

The Mausoleum
of Theoderic the
Ostrogoth

Ravenna, Italy
(ca. 520-525 CE)

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We all come to our interests via diverse paths. I came to mine from the opposite direction from which one would expect—from ignorance and prejudice. I was first introduced to Theoderic in Prof. Paul Spade's Mediaeval Philosophy class as a sophomore. We studied the 5th-6th century CE philosopher Boethius in the middle of the course, and Prof. Spade's readings included a description of Boethius's execution. I highly admired the philosopher whose interests revolved, apparently, around preserving the greatest philosophical knowledge of the ancient world for posterity. His brutal execution on the orders of Theoderic caused me to take a rather dim view of the Gothic king.

This introduction was followed by my viewing of the PBS series Testament, John Romer's brilliant exposition on the Bible and its place through history. In the series, Romer stands in the upper room of Theoderic's mausoleum and states:

Well—this monster was created about 525 AD, about 70 years after Galla Placidia's elegant mausoleum. It was built by a king—an emperor—called Theoderic the Goth. He was the ruler—a prince, indeed—of one of the hordes of peoples coming into the Empire at this time. The mausoleum is a bit like Theoderic himself, a terrible mixture of classicism and barbarism. They didn't know how to dress, they didn't know how to behave, and they didn't know how to appear imperial. They destroyed the Empire like children would destroy a watch—by ignorance and barbarism, really.

Having had these sorts of introductions to Theoderic and his people, there can be little wonder that I rather despised them for quite some time. Later, when I was a senior, I audited one of Prof. Spade's seminars on mediaeval philosophy. I

accepted a paper assignment to write about the Anonymous Valesianus, a combination of two somewhat disparate texts—the second of which described the end of Theoderic’s reign. Prof. Spade wanted to know what it was about, since he had only heard that there was a story of Boethius’s execution in it.

In the midst of researching for this paper, I read several more balanced accounts of the king and his activities. The work that really opened my eyes was John Moorhead’s Theoderic in Italy. I read about Theoderic’s building programs in Rome, Ravenna, and Verona; scanned several letters in the Variae by Cassiodorus, which detailed his careful political dealings with rulers in Gaul, Burgundy, and Constantinople, not to mention with his own Ostrogoths; and learned more about his vision for a peaceful and prosperous living situation in Italy for both Goths and Romans. These, I told myself, were not the activities of a bumpkin recently taught the game of governing a kingdom; they were the age-old accepted and anticipated behaviors of a good Roman Emperor. Since that time, I have esteemed him for his capable rulership—although I always keep in mind that he did have major problems.

His mausoleum has always interested me, even when my feelings towards him were decidedly antagonistic. I have visited Italy twice—in 1990 and 1994—and both times I spent extended periods in Ravenna examining the major monuments. In 1994, I took many photographs of the mausoleum, both inside and out. I carefully studied all of the salient features of the building (that were

within my reach), and made notes about the details which piqued my curiosity. All of these I later used for my own reference when dealing with the monument.

The building itself is straight north from the modern train station in Ravenna, and was outside the city walls in ancient times. Its neighborhood was the Gothic area of town. As it stands today, it is unfinished. It is a two-storey edifice built of ashlar-cut limestone; it is decagonal below and circular on the top. Some joins utilize masonry, but for the most part the building is held together using the joggled voussoirs that are so prominent over the door to the lower storey. It is crowned by a dome made by a single block of limestone, 10.9 m. in diameter and weighing some 300 tons. The dome has 12 projecting spurs that bear inscriptions with the names of eight Apostles and four Evangelists. Around the exterior of the upper storey runs a continuous frieze of pincer-shaped motifs, called a Zangenfries in German, and below the cornice are alternating rounded and polygonal supports for a never-built gallery. The interior of the lower storey is a cruciform room, bare now but for four small scallop shells affixed to the cornices in the corners of the room, and may have been used as a memorial chapel or for ritual functions. The interior of the upper storey is round and contains a Late Antique porphyry bathtub which was probably not the original receptacle for Theoderic's remains. The underside of the dome, which has a crack running along the south side, bears the remains of a large painted "jeweled" equilateral cross on its surface. Both upper and lower storey rooms have small slit- or cross-shaped windows which are unglazed. In its current location, it is somewhat

sunk down in the earth, due to the once soft, marshy land which surrounded Ravenna. Photographs from the earlier part of this century, like those in Pfeilschifter's Theoderich der Grosse, show that there were two staircases on either side of the building which allowed access to the upper storey. Now there is a single walkway to that level from the east side. Originally there was a fence made with decorative piers (now housed in the Archiepiscopal Museum in Ravenna) which surrounded the mausoleum. The building itself was later used as a church, named Santa Maria Rotunda, and had a basilica running off of it to the east. Graves of indeterminate date occupied the ground encircling the edifice. The king was originally buried wearing a golden cuirass and other jewelry; these items were found by some workmen in a nearby field in 1854, but the goods disappeared before they could be investigated and preserved.

There are a few problems regarding research for this monument. The most prominent of these is that we do not know how the building was supposed to look when it was finished. Numerous reconstructions can be found (those of Bovini, Heidenreich, and De Angelis d'Ossat being the most commonly circulated) in the literature on the monument. Scholars have tried for more than a century to develop a scheme for it, trying different gallery types and strange sculptures on the crown of the dome. Alas, we will probably never be certain about its intended final appearance. The next problem was a highly time-consuming one: the spelling of Theoderic's name. Since antiquity, it has been spelled two ways, either Theoderic or Theodoric. When searching online or in

card catalogs, care had to be taken to try both spellings in the search. I use “Theoderic”, because his name was spelled that way on the Senigalla Medallion, which was originally a Ravenna-minted triple-solidus of his time. Of course, during searches I had to also try some other keywords in order to find relevant things: mausoleum, mausoleo, Ostrogoth, Goth, Theoderich, Ostgermanen, and others.

Attendant to that problem was the fact that the literature dealing with the Ostrogoths has become international recently. Eastern Europeans, particularly in the Balkan region, have begun to study the Gothic tribes who came through the Roman provinces of Pannonia and Raetia in the 4th and 5th centuries. Thomas Burns discovered this as well when writing his History of the Ostrogoths; he solved the problem by enlisting the aid of his fellow Emory faculty members who knew the languages so that he could have translations of the major publications. If necessary, I could do the same; but since those who have already done just that (Moorhead, Burns, and Heather) have discussed the Eastern European contributions to Ostrogothic scholarship, I don’t need to do that just yet.

What was originally a boon can sometimes come back to haunt you. Thanks to my research and interest before starting this project, I have amassed a large collection of critical scholarly literature on the Goths, early mediaeval art and architecture, and the history of the period. The good thing was that I had all the information on hand and had often already read it. One problem was that I

could not always remember where I had first heard of a source, so documenting that was difficult—and probably inexact. The other problem was that when I began searching sources (online, card catalogs, and reference books), I kept finding the same items over and over again. This became tiresome, and frankly irritating.

But I am a born investigator, and few things can deter me. I have become adept at searching for things on the Internet, and so using the online services from the IU Libraries Homepage provided most of the best discoveries. Naturally, such search engines have their quirks. Occasionally, a database will be down when it is supposed to be functioning (e.g., the British Libraries Catalog, which took several attempts to work properly). When my computer's Telnet connection was repaired, I easily and quickly accessed such gold mines as IUCAT, OCLC, and RLIN. These databases, when the correct search was used, provided many of the more esoteric items. Master's theses, dissertations, and journal articles were these important finds. CD-ROMs are wonderful; I have used and enjoyed for several years the PERSEUS CD-ROM. My secret wish is to make a "World of Late Antiquity" CD-ROM using much the same techniques. Highly irritating was the disappearance, once again, of the British Library CD-ROM from the Main Library; who knows how this problem will ever be fixed! Sometimes, Internet searching is done through the back door. I found Thomas Burns's web page that way. I did not know the address, and did not even know if he had a page. But I went to Emory University's page, then to the

departments, then to the faculty list. His page is very good—complete with picture, brief biography, and a listing of his publications which can serve as a resource all by itself. Lois Swan Jones has a new book, Art Information and the Internet: How to Find It, How to Use It, which is quite good; it lists all kinds of web sources for everything from images of art works to history pages, like ORB or Labyrinth. I didn't learn anything new from her book, however; and as quickly as the Internet changes, I fear that her book will soon become out of date. The traditional physical types of reference material, such as card catalogs, book-form card catalogs, and the bound versions of RILA and Art Index, were more time-consuming. But by the same token, it was easier to change one's search while using them. Whereas with an Internet search engine a badly delineated search can yield thousands of irrelevant finds, in text materials one can quickly scan whole references for appropriate materials. The same principle holds for one of my favorite activities: scanning the bookshelves. Once you are in the right area in the stacks, it is easy to find uncatalogued (or incorrectly catalogued) references. Bibliographic gems have been found that way, as will be seen shortly.

My research path has taken a few hard turns over the years. Finding sources dealing with the mausoleum itself was not hard; Heidenreich, Bovini, Haupt, and other such elementary citations were in the bibliographies of books like those of Kleinbauer (Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture: An Annotated Bibliography) and Krautheimer (his Penguin History of Art book). But early on,

I was drawn to learn more about the Ostrogoths themselves. This anthropology interest led to basic histories like Wolfram's History of the Goths, Burns's History of the Ostrogoths, and Heather's The Goths. My attempts to stay connected with the scholarly realm reaped a great harvest. I began attending the International Congress of Medieval Studies, which are held each May in Kalamazoo; I met and conversed with many scholars there, most prominent among them Prof. Goffart and Prof. Moorhead. I attended a couple of annual conferences at the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto. It was there that I first heard Prof. Walter Goffart, who is at the forefront of the movement to redefine the relationship between the Goths and the Romans. His view is that the oft-heard "massive hordes of uncivilized barbarians sweeping down and destroying all in their path" view is probably inaccurate. His landmark study, Barbarians and Romans, A.D. 418-584: The Techniques of Accommodation, revolves around Late Roman tax law—a far stretch from the history of art, but nevertheless important to gain a picture of the Gothic people and how they lived alongside the Romans. I joined several e-mail discussion lists (MEDIEV-L, LT-ANTIQ, MEDART-L, EARLYMEDNET, and BYZAN-L, among many others) where active scholars and students like myself discuss recent findings, debate the current state of their field of scholarship, throw around queries, and generally commune with each other. This source has kept me up-to-date on many problems within academe—which is rather important, since I will at some point go to a graduate school and later teach at the university level.

My own past studies have shaped a few of my searches too. Naturally I idolize Prof. Kleinbauer, and I have caught his love of historiography. His works Modern Perspectives and Research Guide are wonderful, because they allow me not only to learn about the history of our discipline, but also to become more aware of the prejudices and theoretical constructs of scholars. As you will recall, when I started dealing with these Ostrogoths I had accepted the “line” that they were cruel, smelly, dirty, etc. barbarians who could scarcely even reason. Going back over the things I had read up to that time, I know where I got such a perspective; but now I am keenly aware that in order to understand something, it is best approached from many points of view. Almost everything in life has multiple layers of meaning, and this topic is no exception. Along the same lines as Prof. Kleinbauer’s works is Udo Kulterman’s history. It was so intriguing to me that I purchased it; I love the fact that I can see what the art historians of the past looked like, and have a discussion of their backgrounds and methodologies as well.

One last source of references needs to be highlighted—shopping for books. Let it never be said that shopping for rare books will meet with near certain defeat. Several years ago, I was at Caveat Emptor, looking at the books in the history section. My eyes found a thin, nondescript green book with “Theoderich” on the binding. I had discovered Georg Pfeilschifter’s biography of Theoderic, published in 1910, sitting there unobtrusively and priced at only \$10. Gothic script, old photographs, a full-color rice-paper-covered

frontispiece—what a find! Conference book shopping has been my downfall; it was at the conference in Kalamazoo where I purchased Bovini's Ravenna book. Not until it was too late did I discover the \$250 price tag. For the traveler, finding otherwise unobtainable books is one benefit of globetrotting. I purchased Caravita's Teoderico during my last stay in Ravenna. Online shopping services are very helpful; my mainstays are Amazon.com and Blackwell's, which is where I bought all of Prof. Goffart's books. Subject searching in these online bookstores is very helpful, because they often have not-yet-published books which are important to one's research. Amazon.com's reviews can be (although they are not necessarily) very well written and give the prospective buyer a better idea of the book they are considering. Finally, there is the "looking for one thing and finding another" approach. That is how I found T. W. Potter's Roman Italy. It is great by itself, full of descriptions of recent archaeological techniques. In this book, however, are two illustrations of Roman mausolea—round, stone-built, with spurs projecting from their domes. I did not realize how important they are until recently when they caught my eye. When I went to talk with Prof. Kleinbauer about my project, I showed him these illustrations. He had never seen them either! Hopefully, these drum-built tombs will be a new avenue for me to explore in searching for the typological sources for Theoderic's mausoleum.

It is an indescribably delightful process, to move from knowing little towards knowing enough to share with others. My whole career has been that way.

When all I had taken was Art Appreciation, I thought that the pinnacle of art was that produced in Athens in the 5th century BCE; all the rest were either pale imitations of the original Greek masterpieces, or were ugly, technically unsophisticated useless bits. My window on the world of art widens daily. I am not currently in the art history sphere of scholarship; hence, I must acquire experiences and learn on my own. Long-term research, like I have been doing for the past decade, is my way to do this. The more tools one has, the more one can learn; and with the improvements in the distribution of information and knowledge, spearheaded now by the ever-blossoming Internet, the outlook is incredibly favorable for all of us—to learn and share.