

OVID AND THE BARBARIANS BEYOND THE LOWER DANUBE (*Tristia* 2. 191-2; Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.3.17)

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Ovid spent the last nine years (*A.D.* 8-17) of his life in a form of exile at the Black Sea city, Tomis (Constanța). Not surprisingly he is usually credited with having considerable knowledge about the native peoples to be seen in and around that city. He describes the area loosely as ‘Scythian’, but pictures it as peopled by Thracian *Bessi* and *Getae*, though it is plagued by other *Getae* and by *Sauromatae/Sarmatae* from beyond the Danube¹. He paints a picture of the climate more miserable than it really was, and makes the milieu more barbarous, stressing his need to learn the Getic and Sarmatian languages. This ‘darkening of the colours’ was done in the hope of being recalled to Rome by a, hopefully, more lenient Augustus, or later by the notoriously resentful Tiberius. It never happened. As a result we have the poet’s, self-pitying, picture of this remote north-eastern corner of Rome’s European empire, directly due to the fact that his relegation to Tomis was never revoked².

Unfortunately, however, the one place (a hexameter line), where Ovid produces the most specific ethnic names of tribes dwelling just beyond the Danube, is one of the most textually unreliable and most variously emended lines in the whole of his ‘Pontic’ writings. Four names appear to be listed in the one line, though, as it stands, they are a curious cocktail of Caucasian, Colchian and Central Asian peoples as well as the expected *Getae*, native to the area.

*Ciziges et Colchi Metereaue turba Getaeque
Danuuii mediis uix prohibentur aquis.
Tristia 2. 191-2*

‘The Ciziges and the Colchi, and the Meterean troop and the Getae
Are barely kept back by the Danube’s waters between.’

The presence of *Getae* is no surprise, and they are left undisturbed by scholars at the end of the line, but the situation is quite different with the *Ciziges*, *Colchi* and the *Meterean troop*. They have met with various levels of disbelief, leading to suggested emendations.

Ciziges is not the only reading in the MSS, others being *Gizizes*, *Iaziges*, *Iazides*. An emendation to *Sidones* has been suggested, only to be withdrawn in favour of *Cizices*, pointing to Pliny’s mention of a

¹ N.V. Vulikh, “The *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* of Ovid as a historical source”, *VDI*, 1974, 1, pp. 64-79 (in Russian); A.V. Podosinov, “Scythians, Sarmatians and Getae in the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* of Ovid”, in *Drevneishiy gosudarstva Vostochnoi Evropy*, Moscow, 1976, pp. 21-40 (in Russian); I.Y. Kuklina, “*Sauromatae* and *Sarmatae* in Ovid”, in *Severnoye Prichernomor’ye v Antichnosti – Voprosy istochnikovedeniya, Drevneishiy gosudarstva Vostochnoi Evropy 1996-1997*, Moscow, 1999, p. 253-270 (in Russian).

² R. Syme, *History in Ovid*, Oxford, 1978; A.V. Podosinov, “Ovid and the Black Sea area – an attempt at a source-study analysis of a poetical text”, in *Drevneishiy gosudarstva Vostochnoi Evropy*, Moscow, 1984, p. 125 (in Russian).

people *Cizici* in the N. Caucasus region (*NH* 6.19)³. The reading *Iazyges* has rightly been seriously considered (*s.v. Iazyges*, Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*). *Iazyges* did, without doubt, exist north of the lower Danube at the time (Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.3.17; Pliny, *NH* 4.80). Ovid himself mentions them twice in his Tomis-based poems (*Iazyges*, *Ep. ex Pont.* 1.2.7-8; *Iazyx*, 4.7.9-10) and once in *Ibis* 138 (*Iazyges*). However, on each occasion he awards the initial *i* a separate value in the verse as a short beat in the foot to suit the place in the line⁴. This has been thought to rule out its appearance at the beginning of a line of hexameter verse, requiring - ~ -. But it may have been treated as 'y'. The form of the name of this tribe is far from fixed in ancient sources, which provide *Ixibatai* (Hekataios, fr. 216, 'a tribe near the Sindoi', *i.e.* beyond the Tanais/Don, in Asia), *Iazamatai* (Ps-Skymnos 879, a Maiotian people according to Demetrios of Kallatis, but Sauromatian according to Ephoros), *Ixomatae* (Pomp. Mela 1.114, 'next to the mouth of the R. Tanais'). In view of these variants in the name, persisting in the literature until the first century A.D., it is not unlikely that the name could be used by Ovid as a three-syllable word presenting a dactyl for the beginning of a line. However, it is clear that Ovid far preferred the more tractable generic name-forms, *Sauromatae/Sarmatae*, again tailored to suit different parts of his elegiac couplets⁵. What is certain is that the Sarmatians found immediately beyond the Lower Danube in Ovid's time were specifically the *Iazyges* (*Iazyges Sarmatai*, Strabo 7.3.17; Pliny, *NH* 4.25), and beyond them further north were the *Roxolanoi* ('between Borysthenes and Tanais', Strabo, *ibid.*). The *Iazyges* are, historically and geographically, much better attested as frequenting the area north of the Danube than the obscure *Cizici* of Pliny, known only somewhere in W. Asia.

The second name in l. 191, *Colchi* (var. *Cholchi*) is often left unemended on the ground that Ovid does elsewhere make fairly frequent reference to Colchians in his Pontic poems or in connection with the Pontus. But they relate to the Argonauts' expedition, or reflect the aetiological derivation of the name Tomis (Τόμοι) from the legendary fate of Medea's brother (being cut to pieces in order to delay the pursuit of the Argonauts by the Colchians). In that tale the Colchians did land at Tomis. It has also been suggested that piratical raids by Colchi across the Pontus may lie behind the story⁶. The context here, however, is a purely contemporary one – a barbarian people beyond the Danube is prevented from crossing, but only just, by the river's waters. It has been suggested that *Colchi* should be emended to *Coitae*, another people mentioned once by Pliny (*NH* 6.7) among the Sarmatians in Asia⁷.

But if a relevant barbarian people is to be looked for in the area immediately north of the Lower Danube one should look to the same passage of Strabo (*Geogr.* 7.3.17) as before, 'the *Iazyges Sarmatai* and those called *Basileioi* and *Ourgoi*; these are for the most part nomads, but also to some extent they occupy themselves in farming'. These *Ourgoi* are probably the people lying behind the name *Colchi*, the corruption occurring from a genuine, but unfamiliar, barbarian name to a name associated with Tomis, very familiar to the scholarly scribe, but not appropriate to this context. The origin of the word *ourgoi* has been sought in Iran, **ugra* meaning something like 'strong', 'mighty'⁸. Be that as it may, it seems probable that Strabo's *Ourgoi* are also none other than Herodotus' *Iurkai* (4.21-2), who some four hundred years earlier were represented by him as hunters of wild game using horses and hunting dogs. They were, he says, neighbours of the *Sauromatai* in the region beyond the Don. They are probably those listed (by then anachronistically) in Asia east of the Don as *Tyrcae* (*sic* !) (Pomp. Mela 1.116; Pliny, *NH* 6.7). The second tribal name, written originally in this line may be restored as *Iurgi*

³ For a summary of the MS variants of names in this line and emendations to them, see N. Gostar, "Metereaque turba (Ovide, *Tristia* II, 191)", *StCl* 3, 1961, pp. 314-5; A.V. Podosinov, *Proizvedenia Ovidia kak istochnik po istorii Vostochnoi Evropy i Zakavkazya – Texty, perevod, kommentarii*, Moscow, 1985 (= Podosinov 1985), p. 168, n. 236.

⁴ In each case the word occurs in the second last or last foot in the line, where a short beat is required before a dactyl or spondee (~ ~ ~ ~ ; ~ ~ ~). For the general rejection of *Iazyges* by editors, see Podosinov 1985.

⁵ I.Y. Kuklina, *loc. cit.*, pp. 268-70.

⁶ I.P. Gagaa, *Ovidii Nason i Drevnyaya Kolkhida*, doct. diss., Tbilisi, Georgia, 1981 p. 19 (*non vidi*, ref. in Podosinov 1985, p. 16).

⁷ *Coitae* are mentioned alongside *Cizici* by Pliny, but are not otherwise known, and the name is not particularly close to *Colchi*: N. Gostar, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

⁸ V.I. Abayev, *Osyetinskiy yazyk i folklor*, Moscow, 1949, p. 185; L. Zgusta, *Die Personennamen griechischer Städte der nördlichen Schwarzmeerküste*, Prague, 1955.

(*Iurkai*>*Iurgoi*>*Ourgoi*), the people mentioned by Strabo alongside the *Iazyges Sarmatai*. They may have been the people who, as well as nomadism, had some tendency to agriculture, according to Strabo; Herodotus centuries earlier seemed to wish to distinguish them from the *Sauromatai* as a people, though not specifically making them agriculturalists⁹. We now have in the first half of the line two names of peoples which, though barbarous and unfamiliar, do fit the verse metrically and in one other particular; they have a striking alliteration, *Iazyges et Iurgi*, desirable in verse.

The fourth, apparently tribal, name, *Metereaue turba*, has also been variously explained, as a corruption of *Tereteaque* (from *Toretai*, a tribe of the N. Caucasus, Pliny, *NH* 6.17)¹⁰, or, retaining the text more closely, *Materea* from *Ματῆροι*, a people of *Sarmatia Asiatica*, mentioned by Ptolemy (*Geogr.* 5.9.17)¹¹. This tribe moved westward to the area north of the Danube, it is suggested, though the only evidence for it is in Asia. Like Pliny's *Cizices* and *Coitae* it is best to keep these *Materoi* in Asia, especially as another explanation of the phrase *Metereaue turba* is available and relevant to this Danube region. The word *turba* means 'band', 'troop', 'horde' (since the English 'horde' is an adaptation of a Turkish word for Tatar, 'troop', 'band')¹². Ovid uses the word elsewhere, once of the band of Argonauts (*Her.* 12.10), once of a 'trousered troop of *Getae*' (*bracataque turba Getarum*, *Trist.* 4.6), and once of barbarian *Getae* in Tomis (*barbara turba*, *Trist.* 5.10.28). The middle one is particularly close to the phrase in l. 191, *metereaue turba Getaeque*, in its structure (adjective, plus noun, plus noun). The troublesome, lengthy, word may be an adjective descriptive of *turba* (as *barbara* and *bracata*), rather than an adjective made from an ethnic or tribal name.

The original word before *turba* was, I suggest, *metanastes*, or its adjectival form *metanastea*, meaning 'wandering', 'changing homeland', 'nomadic'¹³. It is clearly appropriate to the way of life of the *Iazyges Sarmatai* and *Ourgoi* of Strabo's *Geographia*. Furthermore the term *metanastai* is applied specifically to the *Iazyges* some 200 years later by Ptolemy in his *Geography* of ca AD 140 (3.5.1; 7; 8.1). So one possibility is that a faint or illegible part of the line in Ovid's MS may have led the scribe, who did not recognize the relevance of the transliterated Greek word *metanastai/metanastea* to the context, to substitute a more Latin-looking, though meaningless, *metereaue*. Another possibility is that *turba* itself is a substitute word for another original name. We have seen *turba* already used by Ovid three times, and there are another two instances (*turba ... mixta ... inter Graecos Getasque*, *Tristia* 5.7.9-11; *barbara turba, Sauromata ... Getasque*, *Ep. ex Pont.* 3.2.37-8). It might almost be said to be a mannerism of his to speak of a barbarian 'troop', a 'horde' of *Sauromatae* or *Getae*. He may have done this in this passage too, but it is also possible, in view of the passage in Strabo (7.3.17), that the name was originally intended to be *Tyregetaeque*, a third tribe said by Strabo to be just beyond the Danube next to the *Iazyges Sarmatai* and *Ourgoi*. So we could have two slightly differing versions of Ovid's line, one originally inspired by the geographical situation, and one perhaps adapted to suit the poet's predilection for the word *turba* and his frequent reference to *Getae*.

Iazyges et Iurgi, metanastea turba, Getaeque
Danuuii mediis uix prohibentur aquis.

or *Iazyges et Iurgi, metanastae, Tyregetaeque*
Danuuii mediis uix prohibentur aquis.

⁹ Earlier commentators on Strabo (7.3.17) suggested that his *Ourgoi* might be *geôrgoi* (farmers) or *Agathyrsoi*, referring back to Herodotus (4.18 and 4.100; 125). *Ourgoi* is retained as the textual reading by H.L. Jones (ed.), *The Geography of Strabo*, Loeb, III, London – New York, 1921, p. 221, n. 3. Other conjectures mentioned (*Ungri*; *Turci*) are anachronistic.

¹⁰ R. Ellis (ed.), *Ovid, Tristia II*, p. 153. The *Toretai* living north of the *Colchi* are mentioned by Strabo (11.2.11), Pliny (*NH* 6.17) and Steph. Byzant. (s.v. Τορέται).

¹¹ G. Luck (ed.), *Ovid, Tristia II*, p. 115; N. Gostar, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-315. This tribe is placed somewhere between the Caucasus and the Volga by Ptolemy. The identification *Materea-Materoi* was first made by K. Müllenhof, *Deutsche Altertumskunde* III, Berlin, 1892, p. 97.

¹² For the meaning of *turba* see Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, "mob", "band", "troop". Gostar thinks that the use of *turba* implies a tribe known to the poet, *op. cit.*, p. 314. It certainly implies a troublesome group, probably a war-band or nomad-horde; Ovid's most common adjective with the word is *barbara*.

¹³ For the meaning, see *μετανάστης, μετανάστιος*, "wandering", "changing homes", LSJ, s.v.

‘The Iazyges and the Iurgi, the wandering horde and the Getae’

or ‘The Iazyges and the Iurgi, nomads, and the Tyregetae
Are barely kept back by the waters of Danube between.’

The Tyregetai are met with not just in this passage of Strabo but also elsewhere in his *Geography* (2.5.12; 7.41), and, with the variant spelling *Tyragetae*, in Pliny’s *Natural History* (4.26) and in Ptolemy’s *Geography* (3.5.25). The ancient writers seem to think of them, without saying so outright, as the *River Tyras-Getai* (Strabo 7.1.1). This being so, it would seem that *Tyragetae* could not fit the last two feet of the line, since Tyras has a short first syllable where a long one is called for. So *Tyragetae* in Ovid’s line might seem to be ruled out, rather as was *Iazyges* (see above). However, the derivation of *Tyragetai* in the Greek sources may lie not in *Getai of the R. Tyras*. It is possible that we have here traces of the forward movement into the Lower Danube region of yet another people accompanying the Sarmatians across the Tanais into Scythia some time in the Hellenistic period. These are the *Thyssagetai*, mentioned by Herodotus as neighbours of the *Sauromatai* and *Iurkai* (4.22; 123). This people is mentioned by Pomponius Mela (*Chor.* 1.116) and by Pliny (*NH* 6.7) as living near the Tanais, *Thyssagetae*, but these writers incorporate much information derived from earlier sources (see *NH* 4.88), which was out of date by their time, the first century A.D. We know that at least some part of this tribe was operating near Olbia, in the area of the Ukraine and in the hinterland of the Dniepr/Dniestr estuary. They are mentioned in the honorary inscription (late 3rd cent. B.C.) of that city for Protogenes (IOSPE I² 31) in the form *Thyssamatai*. These are surely at least a section of Herodotus’ *Thyssagetai*. Once in the hinterland of the NW. coast of the Euxine, it would be natural for ancient writers to re-interpret them as *Tyra-getai* (‘Getai of the Dniestr’), which was by then the region they were associated with. As to Ovid’s hexameter line, just as with *Iazyges*, there may have been a tension between the unfamiliar name *Thyssagetae/Tyragetae* and the needs of the metre, which appeared better satisfied by a more familiar-looking phrase, *turba Getaeque* at the end of the line. It is interesting that another poet, Valerius Flaccus, provides an intermediate form, *Thysagetae/-getes* (*Arg.* 6.14; 135).

Turning to the ethnography of the Lower Danube area we have in Strabo’s passage (7.3.17) two Sarmatian peoples, *Iazyges* and the *Roxolanoi* beyond them, and two associated tribes, *Ourgoi* and *Tyregetai*, who may reasonably be supposed to have left the Asiatic steppelands E. of the Tanais (where they were in Herodotus’ time) in the wake of the Sarmatians, if we are right in identifying the *Ourgoi* with Herodotus’ *Iurkai* and the *Tyragetai* with his *Thyssagetai*¹⁴. This is a more complex picture of the movement westward than is usually presented, where *Sarmatai* displaced the Scythians¹⁵. There is mentioned in Strabo one other population-group, which we have not yet touched on. These are those ‘named *Basileioi*’, who appear in the very same sentence between *Iazyges* and *Ourgoi* (7.3.17). The equivalent name in Latin (from Greek *Basileidai*) appears as *Basilidis* (Pomp. Mela 2.11) and *Basilidai* (Pliny, *NH* 4.88). Going back to Herodotus, it appears that there were two groups of *Skythai Basileioi*, those who were the rulers of the Pontic steppes, ‘regarding all other Scythians as their slaves’ (4.20; 56-75), and those who had hived off from that group and had gone eastwards to range the steppes beyond the Tanais, to become neighbours of the *Sauromatai*, *Thyssagetai* and *Iurkai* (4.21-2). It is commonly supposed that much later the Royal Scythians from the Pontic steppes moved, under pressure from the

¹⁴ Little is said of these *Iurkai* and *Thyssagetai* beyond their location near the Don, along with the *Sauromatai* and *Boudinoi*, in modern studies: A.P. Medvedyev, ‘The Don Region in the Skythian period’, in *Skiphy i Sarmaty*, Moscow, 2000, p. 197 (in Russian).

¹⁵ T. Sulimirski, *The Sarmatians*, London, 1970, pp. 102-103; K.F. Smirnov, ‘On the beginning of the penetration into Scythia by the Sarmatians’, in *Problemy skiphskoi arkheologii*, Moscow, 1971 (in Russian); idem, *Sarmaty i utverzhenie ikh politicheskogo gospodstva v Skiphii*, Moscow, 1984; V. Stolba, ‘The demographic situation in the Crimea in the fifth to second centuries B.C. (on the evidence of the literary sources), *Skythai, Sarmatai, Slavyanye, RUS*’, *Petersburgskiy Arkheologicheskii Vestnik* 6, 1993, p. 56-59 (in Russian); D.A. Machinskii, ‘On the date of the first active appearance of the Sarmatians in the Dniepr area according to the evidence of the ancient written sources’, *Arkheologicheskii Sbornik Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* 13, 1971, p. 51 (in Russian); V.E. Maksimenko, ‘The population of the Don-North Donets interfluvium’, in *Skiphy i Sarmaty v VII-III vekakh do nashei ery*, Moscow, 2000, p. 181-185 (in Russian).

Sarmatians, into the Crimean steppe and formed a kingdom there with a capital at Neapolis. If this is what happened, then the *Basileioi*, recorded in the area of the Lower Danube, might be a segment of those, pushed south-westwards instead of south-east. But another alternative is that these *Basileioi*/*Basilidai* are the descendants of the group of *Skythai*, who had been left in Asia, or who had ‘crossed the Tanais river into Asia’ in the words of Herodotus, as ‘Breakaways from the *Basileioi*’ (4.22). It would seem too much of a coincidence that in Herodotus we have *Sauromatai*, *Iurkai*, *Thyssagetai* and *Basileiôn Apostantes* all east of the Tanais in steppe country, and that we see in Strabo, the *Iazyges Sarmatai*, *Ourgoi*, *Tyragetai*, *Basileioi* several centuries later – all in the western section of the Pontic steppe north of the Lower Danube. Our conclusion should be that it was not just the Sarmatian tribes proper who came westwards in the Hellenistic period, as is well known (*Iazyges*, *Roxolanoi*), but so also did other tribes who partially shared their nomadic way of life, in particular the *Thyssagetai*, *Iurkai* and *Basileiôn Apostantes* (*Skythai*)¹⁶. The steppes east of the Tanais would thus have become vacant for occupation by the eastern groups of Sarmatians, the *Siraci*, *Aorsi* and *Alani* (formerly *Massagetai*), who themselves were to enter the European steppes in the early centuries A.D. under pressure from the Huns (Strabo 11.2.1; 5.8; Tac., *Ann.* 12.15; 16; 19; *Hist.* 1.79; Amm. Marc., *RG* 22.8.31; 31.2; 6-25).

It is the argument here that Ovid’s problematic line (*Tristia* 2.191) presents us with two of these peoples known to Strabo, his contemporary, the *Iazyges* and *Iurgi* (*Ourgoi*) and maybe a third, *Tyragetai* (from *Thyssagetai*), and that the word *metanastai* (*metanastea*), known to be applied to the *Iazyges*¹⁷, was present as well in the original line or in the geographical information that inspired it (Strabo 7.3.17).

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¹⁶ Gostar’s article (note 3) argued similarly for “Sarmatian” tribes leaving the steppes east of Tanais and turning up on the Lower Danube, and hence in the *Tristia* of Ovid. However he thought to find the originals of these tribes in Pliny’s *Natural History* (6.7), and omitted the Greek geographer-historians, Herodotus and Strabo, and the Protogenes inscription, which allow the movements of four peoples to be traced westwards – probably starting in the early third century B.C.

¹⁷ For the *Iazyges Sarmatae* see A. Kh. Magomedov, “Ovid and the Sarmatians”, in *Antichnye Gosudarstva i Varvarskiy Mir* (*Mezhvuzovskiy Sbornik Statei*), Ordzhonikidze, 1981, pp. 105-109 (in Russian).