

The best place for us to begin an exploration of the term 'Gothic' is via the first set of meanings outlined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that is, number 1. a., Gothic as an adjective that means 'Of, pertaining to, or concerned with the Goths or their language'. This begs the question of 'Who were the Goths?', and, more pertinently, how did they come to be so closely associated with British culture from the late seventeenth century onwards? The Goths, of course, were the Germanic tribe who were thought to have played a major role in vanquishing the Roman Empire, and thus inaugurating the 'medieval' period in European history. Remember, in this regard, that one of the meanings of the term 'medieval' – though the term 'medieval' post-dates the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by a few decades – is that which lies 'between' the classical and renaissance worlds. Instead of using the term 'medieval', eighteenth century termed this period the Middle Ages or, as we shall see, the 'Gothic' ages. The Goths, then, were held responsible for the sacking of Rome: under the leadership of Alaric, the Visigoths, one 'Western' strand of the Gothic tribe, defeated Rome in 410 AD. This is the background to Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus*, for those of you who are familiar with it. For the conquered Romans, the Goths were a 'Barbaric' tribe, the term meaning, in this instance, anyone who was not Roman, or who derived from and lived outside of the realms of the Roman Empire. The Goths had long been thought to originate from 'Scythia', an area that we today know as parts of Romania and Russia. One of the major sources of information about this tribe is the Roman Historian Tacitus's *Germania* (AD. 98), a text that, while it does not mention the term 'Gothic', became especially important, for reasons that I shall soon elaborate upon, in eighteenth-century Britain. The Goths, it was held, gradually spread throughout parts of Europe, the Visigoths in parts of what we now know as France and Spain, and the Ostrogoths, or the Eastern Gothic tribe, into other regions. When taken together as a composite group, the Goths, or so an ancient historian such as Jordanes in *Getica* (c. AD 551) influentially argued, derived from the homeland of Scandza, an imaginary island off the coast of Southern Scandinavia. This historical positioning, we shall see, is important, and has implications for the ways in which the Gothic tribes eventually came to be entangled with the history of the British nation. Originating in 'Scandza', the Goths, it was believed, migrated to 'Scythia', and then, eventually, Germany; indeed, the associations between the Goths and Germany, that sense of the Gothic tribe as a distinctly Germanic one, became particularly prominent. Again, this would become very important for accounts of the Goths in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Let's turn to consider this more closely, then.

The question we are asking is 'how did this Barbaric European tribe, the Goths who were responsible for the sacking of Rome in 410 AD, become so closely associated with the history of Britain from the late seventeenth century onwards?' Well, the answer is rather simple, although, when reading the historical material at stake, there is very little consensus about it at all. From the end of the seventeenth century onwards, it became a frequently rehearsed commonplace in historical writing that England and the English constitution derived from the 'Goths': founded in the 'woods of Germany', the English constitution, unwritten though it was and still is, was 'Gothic', one based upon the principles of democracy and enlightenment with which the Gothic tribe had vanquished a decadent, tyrannous Roman empire. What I am suggesting, then, is that, through a number of historical oversights, accidents, mistranslations and sleights of

hand, the late seventeenth century increasingly came to label the invading Angles, Saxons and Jutes, the Scandinavian tribes who invaded Britain between the mid-5<sup>th</sup> and early-7<sup>th</sup> centuries, as 'Goths'. Of course, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes were not 'Goths' in the true sense of the word at all. Nonetheless, that modern-day Britain, or, more narrowly, England derived from the Goths was a frequently rehearsed political and historical claim. Made vulnerable by the withdrawal of the Romans, the narrative went, Vortigern, the ancient king of the Britons, invited the Anglo-Saxon 'Goths' to England in 449 AD as reinforcement against the tide of violence issuing from the Picts and Scots, confined to the territory north of Hadrian's Wall. This was Vortigern's famous 'Gothic appeal'; following this mislabelling of the invading Angles, Saxons and Jutes as 'Goths' – a mislabelling facilitated, perhaps, by the fact that they issued from Scandinavia, close to the mythological island of 'Sdanza' – was seen as the origin of the British nation. For the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Anglo-Saxon England, that is, England prior to the Norman invasion of 1066, was 'Gothic'. In other words, the term 'Gothic', in addition to implying the ancient Gothic tribe, came to signify a sense of the ancestral and the natively 'English'. With the Norman Conquest of 1066, it was held, Gothic liberties fell under what was referred to as the 'Norman Yoke'; fortunately, however, it was perceived as having persisted as a strong impulse in politics and cultural life more generally up until the late seventeenth-century present.

Why did this become such a regularly peddled assumption in historical and political discourse of the period? The answer, I think, is a highly political one, for claims to the 'Gothic' origins of the British constitution became particularly prominent around the time of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. On the slide, you'll see some key facts about the so-called 'Bloodless' or 'Glorious Revolution':

#### The Glorious Revolution:

- 1688
- Overthrow of King James II of England, a Stuart King, by William of Orange and his wife, Queen Mary.
- The Presumed Vanquishing of Stuart Absolutism and Divine Right of Kings
- The Presumed Vanquishing of Catholicism by a Protestant Ascendancy
- The presumed replacement of Sovereign Tyranny by a 'Gothic' system of democracy

The Goths, in other words, were heralded not only as the originators of the English constitution – 'our constitution', politicians tirelessly claimed, 'derived from the Woods of Germany' – but also the British system of Liberty, democracy, and power-sharing. According to what we now refer to as the 'Gothic Balance', the Goths, it was held, were responsible for checking Royal prerogative, the absolute right of Kings, with the more democratic structures of Parliament. In other words, the British system of parliamentary democracy, that delicate balancing of power between a sovereign and his or her government, was thought to be of Gothic origins – it originated, or so many politicians claimed, in the 'witangemot' or 'witenangemot' of the Anglo-Saxons, itself or Gothic origins, an advisory council to the King composed of nobles and other officials, who advised him on administrative and juridical matters. Perceived as an antidote to,

and careful check on, the absolutism of the Stuart line of Kings, this Gothic system of government was particularly appealing to the liberal Whig politicians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Consequently, the term 'Gothic' became, in the hands of several seventeenth and eighteenth-century historians, a synonym for 'Enlightened'; though certainly Barbaric, the Goth was perceived as democratic and freedom-loving before anything else.

This has been, I am sure, a lot to process. Let's reflect upon this now for a moment