



Publié sur *La Vie des Classiques* (<https://96.ip-213-32-20.eu>)

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THE FIRST MENTION OF YULE: THE GOTHIC LITURGICAL CALENDAR IN THE CODEX ARGENTEUS

The first mention of “Yule” is to be found in a palimpsest manuscript, perhaps of the the 6th century AD. A number of Gothic bibles were reused for their parchment at the northern Italian monastery of Bobbio, and one of these contains a fragment of a Gothic calendar of saints’ days as the last but one leaf. Curiously the literature seems to refer to this as the Codex Ambrosianus A, without ever specifying the shelf-mark at the Ambrosian Library in Milan more precisely.^[1]

The calendar was first printed, with Latin translation, by the inevitable Angelo Mai, then prefect of the Ambrosian Library.^[2]

An old edition of the calendar may be found [at Archive.org here](#),^[3]

·kg· þize ana Gutþiudai managaize marwtre jah Friþareikei[kei]s.
 ·kd·
 ·ke·
 ·kq·
 ·kz·
 ·kh·
 ·kþ· gaminþi marwtre þize bi Werekan papan jah Batwin bilaif.
 aikklesjons fullaizos ana Gutþiudai gabrannidai.
 ·l·

Naubaimbair: fruma Jiuleis ·l·

·a·	·iq·
·b·	·iz·
·g· Kustanteinus þiudanis.	·ih·
·d·	·iþ· þizo·alþjono in[e] Bairaujai
·e·	·m· samana.
·q· Dauriþaius aipisks.	·k·
·z·	·ka·
·h·	·kb·
·þ·	·kg·
·i·	·kd·
·ia·	·ke·
·ib·	·kq·
·ig·	·kz·
·id·	·kh·
·ie· Filippaus apaustaulus in Jairupulai.	·kþ· Andriins apaustaulus. ·l·

Fragment of an ancient Gothic calendar from Codex Ambrosianus A

The actual meaning of these ancient words in a little known language is much debated even today, but for our purposes a quick-and-dirty version of Angelo Mai's Latin will help us get an idea of what we are looking at.

23. The sufferings of the martyrs and Fritharic among the Gothic people.

29. The commemoration of the martyrs who, with Werekan the presbyter and Batwin the minister of the Catholic church were burned among the Gothic people.

... beginning of July .30.

3. Of King Constantine.

6. Of Bishop Dorotheus.

15. Of Philip the Apostle of Hierapolis.

19. Of the venerable nuns of Beroea, 40 in all.

But Ebbinghaus rendered the second entry as perhaps, “The memory of the martyrs who were with Wereka the priest and Batwins—all that is left of a church full of people—burnt in Gothia”^[4].

Likewise “July” is not what subsequent readers have understood. The “Naubaimbar” or “November” above wasn’t even visible to Mai. Recently David Landau has restudied images of the palimpsest and has shown that the word is not there.

I’ve been trying to find out more details, but it is remarkably hard to find your way into the literature. I can’t find the shelfmarks for the manuscripts. The key article on the calendar appears to be E. A. Ebbinghaus, “The Gothic Calendar”, *General Linguistics* 15 (1975); but I can find no evidence of the journal.

David Landau seems to have done a lot of work on this, and especially on the word “jiuleis”. [His home page is here](#), and includes many PDFs of his articles. In “[The Source of the Gothic Month Name jiuleis and its Cognates](#)”, *Namenkundliche Informationen* 95-6 (2009), pp. 239-248, he argues that it cannot mean “Jul” or “Yule”, because no such pre-Christian feast existed. His source for this is given as Gustav Bilfinger, *Untersuchungen iiber die Zeitrechnung der alten Germanen. Vol.2: Das Germanische Julfest*, Stuttgart 1901. The value of this statement is not known to me. Instead he argues that it derives from “jubilee”.

It would be interesting to know more about this obscure text in an obscure language.

1. ^[1]D. Gary Miller, *The Oxford Gothic Grammar*, Oxford (2019), p.9. [Preview here](#).↵

2. ^[2]*Vlphilae partium ineditarum in Ambrosianis palimpsestis ab Angelo Maio*, 1819. [Online here, p.26 f.](#)↵

3. ^[3]W. Streitberg, *Die gotische Bibel*, 1908. The calendar is on p.472-4.↵

4. ^[4]Ernst A. Ebbinghaus, “The Second Entry of the Gothic Calendar”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 77 (1978), 183-7. [JSTOR](#)↵
