basest of men and utterly abandoned rascals” (*ponērotatoi anthrōpōn apantōn kai kakoi kakōs apoloúmenoī*) (6–14–36). At another place (7–33–13) Prokopios indicates the location more exactly: The Eruli had received Singidunum (Belgrade) and the surrounding towns. “Here they are settled at the present time (i.e., c 560), overrunning and plundering Illyricum and the Thracian towns generally. Some of them even become Roman soldiers, serving among the *foederati*.”

Prokopios, however, also knows about a splinter group of Eruli, whose story is quite remarkable (6–15–1 ff): “When the Eruli, being defeated by the Langobardi . . . migrated from their ancestral homes, some of them made their home in the country of Illyricum. But the rest were averse to crossing the Ister River, but settled at the very extremity of the world. At any rate, these men, led by many of the royal blood (*tou basileiou haimatos*) traversed all the nations of the *Sklabenoi* one after the other, and after next crossing a large tract of barren country (*erēmon khoran*), they came to the *Ouarnoi*, as they are called. After these they passed by the nations of the Danes (*Danōn ta ethnē*), without suffering violence at the hands of the barbarians there. Coming thence to the ocean, they took to the sea, and putting in at *Thoulē*, remained there on the island.” At another place (6–15–26) we learn that the incoming Eruli settled among the *Gautoi*, said to be one of the most numerous (*poluanthrōpon*) of the nations there.

Prokopios says that *Thoulē* is ten times larger than Britain. From this and other contextual clues it seems quite clear that *Thoulē* means Scandinavia. The time of the migration is not stated exactly. If we take the defeat of the Eruli at the hands of the Langobards to have taken place c 494, we have an earliest date.<sup>8</sup> But if the expedition was undertaken as a way of avoiding submission to Roman rule, it seems more likely that it took place at about the time when Anastasios admitted the other group of Eruli into Illyricum, that is to say, in 512.

### III. Eruli originating in Scandinavia?

We have seen above that a widely accepted view among modern historians is that this group of Eruli *returned* to their ancestral homes. But there is absolutely no support for this supposition in Prokopios’ text. It seems to me that the historians have here been influenced by Jordanes’ story of the Scandinavian origin of the Goths, and also by an obscure mention of the Eruli in Jordanes’ description of the peoples on “Scandza”. Jordanes writes: “*Suetidi cogniti in hac gente reliquis corpore eminentiores, quamvis et Dani, ex ipsorum stirpe progressi, herulos propriis sedibus expulerunt, qui inter omnes Scandzae nationes nomen sibi ob nimiam proceritatem affectant praecipuum*” (Getica 3:23.)

The syntax of this passage is less than translucent, but the picture we get is that the Eruli considered themselves the tallest race in Scandinavia, and that, in spite of this, they had been driven from their homes (*propriis sedibus*) by the Danes. The Danes, in their turn, were of the same stock as the Swedes, who were “known” to be foremost in bodily strength. Jordanes says nothing about just when the Danes drove out the Eruli. Most writers indicate a date around A.D. 250, enough to allow for a move of the Eruli from their supposed Scandinavian home to the place where they made their unsuccessful incursion into Gaul in A.D. 287 (see below section V:1).

Another problem is our lack of information about the Danes before the sixth century. If the Danes, as Jordanes says, originated from the Swedes, when did the split take place? The first mentions of the Danes are precisely the passages from Jordanes and Prokopios just quoted. We have two somewhat later mentions: two brief allusions by Venantius Fortunatus (7–7–50 and 9–73) from c 580, and one by Gregory of Tours, writing c 590, reporting a raid in Frisia by Danes led by one *Chlochilaicus* in c 515.

It is of course possible that the Danes had been in existence for hundreds of years before we hear about them. However, neither Caesar, nor Pliny, nor Tacitus, nor Ptolemy names them, though they name several other peoples in these northern regions. Hence the most likely hypothesis, it seems to me, is that the Danes were a comparatively recent formation when Jordanes and Prokopios were writing. The Danes are by no means alone in appearing, so to speak, out of nothing. The Franks and the Alamanni also appeared without warning, though somewhat earlier: Franks in the late 3rd century (Pan. Maximilianus in A.D. 291), Alamanni in the early 3rd century (Dio Cassius 9, A.D. 213).

Now if the Danes themselves came into existence as an identifiable group around A.D. 500, the expulsion of the Eruli by the Danes – taking Jordanes’ report to be correct, which is to allow him more credit than he deserves – may have occurred not so very long before Jordanes was writing. However, if the Danes expelled the Eruli from Scandinavia around 500, we have a problem. Prokopios goes out of his way to declare that the Eruli passed through the land of the Dani “without suffering violence” (*biazomenon*) at their hands.

But Prokopios’ story of the Scandinavian Eruli has a continuation. Those Eruli, apparently the main body, who settled in Illyricum were, according to Prokopios, an unruly lot. During what appears to be a drunken bout they killed their king, one *Okhos*, “for no other reason than that they wished to be without a king hereafter” (6–14–38). On sobering up, they realized that “they were not able to live without a ruler and a general (*anarkhoi te kai astratēgētoi*). They therefore decided to send an embassy to those of their compatriots who some thirty years earlier had chosen to go to *Thoulē* instead of settling in Illyricum, and who included, as Prokopios says (6–15–2), many of their royal family. The embassy’s task was to persuade one of those to assume royal power over those Eruli who had settled in Illyricum.

Such an idea may seem far-fetched to a modern reader. But it serves as a

timely reminder of the aristocratic way of thinking of the Germanic groups living along the Roman limes in the 6th century. Not just anybody could become a king, only a member of the royal family would do. If he had to be fetched from the other end of the world, so be it.

The very full and geographically correct details that Prokopios provides about the Erulian embassy (6–15–27 ff) seem to me to be good evidence that the story was not invented – the more so as the details are hardly designed to enhance the story stylistically. “The Eruli who dwelt among the Romans, after the murder of their king had been perpetrated by them, sent some of their notables to the island of *Thoulē* to search out and bring back whomsoever they were able to find there of the royal blood. And when these men reached the island, they found many there of the royal blood, but they selected the one man who pleased them most and set out with him on the return journey. But this man fell sick and died when he had come to the country of the Dani. These men therefore went a second time to the island and secured another man, *Datios* by name. And he was followed by his brother *Aordos* and two hundred youths of the Eruli in *Thoule*.” (*Eroúlōn neaníai diakósioi*).

The embassy to Scandinavia, and its return, of course took time, and it is perhaps not surprising that, as Prokopios says, the Illyrian Eruli began to feel restless, and to have second thoughts about their decision to choose a king without first consulting the Emperor. They therefore sent an embassy to Justinian as well. He immediately dispatched a royal candidate to them, one *Souartouas* by name. Complications were bound to arise. It all ended with the Eruli deserting *Souartouas*, choosing *Datios* from Scandinavia as their king. *Souartouas* managed to flee to Constantinople, where Justinian understandably was furious, and tried to reinstate his protégé. The Eruli countered by terminating their treaty with the Romans, deciding to join (*proskhorein*) the Gepids instead (6–15–36).

Since Prokopios gives very few dates, it is difficult to establish the exact chronology of all this. If we accept 512 as approximately the time when the Eruli first came to Scandinavia to settle, and 545 as an equally approximate date for the embassy from the Illyrian Eruli, we have a span of about a generation between the two events. Long enough for the immigrants to strike root, and also short enough for memories not to fade too much.

We also know very little about the number of people involved. But it is hard to believe that they were many. My guess is that the immigrant party probably did not consist of more than a few hundred, perhaps up to a thousand people. The participants may have been chiefly the royal clan and some aristocratic families, with military and domestic clients and attendants. The very fact that they were allowed to pass unmolested, and eventually to settle in Scandinavia, supports that hypothesis. A few hundred would not pose a serious threat to the communities they passed through. And if the leaders were aristocratic, they would be better able to plead their cause, and would also be in a position to offer something in return: treasures and gifts, and, perhaps not least, status.

But why on earth did they go to Scandinavia? Prokopios does not even try to

explain it. He simply says that they did not wish to cross the Danube. Thus the migration to Scandinavia appears as the result of a decision to go in the exact opposite direction, as far from the Romans as possible. As a motive that may seem rather thin, which is probably why historians have tended to look for alternatives, including the return theme. However, the fact that Prokopios does not even hint that the Erulian trek to Scandinavia might be a return to ancestral homes is most simply accounted for, it seems to me, if neither he nor his sources looked upon it as such.

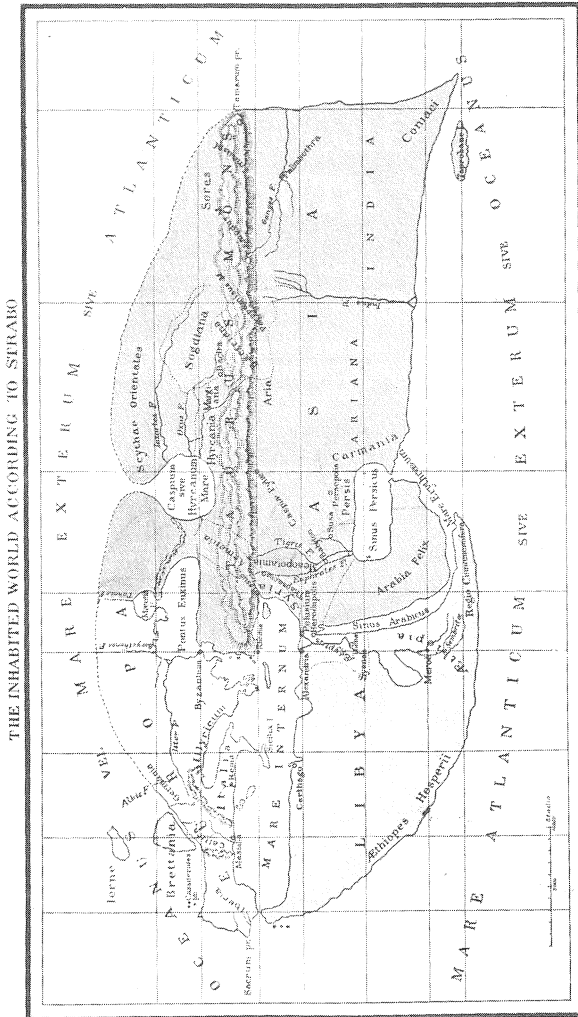
There are, after all, other possibilities. We know that the Germanic aristocracy kept up communications over wide areas. Royal families intermarried, children grew up with fosterparents in far-away lands, warriors served as officers under kings and generals of other nations. We are told by Jordanes that a Scandinavian king, or chieftain, named Rodulf emigrated to Italy, apparently to serve under Theodoric (*Getica* 3:24). One Agrivulfus, of the Varni, whose land was in Northern Germany, served as a general under the Visigothic king Theoderid, who placed him as ruler of the Suebi in Spain (*Getica* 44:233). The examples can be multiplied, from Ariovistus' and Arminius' time onwards. The Germanic warrior aristocracy was truly international.

It is therefore not at all impossible that there was at least a sprinkling of Scandinavian aristocrats among the Germanic groups along the Danube in the fifth and sixth centuries. We know after all that Prokopios had been able to interview a number of people originating in *Thoulē* (6–15–8). In fact, the Eruli would, towards the end of the 5th century, be a particularly attractive group to seek out for adventurous aristocratic warriors from the North, if Prokopios' is right when he says that they were at that time "superior to all the barbarians that dwelt around them" (6–14–11). It may well have been at the suggestion of such allies that some of the leading Eruli decided to seek their fortune, or at least to lick their wounds, and recover their strength, in the far-off North. I certainly do not offer this as a highly probable hypothesis, but chiefly to counter the argument that the Erulian trek North could only be explained as a return to their original home.

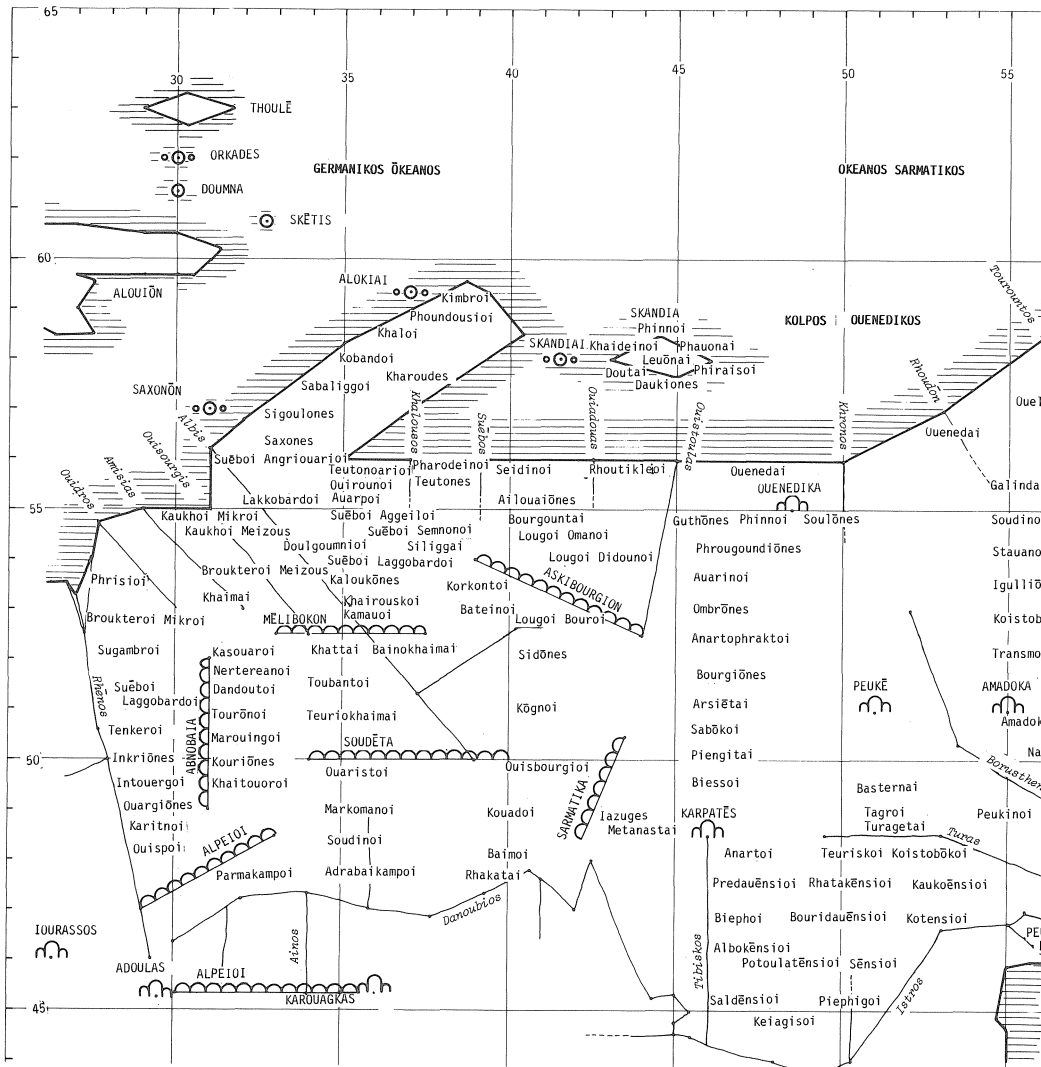
At this point it may be in order to consider again the apparent contradiction between Jordanes and Prokopios in regard to the Scandinavian Eruli. Jordanes, when saying that the Danes expelled the Eruli from their homes, *propriis sedibus*, certainly seems to imply that Scandinavia was the original home of the Eruli. Jordanes was writing around A.D. 551, and according to our interpretation of Prokopios, Eruli had been living in Scandinavia from c. 512 to c. 545. That seems long enough for them to be regarded as a fairly permanent part of the population. Now Prokopios says that the embassy from the Illyrian Eruli resulted in the reemigration of at least some of the royal family, and 200 youths. That may have been a substantial portion of the Scandinavian Eruli, who thus left their homes there some years before Jordanes wrote down his story (assuming that the story is Jordanes', rather than Cassiodorus).<sup>9</sup> Prokopios, on his part, obviously thought the Eruli went south because they were persuaded by the Illy-



rian embassy. It is, however, quite possible that they had many reasons. In other words, Jordanes and Prokopios may be referring to the same event, but looking at it from different points of view. If the Danes swiftly filled the vacuum left by the emigrants, it may have looked to them, and to others, as if they had “expelled” the Eruli.



From Strabo, *The Geography*. (The Loeb Classical Library) Vol. 1.



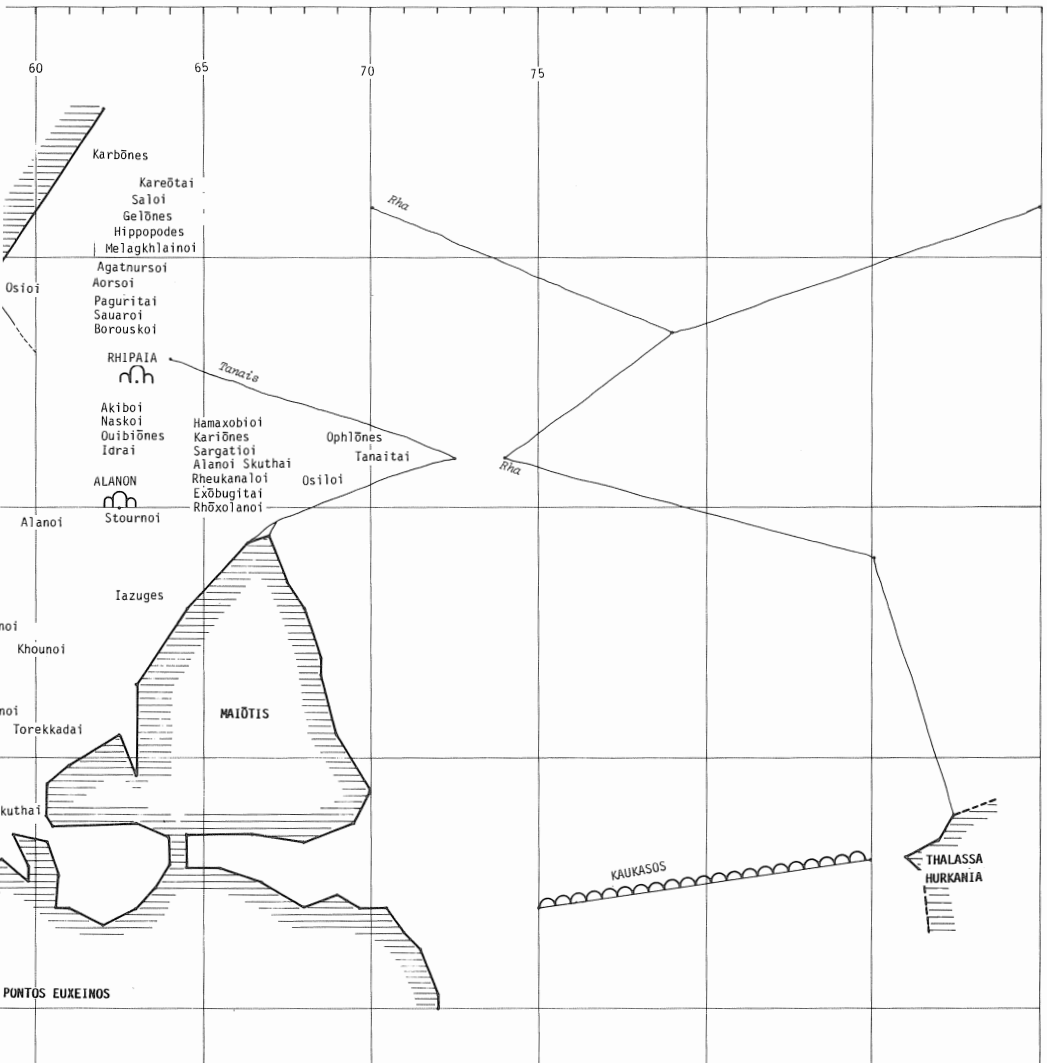
### Ptolemy's map of northern and north-eastern Europe (c.A.D. 170)

The above map is intended to provide neither more nor less information than is provided by Ptolemy's text in his chapters on *Germania Magna*, *Sarmatia Europaea*, and *Dacia* (omitting cities). Thus the coast lines, river courses and mountain ranges have been drawn by uniting by straight lines points that Ptolemy indicates by exact longitude and latitude values, i.e. river estuaries, promontories, etc. Individual mountains, islands, and groups of islands for which Ptolemy indicates only a single point are represented by symbols which should be self-explanatory. The locations of the "tribes" are very seldom given with any exactness by Ptolemy: only relative to each other and to rivers or mountains. For most rivers, he gives only the position of the estuary: for a few the source is also given. For the Danube the information is (naturally) much fuller.

The projection is a modified cylindrical one with latitude 48° as the standard parallel. The distance between the parallels has been standardized. Ptolemy was fully aware of the problem of converting a spherical surface on to a flat one. However, no very old copies of his actual map exist. The

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oldest extant Ptolemaic maps are to be found in 12th century Greek manuscripts: they have an orthogonal grid like the present one. 15th century printed Ptolemaic maps usually have a conical projection.

Though Ptolemy, and the ancient writers generally, knew perfectly how to ascertain the latitude of a place by observing the sun or the stars, it is obvious that most of Ptolemy's map is not based on exact astronomical measurements. If such had been the case, he would not have placed the northernmost point of the Maiotis 6° too far to the north, and the German Baltic coast almost 2° too far north. Ptolemy probably first drew up a map where he tried to harmonize the verbal reports of travellers and sea captains, combining them with the few exactly measured latitudes that he had (e.g. for Alexandria, Athens, Rome and Marseilles). Having drawn up the grid and the map, he could then read the latitude and longitude from his own hypothetical construction, and insert the exact values which we find in his text.

The transcription used in the one set forth in note 2

The Danish expulsion of the Eruli (if there was one in the first place) may therefore have been quite a recent event. This also squares well with the fact that the Danes first appear in history around 500, and that no earlier or later writers speak of Eruli living in Scandinavia. In fact, the only thing we can say with reasonable certainty is that a small group of Eruli lived there for some 30–40 years in the first half of the sixth century A.D.

It is also worth noting that Jordanes nowhere says that the Eruli *originated* in Scandinavia: that honour he reserved for the Goths (proper) and the Gepids. As for the Eruli, Jordanes shared the common opinion in his times, namely, that they originated in the region around the Sea of Azov (*Getica* 23:117). This was based, at least partly, on a mistaken etymology of their name (see below, section IX).

#### IV. Ancient geography and the North

To us, an origin in Scandinavia appears as absolutely incompatible with one around the Sea of Azov. We know, or if we do not know, we can ascertain from a map, that the distance between Southern Sweden and the Sea of Azov is about as great as that between Southern Sweden and, say, Spain. However, in antiquity, and especially in the Eastern half of the Mediterranean world, things seemed very different. On Ptolemy's map of the world, from c. A.D. 170 (see map 1 p 00), which summarized all ancient geographical wisdom, the mouth of the river Tanais (Don) in the Sea of Azov is located some 6 degrees of latitude, or more than 600 km, too far north. Its distance from Skandia is not much more than that between Skandia and the mouth of the Rhine.

When the ancient Greeks spoke about the North, they were normally referring to the country north of the Danube and the Black Sea. They did not know much about it, and in the absence of facts they allowed their imagination free rein. Herodotos recounts (though he himself remains sceptical) the story of the one-eyed Arimaspi, who steal the gold guarded by the watchful griffins (3:116, 4:32). Four hundred years later the sober Strabon specified the part of Europe that was uninhabitable on account of the cold, as the area between the Don, the Dnepr, and the Sea of Azov (2:5:26). Pomponius Mela, who is the first ancient writer to mention Scandinavia,<sup>10</sup> places it and other islands in the part of the Ocean opposite Sarmatia, and declares that it is inhabited by Hippopodes with horses' feet, and by Panoti, who could cover their bodies with their over-sized ears (3:6). Following Herodotos, Mela also locates the mythical Hyperboreans in this northern part of the world, north of the equally mythical Rhipaeian mountains. There, he says (3:5), directly under the Polar star, they live in a kind of Paradise – and this in spite of the fact that Mela at another place repeats the teaching of the philosophical geographers, to the effect that the zone above the Arctic Circle was uninhabitable because of the cold. The equally credulous Pliny draws a similar picture, in which the Northern Ocean describes a wide arc from

India to Sarmatia and Germania, with the Caspian Sea as an inlet from the north (2:67).

The ancients accordingly visualized Northern Europe as a strip of land bounded on the north by the Ocean (See map 2 p. 00). Hence, for them the natural way to reach that ocean was by way of the Sea of Azov. And if Scandinavia, or Scandza, or *Thoulē*, was an island in the northern ocean, it was natural to consider it to be not too far from the mouth of the Tanais, the Sea of Azov. We may add that for similar reasons it was natural to connect the Cimbri, coming from the North somewhere (nobody knew exactly where) with the Kimmerians of the Caucasus region. For was not that region immediately to the east of the Sea of Azov?

It is necessary to keep this very confused and distorted picture of the North in mind when interpreting some passages where the Eruli are mentioned. Thus when the Greek historian Dexippos wishes to impress his readers about the remoteness of the Scythian world, he writes that some of the barbarians who ravaged Greece and Asia Minor in the middle of the third century had taken about a year to reach the Roman *limes* from their homes at the shores of the Northern Ocean.<sup>11</sup>

Nor is anything more precise implied when Sidonius Apollinaris, in A.D. 476, composed his verses about the Eruli living in the furthest recesses of the Ocean (8–9–28).

*Hic glaucis Herulus genis vagatur  
imos Oceani colens recessus*

“*Imos Oceani recessus*” is just Sidonius’ way of expressing the common assumption that the Germanic barbarians, and especially those associated, like the Eruli, with the Pontic area, were coming from the unknown and awesome regions of the North, which were so to speak by definition bounded by the farthest reaches of the world-encircling Ocean. His words cannot by any means be taken as evidence about an Erulian homeland on the shores of the Baltic. We have no reason at all to think that Sidonius knew anything about the Baltic: his geography of the Northern world was no more precise than that of everybody else among the literate in antiquity. When they heard, or said, that the Goths, or any other Germanic, or Sarmatian, or Scythian, tribe came from the North, they were taken to come from the unknown and fabulous area bounded on the south by the Danube and the Black Sea, on the west by the Rhine, on the east by the Tanais, and on the north by the Ocean, which everybody assumed to be there, though nobody had seen it – as both Herodotos (3:115) and Strabon (7–2–4) admitted. If, for rhetorical or other reasons, a writer wished to represent a particular group of people from this general region as especially formidable or remarkable, it was quite natural to maintain, with or without evidence, that they originated in the *extreme* north of this region, that is, on the shores of the Ocean (as Sidonius does with the Eruli) or on an island in the Ocean (as Jordanes, or Cas-

sidorus, or Ablavius, does with the Goths). No exact location was implied, or even possible.<sup>12</sup>

Prokopios' account of the Eruli of his own times is of quite a different nature. He apparently relies both on his own observations, and on interviews with people who were either Eruli themselves, or who knew about them from personal experience. The story of the embassy to Scandinavia has the feel of an eyewitness report. It took place, moreover, at a time when Prokopios himself was in active service in the wars. Our confidence in his account at this point is strengthened when we read at another place in Prokopios' work (7–34–45), that one of the two men brought back from Scandinavia by the Illyrian embassy, namely, Aordos, the king's brother, was killed in an encounter with the Romans some time around A.D. 548. On the other hand, Prokopios does not seem to have made much use of earlier historians for his remarkably sketchy account of the *history* of the Eruli, which starts with the rather cavalier statement that "they used to live beyond the Ister River of old". For that we need other evidence.

#### V. Contemporary evidence of 4th and 5th century Eruli

I shall now try to ascertain what we can deduce from the still available sources about the earlier history of the Eruli. For this purpose it is essential to distinguish between contemporary sources and later syntheses. The distinction is unfortunately far from clearcut. Prokopios and Jordanes are indeed contemporary sources when describing events in the mid-sixth century. But the actual copies that we have of their works are several hundred years later, and may have been perverted and changed in the transmission: a common enough occurrence. Epigraphic evidence, such as inscriptions on gravestones and memorials, is much more satisfactory in this respect. But very little such material is extant, only a handful of inscriptions of uncertain date, containing the names of members of the Roman auxiliary unit of the Numerus Erulorum, most of them from Concordia, near Trieste in North Italy (See Fiebiger I:142, 143, II:44).

When ancient historians use contemporary sources for events occurring before their own times, they often do not disclose which they are, and even when they do, they normally paraphrase rather than quote them. Hence it is in most cases impossible to decide exactly what belongs to the source, and what the later historian has himself contributed. In other words, we often do not know to what extent an account mirrors contemporary views, and to what extent it represents the interpretation put upon them several hundred years later. Hence all our conclusions and reconstructions must be provisional only.

##### 1. Mamertinus' panegyric on Maximinian

Our first clear reference to the Eruli is to be found in a panegyric delivered at

Treves in 289 for the emperor Maximinian (284–305), Diocletian's colleague. The author is apparently himself a native of Gaul. In the text, he especially singles out Maximinian's successful wars against Germanic intruders from the other side of the Rhine: *cum omnes barbarae nationes excidium uniuersae Galliae minarentur neque solum Burgundiones et Alamanni, sed etiam Chaibones Erulique, uiribus primi barbarorum, locis ultimi, praecipiti impetu in has prouincias irruissent*"(II:5).

The panegyrist goes on to say that the Burgundiones and Alamanni, who were the most numerous, were defeated by being starved out, whereas the Chaibones and Eruli were beaten in the field, and wiped out so completely that not even one warrior could return to tell their wives and mothers about the disaster: *cuncti Chaibones Erulique cuncti tanta interneccione caesi interfectique sunt ut extinctos eos relictis domi coniugibus ac matribus non profugus aliquis e proelio* (II:5).

The Burgundiones and Alamanni are well known from other sources, both earlier and later. Not so the Chaibones and Eruli: our text is the first one to contain their names. As for the Chaibones, it is not only the first but the only one. We might therefore suspect some corruption of the text. But exactly the same form of the name occurs three times in it, which makes this explanation unsatisfactory.

Our panegyrist does not say where Maximinian won his victories. At most we may perhaps infer that the battles were fought in Gaul, since he speaks of *has prouincias*: these provinces. But Raetia and Noricum might also be included, since they too were under the Western Command.

Nor does he specify from where they came. The *locis ultimi* seems to imply that they came from far away. Many writers suppose that the Eruli attacked from the sea, and that they came from Denmark or the Baltic. But there is nothing in the text itself to support such an hypothesis. I suspect it chiefly derives from the widespread opinion that the Eruli originated in Scandinavia. That opinion, in its turn, is largely based on a misreading of Prokopios, and a doubtful reading of Jordanes, as I have argued above.

We further read that the Chaibones and Eruli were the strongest among the barbarians. But such hyperbole belongs to the stock in trade of the panegyrist, and cannot of course be taken at face value. In fact, the contrast he makes between the Alamanni and Burgundiones, on one hand, and the Chaibones and Eruli on the other, seems to imply that the latter were a rather small group.

## 2. Ammianus Marcellinus

For the next truly authenticated contemporary mention of the Eruli we have to wait more than seventy years. In A.D. 360, the future Roman Emperor Julian, then merely a Caesar, was wintering in Paris. For some years he had carried on successful campaigns against the Franks and the Alamans at and beyond the

Rhine limes. In fact, Julian had been so brilliant as a general, and so popular among his soldiers, that his superior colleague and cousin, Constantius II (younger son of Constantine the Great) began to regard him as a dangerous rival. In order to weaken Julian's position, Constantius issued an order that some of the best troops of the Gallic command should be sent East, to be used on the Parthian front. Those troops were specified as "auxiliaries, namely, the Aeri and Batavi and the Celts with the Petulantes, as well as three hundred picked men from each of the other divisions of the army.": *auxiliares milites exinde protinus abstracturum, Aerulos et Batavos, cumque Petulantibus, Celtas, et lectos ex numeris aliis trecentenos* (20-4-2).

Julian naturally did not like Constantius' order, and tried to argue with the emperor's emissary. His troops, he said, were needed in Gaul, and above all, he had solemnly promised his volunteers from across the Rhine that they should never be sent "beyond the Alps": *qui relictis laribus transrhenanis, sub hoc venerant pacto ne ducerentur ad partes unquam transalpinas* (20-4-4). As for the Eruli and Batavi, they were not available, since Julian had already sent them to Britain to help suppress raids undertaken by Picts and Scots: *moto igitur velitari auxilio Aerulis scilicet et Batavis, numerisque Maesiacorum duobus* (20-1-3).

The emperor's emissary on his part insisted on following his orders, and Julian had to submit. However, he arranged for the departing troops to assemble at Paris. Once there, they refused to leave Gaul except under Julian's command. Eventually the crowd raised Julian on a shield, proclaiming him emperor. Now Julian was compelled to fight things out with Constantius. He was lucky: Constantius died in 361, and Julian became emperor without bloodshed.

Ammianus had occasion to mention the Eruli on two more occasions. The first was the winter of 365-366. Here as well the Eruli are mentioned in conjunction with the Batavi, as part of the Roman forces under the general Charietto, a Frank apparently, who was commander of the Gallic provinces of Germania I and Germania II. The Rhine frontier was again being attacked by Alamanni. The Romans lost the battle, their commander was killed, and "the standard of the Eruli and Batavi was taken, which the barbarians with insulting cries and dancing with joy frequently raised on high and displayed, until after hard struggles it was recovered": *Erulorum Batavorumque vexillum direptum, quod insultando tripudiantes barbari crebro sublatum altius ostendebant, post certamina receptum est magna* (27-1-6).

When we last hear of the Eruli in Ammianus, they are again mentioned along with the Batavi in Britain, where they had been called from Gaul to help quell a revolt by the Picts, Scots and Attacotti. They were now under the command of Theodosius, together with Batavi, Jovii and Victores, described as "troops confident in their strength": *Batavi . . . et Heruli, Ioviique et Victores, fidentes viribus numeri* (27-8-7). They fulfilled their task successfully.

Ammianus' mentions of the Eruli are tantalizingly brief and allusive. The only definite thing we learn about them is that they were lightly armed auxiliaries. It is not even explicitly said that they are Germans. Julian's reference to his prom-



ise not to force the “transrhenan” auxiliaries and volunteers beyond the Alps does not necessarily cover the Eruli, though that is the most natural interpretation.

Every time we hear about the Eruli in Ammianus they are mentioned along with the Batavi. Indeed, they seem to have formed one single unit, since they apparently had a common *vexillum*.

### 3. *Notitia Dignitatum*

The Eruli as a Roman army unit associated with the Batavi is also what we find in a text that is probably roughly contemporary with Ammianus, namely, the *Notitia Dignitatum*. This is basically a list of all Roman dignitaries, civil and military, including an apparently full list of the units making up the Roman army. The *Notitia* is commonly supposed to be composed at the end of the fourth century, with some additions made in the early fifth.<sup>13</sup>

In the section dealing with the Western part of the Empire we find the Eruli listed as one of the *numeri* in the *auxilia palatina* under the command of the *magister peditum praesentalis* (ed. p. 115, 122, 133). They are said to be stationed in *Italia*. In the list, the Heruli are placed between the Celtae and the Batavi.

The association, both in Ammianus and in the *Notitia*, of the Eruli with the Batavi may at first sight seem to support the idea that the Eruli were somehow connected with the North Sea coast. But such a conclusion is hardly justified. The Batavi units in the Roman army had apparently been created as early as the first century B.C.<sup>14</sup> At that time, we may assume, they were mainly recruited from the Batavi who lived near the Rhine estuary. But once such a Roman unit was created, recruitment was by no means restricted to the compatriots of the first recruits.<sup>15</sup> Certainly some degree of continuity may be assumed, not least because a substantial part of the replacements were the sons of veterans. But in the fourth century the Batavi were certainly primarily a unit in the Roman army, not a Germanic “tribe”. What had once been their territory was now as much an integral part of Gaul as any other province there.

In view of this the obvious link between the Batavi and the Eruli in the fourth century does not in itself point to the Germanic Northwest. We should rather look for such a link in areas where the Batavi were *stationed* in those days. One obvious place to look for is the *Castra Batava*, modern Passau (the name is a South German development of *Batava*), at the confluence of the Inn and the Danube, on the boundary between the Roman provinces of Raetia and Noricum. Both were under the Italian command.

#### 4. *Cosmographies*

The sparse evidence we have of a Germanic group, as distinct from a Roman army unit, called Eruli, actually points in just this direction. In a *Cosmographia Iulii Caesaris*, supposed to be composed by one Julius Honorius, and representing in the main conditions from before the Gothic incursions in 376 (ed. p. xxi), the writer provides a list of *gentes* living in the northwestern “quarter” of the world. The list starts in Spain and goes on to Gaul and Germany: *Tolosates, Novempopuli, Narbonenses, Morini, Franci, Alani, Amsivarii, Langiones, Suebi, Langobardi, Iuthungi, Burgundiones, Armilausini, Marcomanni, manni (Alamanni?), Heruli, Quadi, Sarmatae, Basternae, Carpi, Gothi, Duli (Vanduli?), Gippedi* (ed. p. 40). The placement of the Heruli between the Marcomanni, the Alamanni(?) and the Quadi, squares well with the supposition that Roman contacts with them took place in the region north of the Danube limes between roughly Passau and Vienna. That is quite a natural recruitment area for a unit stationed at Castra Batava.

Other cosmographies from roughly the same time also mention the Eruli in a similar context. In one of them, called *Liber Generationis* (ed. p. 84) the list is given as *Marcomanni, Vanduli, Quadi, Heruli, Hermunduri*. All of them are associated with the same general area, Bavaria-Bohemia-Moravia.

More obscure is a list contained in the *Laterculus Veronensis*, published by Seeck in the same volume as the *Notitia Dignitatum*. The main body of the text is supposed to be from the fourth century, but there may be later additions. The part that interests us is a list headed: *Gentes barbarae quae pullulaverunt sub imperatoribus*. It runs as follows: *Scoti, Picti, Calidoni, Rugi, Heruli, Saxones, Franci, Gallouari, Canari, Crinsiani, Amsiuari, Angri, Angriuari, Fleui, Bructeri, Cati, Burgunziones, Alamani, Sueui, Franci, Gallouari, Iotungi, Armilausini, Marcomanni, Quadi, Taifruhi, Hermundubi, Uandali, Sarmatae, Heruli, Rugi, Sciri, Carpi, Scitae, Taifruhi, Gothi . . .* The list is obviously corrupt, since there are various repetitions. Thus the Rugi and the Heruli appear both among the Northwestern *gentes* and among the Eastern ones.

#### 5. *St. Jerome, Hydatius*

Our next contemporary witness about the Eruli is Saint Jerome, who in A.D. 409 wrote a letter to the Lady Ageruchia about the barbarians harrassing Gaul at that time (*Epistolae*, 123): *Innumerabiles et ferocissimae nationes universas Gallias occuparunt. Quidquid inter Alpes et Pyrenaeum est, quod Oceano et Rheno includitur, Quadus, Wandalus, Sarmata, Halani, Gipedes, Heruli, Saxones, Burgundiones, Alemanni et lugenda respublica hostes Pannoniae vastarunt*. St. Jerome hardly seems to enumerate the “nations” from between the Ocean and the Rhine in any particular order. In any case, the placement of the Eruli between the eastern Gipedes and the northwestern Saxones does not allow

us to draw any definite geographical conclusions.

The fifth century Spanish bishop Hydatius provides us with much more detailed evidence. In his *Chronicle* he mentions two Erulian incursions in North-western Spain, one in 455, another in 459. The raids were clearly quite small. The first was undertaken by seven ships and 400 men, the second is not specified (ed. p. 152, 162). As this is the only evidence we have of Eruli attacking by ship (if we disregard the mysterious *Helouri* of the Black Sea area, of whom more below, section IX), we may wonder whether Hydatius is really correctly informed about who the raiders were. Let us, however, accept his report as it stands. Then one possibility is that the raiders belonged to the same group that St. Jerome spoke about fifty years earlier. Perhaps they had established themselves and preserved their identity somewhere in Gaul. Such a thing would not be unheard of: a group of Alani did just that during the same period, settling in a small region south of the Loire. Another possibility is that the Eruli pirates came from Italy, where twenty years later they were among the Germanic soldiers who proclaimed Odoacer as their king (Jordanes, *Getica* 46:242, *Romana* 344). The distance is no problem: Hydatius reports that Vandalic pirates, presumably from the Carthage area, were operating in the same Spanish Atlantic provinces in 445 (ed. p. 140).

All of this is necessarily very speculative. But the most commonly accepted alternative, namely, that the Eruli came from Scandinavia, has even less hard evidence in its favour.

### 6. *Eugippius*

Our best contemporary sources from the fifth century yield little of value for our purpose. Orosius does not mention the Eruli at all. Nor does Priskos, in the fragments still available to us. Priskos' testimony would have been especially interesting, since he had visited Attila's court in the 440s, and had met several Germanic leaders there.

We have, however, one concrete piece of evidence from these turbulent times. It is the *Life of St. Severinus*, by Eugippius. St. Severinus spent his life in the province of Noricum, in the Roman towns along the southern bank of the Danube, from *Castra Batava* (Passau) to *Vindobona* (Vienna). He died in A.D. 482, and his biographer seems to have been a disciple of his, and hence presumably knows of places and events at least from the late 470s onwards from personal experience. He also says that he gathered information from older persons who had met St. Severinus.

Eugippius draws a poignant picture of a region in which the Roman administration and military system is slowly falling to pieces. The cities in Noricum and Raetia are constantly exposed to plundering raids by "barbarians" from the other side of the river. The Roman population tries to gain at least some sort of security by concluding treaties with Germanic leaders, who help to garrison the

towns alongside the Roman forces that still remain. In return, the townspeople have to pay taxes to the Germanic leaders, who thus get an incentive to keep away irregular raiders.

In Severinus' country the "protectors" were the kings of the Rugi, who seem to have been mainly based on the northern bank of the Danube, but who had obtained the right, apparently by treaty, to collect taxes in at least some of the Roman cities, among them Faviana near Vienna. But the protection, besides being costly, was hardly effective. We read, for instance, about raids by Alamanni on Castra Batava, by Goths on Teurnia on the Sava, south of Salzburg, and by Alamanni and Thuringi on Lauriacum, between Linz and Vienna. Some of the incursions were made by unspecified "barbarians".

One such irregular raid was carried out by Eruli. They attacked a little town called Ioviacum, near Passau, hanging a priest and taking many prisoners with them across the Danube. (c. 24.)

That is all we learn specifically about the Eruli. But the context is illuminating. There is constant Germanic pressure on the Danube frontier. Many Germanic groups operate there, but they seem on the whole to be rather small bands, not organized armies. We hear nothing about their home bases. For all we know, they did not necessarily have any permanent homes. Their spheres of influence were obviously fluctuating: Gothi, Alamanni, Thuringi, Eruli, and Rugi all tried to get their slices of the slowly crumbling Roman cake in this part of the world.

## VI. The origin of the Eruli

All the evidence we have about the Eruli seems to me to be quite consistent with the hypothesis that their main recruitment area in the fourth and fifth centuries was roughly in the region of Bavaria and Bohemia. If so, it is also very probable that the main Roman army recruiting centre for them in the fourth century was Castra Batava.

I use the term recruitment area deliberately, since I believe the search for an "original tribal home" (German: *Stammsitz*) for many, perhaps most, of the Germanic groups at this time is a wild-goose chase. Many of the groups probably came into being and organized themselves at different places along the Roman *limes*, for the express purpose of making a living as warrior bands there. Their most profitable activity certainly consisted in raiding Roman territory for booty and slaves. In between such raids, they could scrape a meagre living for themselves by sponging on the farming population on the Germanic side. Some of those subjects were naturally also recruited into the band, as members, or as slaves.<sup>17</sup>

There is some evidence for the formation of such warrior bands. Some of the apparently Germanic names of units in the *Notitia Dignitatum* are not known as anything else than Roman army units: the *Ascarii* and the *Falchouarii*. The names appear to be at least partly Germanic (ash-spear-men and falcon-men),

but are formed in the same manner as the purely Latin names of other units created within the Roman army, like the *Cornuti*, the *Scutarii*, the *Fortenses*, the *Propugnatores*, etc.

It seems to me quite likely that groups like Marcomanni, Alamanni and Franci were formed after the same pattern as the Roman army units. For the Alamanni we have evidence that contemporaries regarded them not as one nation, but as a conglomerate of people (read warriors) of different nations. Surely, if the Romans could form army units in this way, giving them an identity and a name to rally around, so could the Germans on the other side of the *limes*. The difference was, of course, that the Roman units fitted into the firm hierarchy of the Roman army, while the Germanic units outside the *limes* generally operated independently of each other.

Some of these newly-created groups, like the *Ascarii* and the *Falchouarii*, were exclusively Roman creations. Others, like the Alamanni, were purely Germanic creations, though they probably owed their appearance to the conditions created by the Roman presence along the Rhine and the Danube.

The Eruli may have formed in the same manner as the Alamanni. If, as seems very probable, *erul-* is etymologically connected with Old English *eorl*: “warrior, knight” and Old Scandinavian *jarl*: “duke”, the word had the kind of meaning that a warrior-band would appreciate as a self-designation. Such a band would be likely to draw recruits originating from several different parts of the Germanic world.

A plausible origin for the Eruli, it seems to me, is therefore that they were formed in the third century by adventurous Germanic warriors intent on gathering fame and fortunes by raids into the Roman Empire, coming together somewhere outside the Roman *limes* under some charismatic, probably aristocratic leader. In the ebb and flow of military success and failure, some of these warriors may have found that joining the Roman Army offered them a more profitable, and above all more permanent-looking, way of earning their living by the sword, than operating independently. Or they may have been pressed into the Roman army as a result of a treaty following a military defeat. We have ample evidence of both processes through the centuries, from Augustus to Justinian.<sup>18</sup>

The fifth century apparently saw some sort of consolidation of the Eruli group. Like most Germanic groups north of the Danube, they were drawn into the sphere of influence of that super-raider Attila, king of the Huns. But to judge from the near silence of our sources from that time, the Eruli were not then particularly prominent. After Attila's death in 453, they again began to operate independently. All the time their general area of operation seems to have been in the region north of the Danube, in Bavaria or Bohemia.

## VII. Sixth-century writers on the Eruli

Let us now see how we can fit this picture, based on pre-500 sources, to the evidence of later writers, including Prokopios and Jordanes. As we remember, Prokopios was very vague about the original home of the Eruli. The fact that they were defeated by the Langobards (about 494) places them, however, in the general area where I have concluded that they had their base of operation. Their later occupation of the land of the Rugi takes them to exactly the country where St. Severinus had been active a decade or two before.

There is one point in Prokopios' account that does not quite fit in. He says that the Eruli, after their defeat by the Langobards, "traversed the whole country beyond the Ister." If the Eruli, as I have argued there lived near the Rugi all the time, they did not have to go very far at all.

My construction also fits in fairly well with what Jordanes has to say about the Eruli, which is not very much. If we exclude the obscure mention of the Eruli being driven away from their homes by the Danes, Jordanes names them at three different places in his *Getica* (Mommsen ed. p. 88, 120, 125). In the first, he says that the most powerful Gothic king, Ermanaricus, defeated the Eruli under one Halaricus, and placed them under his own dominion (23:117). No geographical details are given, though Jordanes at this point brings in the etymological speculation that connects the Eruli with the Sea of Azov, of which more below. On the other hand, we also read in this place that after defeating the Eruli, Ermanaricus turned against the Veneti, presumably in northwestern Russia, and the Aesti, presumably near the Baltic Sea. The whole story of the fabulous extent of Ermanaricus dominion has obviously very little connection with reality. I wonder if it is not largely a fiction, in which Ermanaricus is raised into a mythical figure that has borrowed several characteristics from Attila. Jordanes, or Cassiodorus, can hardly have had any written sources for the story, and as the events lay some 200 years back in Jordanes time, possible oral traditions must be treated with the utmost caution.

Jordanes next mentions the Eruli when he describes Odoacer's taking over of power in Italy, in 476: *Odoacer Torcilingorum rex habens secum Sciros, Herulos diversarumque gentium auxiliarios Italiam occupavit* (46:242). This is in all probability based on good sources, whether written or oral. Cassiodorus, whom Jordanes surely follows here, may well have had access to people who knew about these matters at first hand. The mention of the Eruli along with the Sciri in this passage, and for that matter, along with Odoacer, who according to Eugippius had visited St. Severinus in his youth, again connects the Eruli with the region north of Noricum.

The same connection can be discerned in Jordanes' last reference to the Eruli, when he describes them as taking part in the battle of Nedao in Pannonia in 454, when the Gepids led the revolt against Attila's sons. The participants in that battle, according to Jordanes, who here refers to Priskos – a reliable contemp-

ary source – included Goths, Gepids, Rugi, Suevi, Alani, Eruli, and Huns (*Getica* 50:261).

One mention of the Eruli in Cassidorus' *Variae* has been taken as evidence that there was in the early sixth century, in addition to the group in Pannonia, an Erulian kingdom somewhere in northwestern Germany. It is a letter, probably from the years 507–514, sent by Theoderic the Great to the kings of the Eruli, Thuringi and Varni (3:3). Theoderic reminds these kings of the support the Goths have rendered them against the expansionist movements of the Franks, and in effect asks them to take active steps against the Franks. Theoderic's purpose is to relieve the pressure exerted by the Franks on his ally, the Visigothic king in southern Gaul and Spain.

We are not informed of the exact date of the letter, nor of the names of the kings addressed. Some historians have argued that the Eruli in Pannonia could hardly do anything effective against the Franks, since their territories did not adjoin. I think this is a mistaken view. The sixth century Germanic kingdoms or dukedoms were hardly well-defined territorially. The kings or generals commanded armies, and their power extended as far as their armies could effectively strike. That is the state of things that we observe in St. Severinus' fifth-century Noricum, and it was probably quite typical. Armies were mobile. Frankish and Burgundian troops participated in the Gothic wars in Italy, Saxons from the north marched with the Langobards into Italy. It was not at all farfetched to suppose that the expansionist Franks might come into contact with the Warnian king somewhere in North Germany, with the Thuringians in Central Germany, and also with the Eruli in Pannonia. In later centuries, in fact, the Franks did expand into all those regions. It was shrewd of Theoderic to take steps to prevent such an expansion.

Moreover, it was quite natural for Theoderic to enrol the king of the Eruli in his efforts to hold back the Franks. In Cassidorus' *Variae* there is another letter addressed by Theoderic to the king of the Eruli, where the latter is designated as Theoderic's foster-son (4:2). In this case as well neither the date of the letter nor the name of the king is given. But we have no reason to think that the Eruli named here are any other than the Eruli we read about in other contemporary writers, namely those who after 512 were settled, or perhaps more accurately, stationed, by the Emperor in Pannonia.

Hence Theoderic's letter does not provide any evidence about an Erulian realm in northwest Germany, unless we *presuppose* that there existed all along an Erulian group in that part of the world. If the other support for such a presupposition does not stand up to scrutiny – as I have argued it does not – then we must naturally conclude that Theoderic's letters were directed to the only Erulian kings we have ever heard about, namely, those governing the Central European group.

In his enumeration of the *gentes* taking part in the battle of Nedao Jordanes provides each with a characterizing description. The Eruli are said to be lightly armed: *cernere erat. . . Herulum levi armatura aciem strui* (50:261). Jordanes

had in fact said the same thing in his first reference (23:117, 118), where he declares that they were swift of foot, and that all other peoples chose them as light-armed soldiers in their armies: *gens quantum velox, eo amplius superbissima. Nulla si quidem erat tunc gens, quae non levem armaturam in acie sua ex ipsis elegeret.*

But this should hardly be taken at face value. The Roman *Numerus Erulorum* was certainly a unit of light-armed foot soldiers. And as the Romans heard far more of their own army units than about their barbarian counterparts, Roman writers more or less automatically associated the name of the Eruli with swiftness and light armour. An example in point is Sidonius Apollinaris, who in 455 praised Avitus' army for beating the Eruli in swiftness and the Huns in the use of the bow: *Vincitur illic cursu Herulus, Chunus iaculis* (ed. p. 233).

We have in fact no particular reason to think that the Eruli, as a *Germanic* group, specialized on swiftness, or restricted their weaponry to light armour, even if the *Roman* unit under that name was so specialized.

Even in Prokopios time it seems the Eruli in the Roman army were remarkably lightly armed. Prokopios says (2–25–28): “The Eruli have neither helmet nor corselet nor any other protective armour, except a shield, and a thick jacket, which they gird about them before they enter a struggle. And indeed the Erulian slaves go into battle without even a shield, and when they prove themselves brave men in war, then their masters permit them to protect themselves in battle with shields.”

We should not, of course, equate the sixth century Eruli, who were *foederati* units, with the *numeri Erulorum* which we encounter almost 200 years earlier. One difference is certain: the 6th century Eruli were cavalry, while the 4th century ones were infantry. In fact there is no reason to think that the 6th century Eruli differed at all from other Germanic groups at the time.

### IX. Eruli in the Black Sea are in the third century?

Let us finally look at the possible location of Eruli at the Sea of Azov. In speaking of the defeat of the Eruli by Ermanaricus, Jordanes says (23:117): *Praedicta gens, Ablabio istorico referente, iuxta Meotida palude inhabitans in locis stagnantibus, quas Græci ele vocant, Eluri nominati sunt.* Thus for his etymology (which hardly impresses a modern philologist) Jordanes refers to the otherwise completely unknown Ablavius. Other writers trace it instead to the 3rd century Greek historian Dexippos, whose work, unfortunately, is only extant in fragments of doubtful authenticity. Since Jordanes refers to Dexippos on other occasions in his work, we may wonder why he does not do so here: after all, Dexippos would even in those days have been regarded as a better source than Ablavius.

It is difficult to get a clear view of the *Helouroi* of Dexippos, since we have to rely on very late sources. Many of these late writers do not distinguish between the various “Scythian” groups at all. Dexippos himself does not do so in the frag-



ments that are still available to us in reasonably authentic form. Synkellos (c. 800) and Zonaras (c. 1100) say the heavy raids involving Asia Minor, the Aegean and Greece in 267 were carried out by Heluri (or Heruli). But in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, from about 400, the raiders are called Goths, while Zosimos (c. 500) talks simply of Scythians. All of these writers are supposed to derive from Dexippos, but nothing definite can be said about this.

If the *helos* etymology really goes back to Dexippos, he must have called the people *helouroi*, not Heruli (or Eruli). It is therefore quite possible that the interpretation of *heluri* as *heruli* is the work of the later historians, such as Jordanes (or his sources Cassidorus or Ablavius). It is not difficult to understand how this kind of thing could come about. In the late fifth century the Eruli were, according to Prokopios and others, one of the more active Germanic groups, while no group called Heluri was known at the time. It was therefore quite natural to suppose that *Heluri* was just a mistaken rendering of *Heruli*. Such transposition of letters is common in ancient times, and of course especially with barbarian names. (The difference in pronunciation between Heruli and Eruli was immaterial at this time).

To summarize. Dexippos' *Helouroi* may have called themselves Eruli. In that case the later historians' identification of the two was in fact correct. On the other hand, Dexippos form may be a correct rendering. In that case the identification of the Heluri and the Eruli was as mistaken as Jordanes' (and many others') identification of Gothi and Getae. We shall never know. And even if they themselves said Eruli, they may possibly have been quite a separate Germanic group, but one using the same name, as the Central European one. If *Erulus* really meant simply "warrior", nobody could claim a monopoly for it.

On the other hand, there is certainly no impossibility in the Pontic group originating in the South German region. Schmidt's argument, to the effect that the Eruli's ability as seamen on the Black Sea proves that they had had experience of it from the Baltic, does not seem to me to carry much weight. Consider for instance the Vandals. They had been landlubbers, for all we know, for untold generations before they occupied Carthage. But in a few decades they became a dominating sea power in the western Mediterranean. Speculation about these matters is idle.

## X. Conclusion

Who then were the Eruli? My answer runs as follows: The Eruli were a loose group of Germanic warriors which came into being in the late third century in the region north of the Danube *limes* that extends roughly from Passau to Vienna. Several of them were recruited into the Roman army in the fourth century. But they also continued to exist as an independent Germanic group. Like other such groups they were under aristocratic leadership.

In the fifth century some of the Eruli joined the many other central European

Germanic bands who overran Gaul and Spain in 406. But probably the majority remained in the region of Bavaria-Bohemia, and were eventually absorbed into Attila's reign. After Attila's fall, the Eruli experienced an extension of their power. Some of them joined Odoacer's forces, probably as Roman federates. Another part stayed in the Danubian region, but suffered a defeat at the hands of the Langobards, probably in 494.

After various vicissitudes, a party of Eruli consisting of the royal clan and its followers trekked north and settled in Scandinavia, while the main body of the group accepted the status of Roman federates in the Pannonian region. Here they remained, allying themselves sometimes with the Romans, sometimes with the enemies of the Romans, especially the Gepids. Many members of the royal clan eventually rejoined the Pannonian group after a 30-year sojourn in Scandinavia.

Gradually, however, they lost their identity as a group. After Justinian's time we cease to hear about them. Not because they were exterminated, but because they ceased to call themselves Eruli. They assumed other identities, as Gepids, as Langobards, as Slaveni, and some, no doubt, as Avars, Bulgars, and later as Turks. In this, as in other matters, they were no different from other barbarian groups who were to build up medieval Europe.

## NOTES

1. I thank the following friends and colleagues for comments on an earlier draft of this article: Åke Fridh, Walter Goffart, Tore Jansson, Göran Kjellmer, Erik Lönnroth, Sven A. Nilsson, Bo Ralph, Herwig Wolfram, Ian Wood. I have profited from them, even though I have not always followed their advice.
2. Most early references give the form as *Eruli*, which is also the form that can be given a plausible meaning in Germanic. The stem *erul-* can be connected with Old English *eorl* “warrior, knight”, and with Old Norse *jarl* “duke”. The form *Heruli* occurs predominantly in Jordanes: as the h-sound was not pronounced in Late Latin and Greek, it was of little consequence. Note that the stress is on the first syllable in Latin, and obviously in Germanic. This appears, for instance, in the verse by Sidonius Apollinaris, quoted in section IV.
3. In my transliteration of the Greek alphabet I use *k* for *kappa*, *kh* for *chi*, and consistently *u* for *ypsilon*. For *eta* I use *ē*, for *omega* *ō*, and *iota subscriptum* is placed after its vowel. All diacritics except *spiritus asper*, which is rendered by *h*, are disregarded.
4. It is notable that Prokopios never calls the Eruli – or the Goths – Germans. That term he reserves exclusively for the Franks. On the whole the 6th c. Roman and Greek practice was to call those Germanic “tribes” with which they came into contact on the Rhine frontier Germans, while those who harassed them across the Danube or the Black Sea were called Goths – if the ancient term Scythian was not preferred. But of course there is no doubt that both groups were Germanic in the present-day sense, as speakers of a Germanic language. To what extent the dialects of Germanic were mutually understandable is a moot question. It is possible that a kind of Germanic *koinē* developed among the Germanic warriors (“aristocrats”) along the Danube limes: what Priskos and Prokopios say about the use of “Gothic” among the soldiers may be interpreted in this sense. The use of Gothic as a Church language must have worked in the same direction. Note that such a *koinē* may well have existed side by side with quite widely divergent local dialects of the language. Latin and Greek writers have disappointingly little to say on these matters.
5. The actual forms in the manuscript are . . . *Trutungī austorgotī uirtingī sigy pedes celtae*.
6. See translation in Harris Birkeland (1954), pp. 17–24.
7. An instance in point is his story of the Anglian princess and the Warnian prince, where he manages to create an extra island, *Brittia*, inhabited by *Angiloi*, *Phrissones* and *Brittones*, situated between *Brettania* and *Thoulē* (book 8, ch. 20).
8. I.e., three years after Anastasios’ accession: see above, p. 8.
9. Åke Fridh tells me that precisely this part of Jordanes seems to him very definitely Cassiodoran. If Cassiodorus wrote the passage, presumably before 533, my interpretation is less likely. However, even so the Jordanes passage is a weak peg on which to hang a theory of Erulian origin in Scandinavia, in view of the silence of *all* other sources. Not that *propriis* may possibly refer to the Danes, not to the Eruli.
10. Mela’s actual form is *Codannovia*, which is usually considered as a corruption due to the name of the Baltic, called by Mela and others *Sinus Codanus*.

11. Dexippos as quoted by Jordanes in *Getica* 22:113. Jordanes takes the story to refer to the Asdingi Vandals.
12. Very possibly the Romans' location of the Cimbri on Jutland was the result of a similar argument.
13. See Hoffmann (1968).
14. See *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* (1968–), sub *Bataver*.
15. See Kraft (1951).
16. See Zöllner (1970) p. 39.
17. On Erulian slaves, see Prokopios 2–25–28, quoted below, section X, end.
18. Using a somewhat drastic metaphor, the origin, or rather, the formation of the Eruli, and probably many other Germanic groups in the third and fourth centuries might be likened to that of a modern professional football team, like Inter or Real Madrid. To regard them as originating from a genetically or territorially defined “clan” or “tribe” is certainly far more misleading. But of course there are also great differences, e.g. the aristocratic, even monarchical ideology of the times (on both sides of the *limes*), as against the individualistic ideology of modern capitalism.

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