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ARMOUR OF THE GOTHS IN THE 3RD-7TH CENTURIES AD

The main sources of information for studying Gothic armour are narrative, the surviving artefacts are not numerous, the pictorial representations are very rare and their application questionable. The aim of this paper is to collect information about Gothic armour given by late antique authors and then to compare it with archaeological and iconographic data. No ancient source discusses the subject in detail. The relevant knowledge is to be found in various works by Greek and Latin authors: the biography of the emperor Claudius II (AD 268-270) by Trebellius Pollio; the *Scriptores historiae Augustae* contains some information dating back to the third century; the Greek soldier and Latin historian Ammianus Marcellinus mentions Gothic arms and armour at the end of the 4th century AD; there is some data in *The Wars* by the 6th-century military historian Procopius of Caesarea. The author of *Strategicon* included a chapter about warfare of the blond-haired peoples. According to Procopius, the European blond-haired peoples included the Goths¹. The Russian scholar P. Shuvalov, who studied the composition of *Strategicon*, suggests that the chapter dealt with a part of the treatise by the Roman general Urbicius, which means that the information dates back to the late 5th – the early 6th centuries AD².

There are some descriptions of the Gothic panoply, a set of weaponry and armour. In his letter found in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Claudius II describes the arms of the Visigoths in the 3rd century AD: their shields, swords, and small spears³. There is no information about the

defensive arms. Of course, the majority of the infantry, who were the most numerous and main kind of the Gothic army in this epoch, wore no armour and could only defend themselves with their shields. Ammianus Marcellinus tells about the same panoply of the Visigothic footman in the 370s AD⁴. The author of *Strategicon* notes that the blond-haired people were armed with shields, spears, and short swords⁵. As the above sources tell us about the typical offensive and defensive arms of the Goths, one can suggest that armour was not in widespread use in Gothic forces.

In his *Panegyric* to Ostrogothic King Theodoric the Great (AD 493-526), the bishop of Pavia Ennodius describes the king's arms⁶. The ruler was protected by a suit of steel armour, greaves and armed with a sword. The *Panegyric* is a piece of poetry and its contents depend on the author's literary aims and the rules of versification. On the one hand, the author does not mention a helm, the usual protective headgear of Gothic chiefs, but on the other, he tells us about the greaves, which were not a common type of armour used by barbarian warriors. Theodoric could have protected his shins with greaves, following the Roman military tradition, he might have worn rich armour, which his officers and soldiers did not wear. Being a successor to the Roman emperors, he wore late Roman stately armour, a scale corselet, which was represented on his gold medallion⁷.

In AD 681, the order of Visigothic King Erwig (680-7) told the magnates to arm their servants with various kinds of arms: some of them had to

¹ Procop., *Bel. Vand.* 1.2.2-5.

² P. V. S h u v a l o v, *Vragi Imperiy (po traktatu Psevdo-Mavrikiya)*, [in:] *Zapiski Vostochnogo otdeleniya Rossiyskogo arkhelogicheskogo obshchestva*, Vol. I (XXVI), Sankt Peterburg 2002, pp. 448-449.

³ SHA. XXV.8.5.

⁴ Amm. Marc. XXXI.5.9, 7.12.

⁵ Ps.-Mauric., *Strat.* XI.3.2 - Mauricius. *Arta militară*, editie critica, traducere și introducere de H. Mihăescu, *Scriptores Byzantini*, VI, București 1970.

⁶ Ennod. Paneg. 8.42.

⁷ See A. L u s c h i n v o n E b e n g r e u t h, *Münzwesen* [in:] *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, hrg. von J. Hoops, Bd. III, Straburg 1915-1916, Tabl. 17,14.



Fig. 1. Reconstruction of an Ostrogothic warrior (c 500 AD).
Drawing by Oxana Gricik.

be equipped with two kinds of armour (*zaba* and *lorica*), the majority of them with shields, swords, bows, spears, and some with slings or other kinds of weaponry⁸. According to the order, there was a clear distinction between the armoured warriors and the more numerous unarmoured soldiers, who could only use shields as a protection. Most probably the skirmishers had no shields at all and the Italian Goths did⁹.

⁸ LV. IX.2.9 (*Leges Visigothorum*, edidit K. Zeumer, [in:] *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Legum sectio I: Leges nationum Germanicarum*, t. I. Hannoverae; Lipsiae 1902): *partem aliquem zabis vel loriceis munitam, plerosque vero scutis spatibus scramis lanceis sagittisque instructos, quosdam etiam fundarum instrumentis vel ceteris armis, que noviter forsitan unusquisque a seniore vel domino suo iniuncta habuerit, principi duci vel comiti suo presentare studeat.*

⁹ Procop., *Bel. Goth.* I.27.27.



Fig. 2. Reconstruction of an Ostrogothic mounted chief (the second half of the 4th century AD). Drawing by John Warry.

The panoply of a common Gothic warrior remained nearly the same for four centuries. As the infantry were the most numerous armed force of the Gothic army, one can assume that the above descriptions deal with footmen. The arms set of a Gothic infantryman was typical of ancient and medieval Germans: shielded warriors were armed with various kinds of spears and side arms, such as daggers and swords. Suits of armour are hardly ever mentioned in historical sources, which, as far as I know, reflects the historical fact.

A shield was the main and often the only defensive weapon of a Gothic footman. It is unclear whether a horseman had a shield, like an ancient Germanic cavalryman¹⁰. Contemporary authors tell us nothing about the armour of the Gothic horse. One can assume that in the 4th century AD, the Goths were influenced by the Sarmatians, who were mounted lancers without shields. Procopius notes that the Ostrogothic horsemen had no protection against Byzantine arrows¹¹. At the beginning of the battle of Taginae (AD 552), the mounted king Totila showed some military exercises with his long lance, holding it in his both hands. Consequently, he cannot have had a shield¹². Maurice's mention of the use of shields by the blond-haired people's horsemen could have referred to other Germanic peoples and not the Goths¹³.

¹⁰ Tacit., *Germania*. 6.2.

¹¹ Procop., *Bel. Goth.* I.27.27.

¹² Procop., *Bel. Goth.* IV.31.19–20.

¹³ Ps.-Mauric., *Strat.* III.5.6.

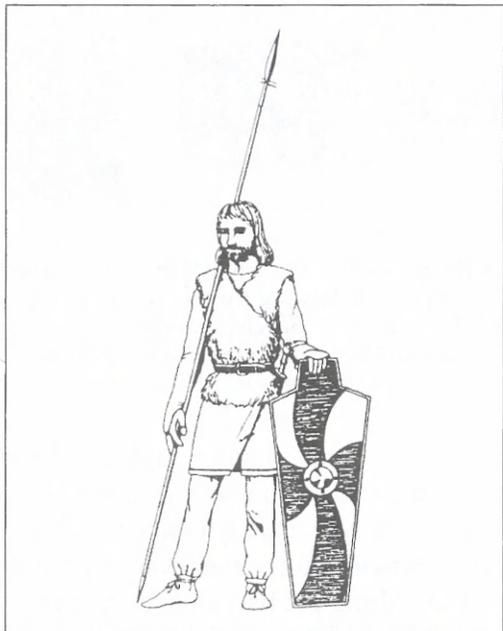


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of a Visigothic shield bearer (c 400 AD).
Drawing by John Warry.

What form did it have? Greek authors use the word ἄσπίς, while Latin sources refer to it as *scutum*¹⁴. If we accept the literal meaning of the Greek term, a shield was a large, round object (especially a hoplite's one), while according to the Latin expression, a shield was oblong, oval, or rectangular. However, the Greek and Roman authors often used these words not as military terms, but as general names of the shield. A professional soldier, Ammianus Marcellinus, calls the Gothic shield a *scutum* or *parma*¹⁵. The former could be a general name for the shield, because the historian uses it referring to the arms of both enemies, the Romans and the Goths, but the latter might be a proper noun. In the Roman military terminology, the *parma* was a round, leather shield. Other Latin writers describe the Visi and Ostrogothic shield as a *clipeus*, the Latin equivalent of the Greek term ἄσπίς¹⁶. Therefore, one can assume that the Gothic shield was round. Indeed, discussing the arms of the Gotones and neighbouring peoples, the famous historian

¹⁴ ἄσπίς: Dexipp., fragm. 19 (Dexippi fragmenta, [in:] *Historici Graeci minores*, L. Dindorfus ed., Vol. I, Leipzig 1870, p. 165-200); Procop., *Bel. Goth.* 1.29.35; IV.5.19, 35.25, passim; *scutum*: Veget. *Epit.*, 1.20; SHA. XXV.8.5; LV. IX.2.9, passim.

¹⁵ *Scutum*: Amm. Marc. XXXI.7.12; *parma*: XXXI.5.9.

¹⁶ Merobaudes. II.158; Cassiod., *Varia*. IV.2.2; X.31.1; Julian., *Hist. Wamb.* 18.

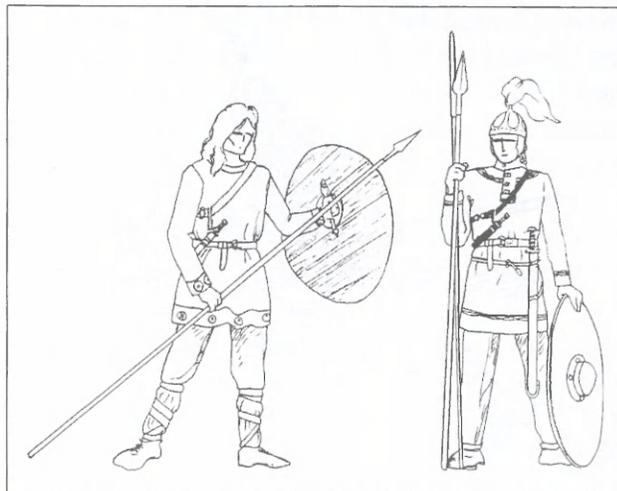


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of two Visigothic infantrymen from Spain (the 5th-7th centuries AD). A drawing from F. Ardanaz Ardanaz, S. Rascón Marqués, A. L. Sánchez Montes, *Armas y guerra en el mundo visigoto*, [in:] *Arqueología, paleontología y etnografía*, vol. 4, 1998, p. 441, fig. 16.

Tacitus considers the round shield a kind of weapon typical of the region¹⁷. The round shield is thought to be typical of the epoch of the Great migrations¹⁸. The wooden find from the village of Belenkoye of the Chernyakhov culture suggests that the shield was round, 80 cm in diameter, with a umbo, and a handle (the 4th century AD)¹⁹. Besides this find, other shields have also been excavated. The shield from Novy Targ of the Wielbark culture is rectangular in shape with rounded edges and the artefact from the village of Oselivka has an iron binding²⁰. In fact, the Latin term *scutum* may be used to describe their shape. Perhaps, both the forms of a large shield, i.e. the round and rectangular ones, co-existed in the first centuries AD. Undoubtedly, the shield of the Goths was big enough to form their usual battle array the “wall of shields”²¹, and to protect

¹⁷ Tacit., *Germania*. 43.6: rotunda scuta.

¹⁸ F. C o n t a m i n, *Voyna v Sredne veka*, Sankt Peterburg 2001, pp. 197-198 (Russian translation).

¹⁹ A. V. G u d k o v a, *Mogilnik IV v. n. e. v s. Belenkoe*, [in:] *Nove issledovaniya po arkeologii Severnogo Prichernomor'ya*, T. L. Samojlov ed., Kiev 1987, p. 59.

²⁰ A. K o k o w s k i, *L'art militaire des Goths l'époque romaine tardive (d'après les données archéologiques)*, [in:] *L'Armée romaine et les barbares du III^e au VII^e siècle*, F. Vallet, M. Kazanski ed., Rouen 1993, pp. 338, 350, Fig. 6a; B. V. M a g o m e d o v, M. E. L e v a d a, *Oruzhye chernyakhovskoy kultury*, [in:] *Materialy po arkeologii, istoriy i etnografiy Tavriy*, Vol. 5, 1996, p. 307.

²¹ Dexipp. fragm., 19; Amm. Marc. XXXI.7.12; Procop., *Bel. Goth.*, 1.29.35; IV.5.19.



Fig. 5. Drawing from the silver dish from Isola Rizza, Italy by R. Boss (the 6th century). *The cavalryman might be a Byzantine, Ostrogothic, or Lombard warrior.*

King Teya in the battle of Vesuvius, where twelve spears were stuck in his shield²².

In the epoch of Caesar and Tacitus, body armour was not in widespread use in the Germanic land²³. In the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, Gothic warriors seldom wore armour. According to the data collected by A. Kokowski, B. V. Magomedov and M. E. Levada, there were no suits of armour among archaeological artifacts from the Wielbark and Chernyakhov cultures²⁴. The Gothic horsemen must have been the first to wear armour, because they were tribal noblemen, who equipped themselves with booty taken in battle. Furthermore, when they fought on horseback, they were not protected by shields and this is why they needed suits of armour. Discussing Roman arms and armour, the military theorist Vegetius notes: “*nam licet exemplo Gothorum et Alanorum Hunnorumque equitum arma profecerint, pedites constat esse nudatos*”²⁵. In the text, Vegetius contrasts the Roman infantry, who had no defensive arms, with the cavalry wearing armour copied from the

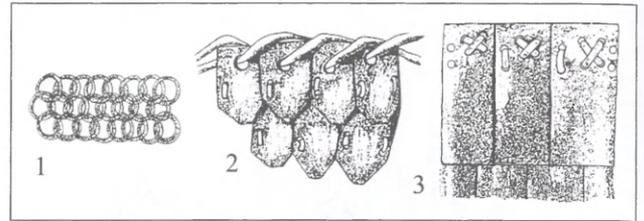


Fig. 6. Late antique armour: 1 – chain mail; 2 – scale armour; 3 – plate armour. A drawing from F. Ardanaz Ardanaz, S. Rascón Marqués, A. L. Sánchez Montes, *Armas y guerra en el mundo visigoto*, [in:] *Arqueología, paleontología y etnografía*, vol. 4, 1998, p. 433.

barbarian, viz. Gothic, Alanian, and Hun defences. We have no information about Gothic armour, but Alanian armour was scale armour or chain mail²⁶.

The sources rarely mention armour of the Goths. Describing the battle of Adrianople (AD 378), Ammianus Marcellinus writes that battle-axes broke the enemy’s colresets and helmets: *et mutuis securium ictibus galeae perfringebantur atque loricae*²⁷. At that time, Gothic warriors could have worn armour carried off as loot from battles with the Romans²⁸. The Gothic commanders frequently used Roman officers’ corselets. Alaric and Theodoric the Great, whose portrait is presented on the above-mentioned gold medalion, wore this kind of defence²⁹. Procopius often mentions armour of Gothic noblemen, officers, and horsemen, but he never describes it³⁰. In the great migrations epoch, chain mail, scale and plate armour was in widespread use in the barbarian and Byzantine worlds. Probably, plate shirts were popular in the Barbaricum. The cavalryman on the dish from Isola Rizza (Italy, the 6th century), the guardians of Lombardian King Agilulf, depicted on a helm, wear this kind of body armour. In addition, a find coming from the Frankish tomb at Krefeld-Gellep is a shirt consisting of about 1100 plates (Germany, the 6th century)³¹. During the war

²² Procop., *Bel. Goth.* IV.35.22-29.

²³ Tacit., *Germania.* 6.2.

²⁴ A. K o k o w s k i, *L’art militaire...*, p. 353-354; B. V. M a g o m e d o v, M. E. L e v a d a, *Oruzhye...*, pp. 304-323.

²⁵ Veget. *Epit.*, I.20. C. Zuckerman dates Vegetius’ treatise at about AD 386/7, while W. Goffard thinks that it was written during the reign of Valentinian III (AD 425-455) (C. Z u c k e r m a n, *Sur la date du traité militaire de Vègèce et son destinataire Valentinien II*, [in:] *Scripta classica Israelica*, Vol. XIII, 1994, pp. 67-74; W. G o f f a r d, *The Date and Purpose of Vegetius’ ‘De re militari’* [in:] *Tradition*, Vol. 33, 1977, pp. 65-100.

²⁶ A. K. N e f e d k i n, *Podznamenem drakona: Voyennoye delo sarmatov vo II v. do n. e. - V v. n. e.*, Sankt Peterburg 2004, pp. 31-36.

²⁷ Amm. Marc. XXXI.13.3.

²⁸ Amm. Marc. XXXI.5.5, 9, 6.3; Oros., *Hist.* VII.34.5.

²⁹ Claud. XXVI (*Bel. Goth.*), 82.

³⁰ Procop., *Bel. Goth.* I.16.11, 22.4, 23.9; II.5.14; III.4.21.

³¹ See S. M. P e r e v a l o v, I. L e b e d i n s k i, *Les combattants sarmates at alains dans l’armée romaine*, Saulcet 1998, p. 21; *Die Alamannen*, K. Fuchs, M. Kempa, K. Redies, B. Theune-Großkopf, ed. A. Wais, Stuttgart-Zürich-Augsburg 1998, p. 407, Fig. 461a; I. L e b e d i n s k i, *Armes et guerriers barbares au temps des Grandes Invasions (IV^e au VI^e siècles après J.-C.)*, Paris 2001, p. 187.

against the Byzantines, the Ostrogoths received armour from the state armouries³². This is why one can assume some sort of uniformity.

In the above-quoted order to arm the servants issued by the Visigothic king Erwig, two kinds of armour were mentioned: *zaba* and *lorica*. The difference between the meaning of the Greek and Latin terms is unclear. E. Oldenburg thought that one kind of armour was a leather corselet and the other type an armoured shirt³³. The ζάβα had been known in Byzantine military literature since the 6th century AD. A. D. H. Bivar suggest that ζάβα was a coat of chain mail, and R. Munoz thinks that it was a scale shirt³⁴. A Byzantine Anonymous of the 6th century notes that it was made of either leather or felt³⁵. In his *Tactica*, the emperor Leo VI (AD 886-912) notes that the corselets (λωρίκια) were made of mail, horn, or leather³⁶. The λωρίκιον and ζάβα were synonyms in Leo's treatise³⁷. One should note that there were no helmets on the Erwig's arms list though it included suits of armour, which were more expensive and not so widespread. Taking this into account, one could assume that Visigothic armour had a kind of hood made of mail. Maurice argues that Byzantine armour had a hood, because Alamanni's coat of mail had one³⁸. The two kinds of armour mentioned in Erwig's order were either both made of mail or one of them was made of iron, probably mail, and the other type was produced of a non metallic material.

³² Cassiod., *Varia*. I.40; V.11; VII.18-19; Procop., *Bel. Goth.* I.11.28.

³³ E. O l d e n b u r g, *Die Kriegsverfassung der Westgoten Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde genehmigt von der Pfilosophischen Fakultät der Friedrich-Wilhelmus-Universität zu Berlin*, Berlin 1909, p. 43.

³⁴ A. D. H. B i v a r, *Cavalry Equipment and Tactics on the Euphrates Frontier*, "Dumbarton Oaks Papers", Vol. 26, 1972, p. 288; R. M u n o z, *El ejército visigodo: desde sus orígenes a la Batalla de Guadalete*, Madrid 2003, p. 27.

³⁵ *De re strateg.* 16,9. C. Zuckerman argues that the anonymous treatise *De re strategica* was part of a lost larger work of Syrianus Magister, an author of the late 6th and early 7th centuries (C. Z u c k e r m a n, *The Military Compendium of Syrianus Magister*, "Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik", Bd. 40, 1990, pp. 210-224.

³⁶ Leo, *Tact.* V.4.

³⁷ Ch. du C a n g e, *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis*, t. VIII, Niort 1887, p. 426, s. v. *zaba*; J. F. H a l d o n, *Some Aspects of Byzantine Military Technology from the Sixth to Tenth Centuries*, "Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies", Vol. 1, London 1975, p. 34.

³⁸ Ps.-Mauric., *Strat.* I.2.2; F. C o n t a m i n, *Voïna v srednie...*, p. 198.

Gothic helmets are rarely mentioned in written records. Tacitus says that the Germans did not often wear them³⁹. As I said above, Ammianus mentions helmets of the Goths and the Romans and Procopius says that Gothic warriors were protected by armour and helmets⁴⁰. Written sources do not inform us about the form of the helmets, while real artifacts and pictorial representations provide some useful details. During the Great migrations epoch, the typical form of a helmet was the *Spangenhelm*, a sort of metallic, spherical, frame wrought headgear with cheek-pieces and a bush in which the crest was placed. The Goths used this type of helmet. In Spain, Visigothic kings wore helmets of this type as their status symbol in the 6th-7th centuries AD, which can be seen on their coins⁴¹. Another example of such a helmet was the *Baldenheim* known in Italy in the late 5th and the first half of the 6th centuries AD⁴².

Defensive horse armour was not used by ancient Germans, particularly the Goths, but Procopius says that the Ostrogothic king Vitigis arrived in Rome with 150 000 cavalrymen and infantrymen in armour, "most of whose horses had horse armour"⁴³. The above text would suggest that both the cavalrymen and their horses were protected by some kind of armour⁴⁴. To make this information clear, we should compare it with contemporary Byzantine sources. A Greek military theorist recommended officers' and elite troopers' horses be armoured and have iron or felt chamfrons, peytrals, and neck guards⁴⁵. If we consider Procopius' account as true, one can assume that Gothic cavalrymen were armoured with the same details which protected the most vulnerable fore-part of a horse. Probably, pieces of

³⁹ Tacit., *Germania*. 6.2.

⁴⁰ Amm. Marc. XXXI.13.3; Procop., *Bel. Goth.* I.23.9; III.4.21.

⁴¹ W. R e i n h a r t, *Germanische Helme in westgotischen Münzbildern*, "Zahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte", Bd. 2, 1950-55, pp. 43-46.

⁴² V. B i e r b r a u e r, *Die ostgotischen Grab- und Schatzfunde in Italien*, "Biblioteca degli studi medievali", t. 7, Spoleto 1975, pp. 194-198, Fig. XXII,5; XXVII-XXVIII; LVIII,1; M. Kazanski, *Les Goths (I^{er}-VII^e après J.-C.)*, Paris 1991, p. 114.

⁴³ Procop., *Bel. Goth.* I.16.11: ππήαφ τε καὲ πεζοῶφ οὐχ ἄσσον ἄ μυριῶδαφ πεντεκα... δεκα ἠπαγόμενοφ, καὲ αὐτῖν τεθωρακισμηνοί ζῶν τοῖφ ἄπιοιφ ο πλεῆστοί ἄσαν.

⁴⁴ H. W o l f r a m, *Goty*, Sankt Peterburg 2003, p. 435, note 85 (Russian translation).

⁴⁵ *De re strateg.* 17,3; Ps.-Mauric., *Strat.* I.2.6.

horse armour were distributed among the troopers from state armories. The aim of such distribution is clear: The armour was to protect the horses from arrows shot by Byzantine bowmen as the Goths, following the Germanic military tradition, had no effective archery. The Ostrogothic cavalymen were armoured troopers armed with lances, their main offensive arm, they rode on armoured horses, which means they were real cataphracts.

In general, following the ancient Germanic tradition, the majority of the Gothic infantry were shielded warriors armed with various kinds of spears and side arms. A large shield was a reliable protection. With the shields, the Goths formed their array called a 'shield wall', protecting them from

enemy missiles. The Ostrogoths developed their cavalry under Sarmatian influence. They were mouthed lancers in chain mail, scale or plate corselets and frame wrought helms who did not carry shields, which would have hindered them from fighting on horseback. The cavalry battled with lancers and swordsmen in close combat because the Goths had a heroic ethos. In the 6th century AD, in Italy the mounted lancers became real cataphracts, because the Italian Gothic state started to distribute suits of armour for the warriors and their horses. The Visigoths preserved the Germanic tradition of foot combat. It was only in fifth century Gallia and Hispania that they improved their mounted forces and turned them into skirmishers.