

codex argenteus: lingua gotorum aut lingua gotica?

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Abstract

The language of the Codex Argenteus has long been assumed to be the language of the Goths - lingua gotorum. The contention of this article is that it is better regarded as a religious language for the Gothic peoples - lingua gotica.

The *Codex Argenteus* - called in English the Silver Bible - dates from circa 500AD, and is one of the most splendid manuscripts of its day, produced in north Italy, probably in Ravenna, on the finest quality of vellum and in letters of silver and gold. The location of this manuscript from its composition until the sixteenth century, when it is recorded in Werden on the River Rhur, is the subject of conjecture; subsequent accident has brought it to the library of the University of Uppsala, Sweden.

The content of the *Codex Argenteus* is the four gospels in a language usually described as Gothic, implying that it is the language of the Gothic people, in a translation produced by Bishop Wulfila in the 340s AD. This manuscript is our only major source of knowledge of the language. In addition specimens of the language are preserved in the five *Codices Ambrosiani* and the *Codex Carolinus* (all of which are codices rescripti, and fragmentary), and the fragmentary Codex Turiensis. Most of these fragments are believed to be part of Wulfila's translation. A handful of additional short fragments and runic inscriptions are known, along with an early-modern word-list in a language cognate with Gothic and usually described as Crimean Gothic. Virtually all of the preserved Gothic is therefore from Bishop Wulfila's Bible translation, and dates from the first half of the fourth century AD. The language of the *Codex Argenteus* and virtually all of the other Gothic fragments may be regarded as an idiolect used by Wulfila for his translation, and which may or may not represent Gothic as it was spoken by any of the Gothic peoples.

There are numerous objections to the idea that the language of the *Codex Argenteus* is the lingua gotorum.

The objections may be listed as follows:

- * Disquiet at the idea that the *Codex Argenteus* is the lingua gotorum predates this article. This disquiet is clearly articulated by Fernand Mossé in *Manuel de la Langue Gotique*, Aubier Montaigne, 1942

On appelle gotique la langue employé au IVe siècle de notre ère par l'évêque wisigoth Wulfila dans sa traduction de la Bible. Bien que le gotique soit attesté, du IIIe au IVe siècle, par quelques autres textes, maigres et rares, on peut dire que c'est la langue d'un homme et d'un texte: nous ne connaissons pas le gotique, nous ne connaissons que la langue de la Bible wulfilienne; c'est la seule considération qu'il ne faut pas perdre de vue.

The point that our knowledge of the language is from just one author and one text is a reason for caution.

- * It is most unlikely that there was a single Gothic language at the time of Wulfila. The Gothic homeland and migrations are the subject of controversy; what is not in doubt is that there were very substantial movements of people over a large geographical area. It is almost certain that in such circumstances there would have been many Gothic dialects, and likely that comprehension between some of them would have been so strained that they are best regarded as separate languages. Antiquity recognised two major fourth century groupings - the Ostrogoths, or East Goths, and the Visigoths, or West Goths. Given that ethnicity and language are closely linked in the thinking of the time it is likely that at least discrete Ostrogothic and Visigothic languages may be postulated.
- * The sixth century division of the Goths into Visigoths (in Spain) and Ostrogoths (in Italy and Illyria) suggests a cultural and linguistic divide. Identification of these Gothic groups of the sixth century with the fourth century groups represented by the same names is tenuous.
- * The language of any Gothic peoples in the 340sAD when Wulfila's translation was composed and circa 500AD when the *Codex Argenteus* was produced may be expected to show marked differences.
- * The concept of a Gothic people is strained. Rather the concept of a multi-ethnic grouping must be advanced. The Goths from earliest times interacted with other Germanic peoples, certainly the West Germanic peoples that became the English and Germans, and the North Germanic peoples of Scandinavia. Much of the Gothic area was also a Slavic area, and contemporary writers used Gothic to describe both Germanic and Slavic peoples. Goths came into contact with Lithuanians. Greek populations certainly lived among the Goths. From the sixth century there is enormous interaction between Gothic and Latin populations, as well as other Germanic groups - for example the Ostrogoths with the Lombards in north Italy.
- * Wulfila is the grandson of Greeks from Cappadocia taken into slavery in 267AD, and part of a Greek community living within the Gothic territory. He spoke Greek and a Gothic language. There is no way of knowing the quality of his Gothic. Classical sources record that he spoke Greek, Latin and Gothic; there is a reasonable presumption that he learnt Latin as a foreign language while resident in Byzantium.
- * Wulfila's Bible was used by Goths over a large geographical range - from Wulfila's original Trans-Danubian bishopric to Italy and Spain. It was understood by groups of people who would certainly have spoken different dialects, and may well have spoken different languages.
- * There is a central contradiction between the quality of the manuscript of the *Codex Argenteus* and what appears at first sight to be a linguistic weakness of the text preserved. Wulfila's Bible is a word-for-word gloss of the Greek original. The purpose of a gloss is usually to aid translation. This is the case for example in the Northumbrian Gloss of the Lindisfarne Gospels, where a Latin original has been disfigured by an interlinear gloss as an aid to comprehension and translation. The *Codex Argenteus* is not a Greek manuscript with a Gothic inter-linear gloss, but rather a Gothic text which happens to be in the form of a gloss. Given the resources expended on the physical production of the *Codex Argenteus* by a community both Gothic speaking and having Greek scholars among them, there would seem to be a

positive decision in favour of the Wulfila text. This is comprehensible if the language is a *lingua gotica*, but not if it is a *lingua gotorum*.

- * There is a parallel in the development of Old Church Slavonic as a scriptural and liturgical language for the Slavic peoples. Old Church Slavonic is an artificial construct to translate the Bible in a way comprehensible to all Slavs.

The syntactic incongruities of the *Codex Argenteus* may be examined through an examination of the problems that the artificial word-order would have caused a reader or listener.

The <i>Lord's Prayer</i> in Gothic	The <i>Lord's Prayer</i> in Old English
Atta unsar thu in himinam	Faeder ure thu the eart on heofonum
weihnai namo thein	se thin nama gehalgot
qimai thiudinassus theins	to becume thin rice
wairthai wilja theins	gewurthe thin willa
swe in himina jah ana airthai	on eorþan swa swa on heofonum
hlaiþ unsarana thana sinteinan gif uns	urne gedaeghwamlīcan hlaef syle us todaeg
himma daga	and forgyf us ure gyltas
jah aflet uns thatei skulans sijaima	swa swa we forgyfath urum gyltendum
swaswe jah weis afletam thaim skulam	and ne gelaed thu us on costnunge
unsaraim	ac alys us of yfele
jah ne briggas uns in fraistubnjai	Sothlice.
ak lausei uns af thamma ubilin	
Amen.	

- 1) The Greek word-order differs significantly from that which would have been expected in Gothic (as for example shown by the Old English). Problems of comprehension would have been enormous.
- 2) Vocabulary is contrived. For example *thiudinassus* for kingdom (4 syllables) when a perfectly good two syllable word exists, *reiki*.
- 3) Subordination not natural. The first line needs a main clause followed by a relative clause; the Gothic has two main clauses.
- 4) Gothic does not translate. While it is true that *Amen* has become an international word, in the fourth century this made no sense and needs to be translated, as in the Old English.
- 5) Germanic theme-rheme order is infringed (eg line 2) because of gloss.
- 6) Verb forms appear wrong. *Qimai* (line 3) suggests an imperfective sense (which makes a nonsense of the meaning) - it should be perfectivised. Similarly *wairthai* (line 4)
- 7) Very clumsy translation of *give us this day our daily bread : loaf of the day of ours give to-day to us*. Two different words are used for day (though the Greek uses only one).

The following linguistic issues may be noted:

- a) The word-order is that of Greek, which has conventions of word-order very different to that of any Germanic language, and would have caused difficulties of comprehension for Goths.
- b) Both word-order and inflection was used in Gothic (as in Old English and Old High German) to carry meaning. When word-order is disrupted there is enormous pressure to maximise the potential for inflection. This might include utilising conservative morphological features, creating desired morphological features by analogous extension, and utilising morphological features of another language, as Greek. There are arguments that all three of these may be observed in the *Codex Argenteus*.

c) Word-order is used in Old English and Old High German for a variety of reasons including emphasis and literary devices. The disruption of Germanic patterns in the Wulfila gloss would have created problems of lack of emphasis and inappropriate emphasis, and would have sounded harsh to Gothic ears.

d) Gothic appears to have had an oral literature. Cognate peoples - the Anglo-Saxons, Old Norse and Old High German certainly had a developed oral literature which predated written records, while the Old English poem *Widsith* speaks of the Gothic ruler Eomarric as a patron of poets. Wulfila turns his back on an established oral literature and its conventions.

e) Much of the vocabulary of the *Codex Argenteus* is in the form of loan words from Greek. This feature - common in all translations into a language of concepts previously not familiar in that language - would have caused difficulties in comprehension. The extent of calques is hard to assess; in whatever quantity they would have further hindered comprehension.

Wulfila's Bible was never easy to comprehend by its original audience. Of many ethnic groups and speaking many forms of Gothic they were presented with a Bible in an alien word-order, with a strange morphology and unfamiliar vocabulary.

What they had was a Bible easier for Goths to read than the Greek original, a Bible written in an artificial language for the Bible by a missionary bishop in much the same way as the brothers Cyril and Methodius later translated the Bible into a common Church Slavonic language for the Slavs.

codex argenteus non lingua gotorum verum lingua gotica

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Note: Literature on the Gothic language is exceptionally scant. Streitberg's 1908 text of the Gothic Bible is still the standard text. For grammar the reader has Braune (1880), Streitberg (1897) and Wright (1910), all Latinate in their approach. Mosse (1950) provides the standard bibliography; while *Medieval Studies* has published several supplements the reader of today is likely to find web bibliographies more accessible. There is very little recent work on Gothic syntax.

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