

### III. KRONIKA – CHRONICLE

## Conference Report from the 7<sup>th</sup> Wolin Medieval Meetings, 17-19 June 2024

JIŘÍ DYNDÁ

Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Slavonic Studies, Valentinská 91/1, 110-00 Prague, Czech Republic,  
dynda@slu.cas.cz  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7321-9359

The 2024 international scientific conference titled ‘The Baptism of Pomerania in the Context of the Christianization of the Baltic Countries in the Middle Ages’, constituted the seventh iteration of the Wolin Medieval Meetings. It marked a significant scholarly event, celebrating the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Otto of Bamberg’s Christianization missions in Pomerania. Organized by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in collaboration with the Municipality of Wolin and the Andrzej Kaube Regional Museum, the conference took place from June 17-19 in the historic towns of Wolin and Kamień Pomorski. This symposium brought together leading historians and archaeologists from across Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe, fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue on the profound cultural and religious transformations in the circum-Baltic region during the medieval period.

The initial section of the conference addressed the subject of ‘Baptism of Pomerania’ as a part of the development of the European civilization during the Middle Ages. First paper by Jerzy Strzelczyk (delivered by Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska) examined the broad power dynamics in Europe in the time of Christianization. It offered several insights into the social organization and external and internal pressures that influenced the Pomeranian society. Subsequently, Marian Rębkowski demonstrated how Christianity facilitated the emergence of new forms of social organization and, based on his own archaeological excavations in the region, centered his discussion on the Pomeranian emporia, elucidating their role as a distinctive stage in the development of Slavic settlements. In his paper, Leszek Ślupecki concentrated on the religious practices and beliefs of the pagan Slavs as a context for St. Otto’s mission. He reflected on the concept of a “mission as a window to old beliefs” and presented a comprehensive review of previous schol-

arly attempts to reconstruct Slavic pre-Christian beliefs. The section was then concluded by Stanisław Rosik who presented a summary of Otto's missions to Pomerania in 1124 and 1128 and then offered several general reflections on the religious, political and economic dimensions of these missions, with a particular emphasis on the historical impact and distinctive characteristic of St. Otto's mission. The subsequent discussion, however, centered predominantly on several scholarly tropes that were present in Strzelczyk's paper: thus, Daniel Sävborg asserted that the research questions posed by Strzelczyk were inherently Christian-centric and problematic, while Christian Lübke contended that concept of a "pagan wedge" (*gentiler Keil*, as coined by Jürgen Petersohn) is no longer a suitable metaphor for the pagan-Christian conflict in the region. The discussion then shifted to the concept of a transfer of violence, which was presented as a constant feature of any cultural contact.

The following Section II adopted a broader perspective in order to examine the Christianization missions across the Baltic region. This allowed for a comparative viewpoint on the medieval Christianization processes to be offered. The section highlighted the evolution of missionary theories and practices over time in various Baltic countries, with a particular focus on the ideological foundations that shaped these developments. In this way, Daniel Sävborg summarized St. Ansgar's mission to Sweden and concluded that Ansgar's role in the Christianization of Sweden was overestimated in the previous scholarship. Sävborg then jokingly presented a list of individuals more influential than Ansgar, including Bishop Gautbert. After that, Jakub Morawiec explored the impact of Christianity on the eleventh-century Old Norse skaldic tradition in Norway, demonstrating how a range of poetic devices resonate with the underlying principles of Christianization. In his captivating presentation, Tõnno Jonuks provided an archaeological overview of the Christianization of Estonia. Utilizing a dataset of 200 graves and their associated artifacts, including luxurious pendants and brooches, Jonuks endeavored to reinterpret the process of Christianization not only as a dissemination of religious beliefs but also as a form of conquest and colonization. He highlighted the concept of the Estonian "pre-Christian Christians", who, in the twelfth century, used Christian symbols and potentially adhered to some beliefs before the official Christianization of the country. Building upon that, Kendra Wilson conducted a review of the Christianization of Finland, emphasizing the significance of Henrik and Lalli legends and the relics cult. Her analysis of the stratification and classification criteria of folklore poetry was particularly noteworthy. In the final paper of the day, Sławomir Wadył presented an archaeological perspective on the conversion of Prussia and revisited the concept of a *longue durée* of Prussian paganism as a direct consequence of missionaries' inability to effectively engage with the Prussian population. The following discussion primarily addressed the problem of inhumation graves from the period preceding Christianization. It then turned to the question of whether the term 'polydoxy' is an appropriate designation for pagan religions, depicting them,

Christian-centrally again, as a mere primitive form of polytheism, essentially an idolatry and a nature worship.

The next day of the conference, the Section II continued, with papers presented therein endeavoring once more to contextualize the twelfth-century conversion of Pomerania and to summarize the current state of research on medieval missions in the Baltic region. In his paper, Andrzej Pleszczyński examined the actions of the first Polish rulers, which he argued were in breach of the ethical and religious standards of the time. He interpreted these actions as indicative of a syncretic pagan-Christian attitude on the part of the monarchs in question. Subsequently, Andrzej Buko presented an analysis of the archaeological evidence pertaining to the Christianization of Poland between the ninth and eleventh centuries. He emphasized the significant connections between the Podbłocie and Wiślica sites and the Great Moravian influence, as well as the Přemyslid links associated with the churches in Silesia and Gniezno. This led to the conclusion that there were two distinct zones of church building investments: one in Lesser Poland and the other in Greater Poland, along with Silesia. The section was concluded with a debate in which Leszek Słupecki, among other things, highlighted that the sexual activities of monarchs were primarily a political issue rather than a pagan religious claim. Building upon that, Przemysław Urbańczyk put forth a compelling argument that our understanding of paganism in Poland is limited, and therefore, any assertion that the reported sexual or unethical practices are indicative of paganism is unwarranted. His critical remarks elicited a vigorous response from both Andrzej Pleszczyński and Jacek Banaszkiewicz, who expressed strong disagreement with Urbańczyk's critical approach.

Section III of the conference focused on the missionary expeditions of St. Otto of Bamberg, conducted through an excursion in Kamień Pomorski that included a visit to the historic Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This section examined the historical significance of St. Otto's missions, emphasizing his role in the ecclesiastical and political realms of the Empire and the Church. Additionally, it explored the archaeological insights into his journeys and the early Christian centers in Western Pomerania, including Szczecin, Wolin, and Kamień. Consequently, Marcin Pauk offered his perspective on Otto as a Salian 'Reichsbischof,' emphasizing his role as a royal chaplain able to mediate between king and the papacy. Felix Biermann depicted Otto as a diplomatic missionary who treated apostates diplomatically by retelling several stories from the hagiographies of Otto and surveying the archaeological evidence from the region. Subsequently, Andrzej Janowski presented a survey of the archaeological excavations conducted at the Pyrzyce site in 2022 and 2023. Perhaps the most intriguing finding presented was that of an unusual structure, which bore resemblance to the assembly hall/temple discovered and reconstructed in Gross Raden, Mecklenburg region. The session was brought to a close with a presentation by Beata Wywrot-Wyszkowska, which provided a summary of the excavations conducted at Kłodkowo-Clodona, a site of

significant importance within the context of St. Otto's missionary activities. In the ensuing debate, Leszek Ślupecki brought into discussion the older hypothesis that Otto of Bamberg may be Gallus Anonymus. This was unanimously rejected by the participants, and the debate then focused on other questions regarding Otto's bishopric and his role as a bishop.

The final session of the conference, Section IV, addressed the pre-Christian religions in the Baltic region. The objective of this section was to provide a comprehensive overview of the diverse belief systems and cults in the Baltic area, which encompasses Scandinavia and the lands of the Balts and Slavs. This would facilitate an understanding of the subsequent Christianization processes and the cultural peculiarities of these maritime communities. Christian Lübke examined the challenges and responses of pagan societies in the face of the influx of Christianity. Asserting that there are "no news in research on pagan religion of the Polabian Slavs in at least 30 years", Lübke offered a comprehensive overview of Slavic-Christian interactions and conflicts during the Middle Ages, thereby establishing a coherent framework for understanding this historical period. Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson mapped the gradual incorporation of Christianity into Scandinavian society through an examination of funerary rites at four selected sites: Valsta, Birka, Sigtuna, and Gamla Uppsala. Hedenstierna-Jonson identified several differences and correspondences in the religious and political development of these sites. She concluded that the practice of cremation, which had been in use prior to the advent of Christianity, continued during the Christianization process. This was seen as a gradual social change involving numerous social, political, and power-related aspects. In his paper on the pagan religion of Finland and Karelia, Frog presented a comprehensive overview of the theoretical and methodological challenges inherent to the study of pre-Christian religious traditions. Frog presented several intriguing examples, including the Kalevala meter, the god Turupio-Tarapitha, and the tradition of laments, to illustrate how religions should be conceptualized as a multifaceted system comprising distinctive ontologies, cosmologies, mythologies, and practices. He posited that these elements are continuously syncretized in a process of cultural creolization. In the concluding portion of the session, Søren Michael Sindbæk explored the interconnection between Christian missionary activities and the evolution of trading sites, conceptualizing these as a sort of 'communicating vessels.' He concluded that the two hundred years of continuous Christianization of Pomerania was not an unsuccessful endeavor, but rather a conscious consequence of the interplay between the Christian mission and traders, ensuring the sustained availability of new slaves for the trade. In the final paper, Przemysław Urbańczyk revisited the ways in which Christianization can be understood. He proposed that "osmotic" Christianization is a slow and shallow process, and that more effective strategies are those that employ a top-down approach to conversion. In conclusion, Urbańczyk proposed that the most promising avenue for advancing scholarship on this topic is to integrate historical, archaeological, and anthropolo-

gical perspectives. Subsequently, the discussion shifted to the Christianization of earlier funeral practices. This led to a debate between Urbańczyk and Frog regarding the reliability of Frog's use of palaeolinguistics, which Urbańczyk deemed insufficient and reliant on nineteenth-century sources. Frog, however, presented a compelling argument that linguistic and metric contacts can be traced back to even earlier historical stages of development in the region.

The general concluding discussion then focused on several key themes of the papers presented at the conference, including the transformative role of Christianity in social organization, the reinterpretation of pagan beliefs and practices, and the nuanced dynamics between Christian and pagan communities in the region. Moreover, the conference was not merely a commemorative event, as one might anticipate for such an occasion. The sessions certainly provided a comprehensive and novel examination of the Christianization process, consistently contextualizing St. Otto's missions within broader regional dynamics and shedding new light on the interplay between paganism and emerging Christian influences. Furthermore, the conference richly examined the archaeological evidence that corroborates these historical processes, underscoring the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to comprehend the cultural creolization and syncretization that occurred during this period. In conclusion, the conference and its lively debates highlighted the evolving perspectives on historical narratives, challenging the conventional Christian-centric views and elucidating the multifaceted nature of religious transformation in the circum-Baltic area.