

Ulfilas Biography

Ulfilas

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Biography

Ulfilas (ca. 311-ca. 382), Arian bishop of the Visigoths, or West Goths, translated at least part of the Bible into Gothic. He developed the Gothic alphabet on the basis of the Greek and Roman alphabets and enriched the Gothic, or East Germanic, language.

Ulfilas was probably descended on his mother's side from Christian captives displaced from Cappadocia in Asia Minor in the 3d century. They converted some of the Goths to their faith and settled with them north of the Danube. Not yet 30, Ulfilas, already a leader of his people, was sent on a mission to Constantine I, the first Christian emperor of Rome, and in the same year was consecrated bishop of the Christian Goths by Eusebius of Nicomedia. For seven years he performed episcopal duties among his people north of the Danube and, persecuted by non-Christian Goths, settled his followers in Moesia (Bulgaria). He also assumed duties as judge and intellectual leader. In 381 he was summoned by the emperor Theodosius to Constantinople for conferences. He died there soon after.

The Arianism of Ulfilas led to a break between Goths and Romans which was not healed by his compromise with Nicene orthodoxy. He was one of the founders of the Arian Gothic Church, which spread with missionary intensity to other East Germanic tribes in the Mediterranean Basin, the Ostrogoths (East Goths), Vandals, and Burgundians.

It cannot be determined how much of the Bible Ulfilas translated. The ecclesiastical historian Philostorgios claims Ulfilas translated all of it except the too warlike Books of Kings; others deny this. Much of the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul, as well as fragments from Nehemiah, Ezra, and Genesis and one psalm, are preserved in later forms. He used the Septuagint for the Old Testament and a Greek text for the New Testament, translating faithfully but not slavishly, enriching his native Gothic with neologisms and syntactic constructions. Philologically this translation--practically all that exists of Gothic--is of inestimable value. Most of what remains is in the Codex Argenteus (Silver Codex) in Uppsala, Sweden. Treatises and exegetical writings in Gothic, Greek, and Latin are also ascribed to Ulfilas. The chief primary sources about him are chapters by early ecclesiastical historians and a letter by his pupil Auxentius.