

CONSTRUCTING IDEAS OF BEING PAGAN IN EASTERN SAXONY IN RELATION TO REBELLION AND APOSTASY BEYOND THE ELBE (10TH – 11TH CENTURIES)¹

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Abstract: DRAGNEA Mihai. *Constructing Ideas of Being Pagan in Eastern Saxony in Relation to Rebellion and Apostasy Beyond the Elbe (10th – 11th Centuries)*. This article argues that the making of a pagan identity in eastern Saxony during the Ottonian era and even after it relied on biblical concepts such as rebellion and apostasy, which were connected in the minds of medieval Christian clerics. It shows that disobedience, considered a sin, and thus an evil thing, was their source, and not necessarily or exclusively pre-Christian beliefs. Paganism during the Early Middle Ages should not be associated with modern paganism, which originates in the nineteenth-century ethno-romanticism. This approach does not exclude the existence of archaic beliefs and rituals, but rather diminishes their importance in the definition of paganism. Medieval paganism should be understood rather as a literary construction, strongly influenced by theology. Furthermore, the connection between disobedience, rebellion, and apostasy functioned as a literary device for the purpose of justifying the punitive campaigns against a wide range of rebels, who rejected everything that involved ecclesiastical authority. Technically moral theology does not allow military conquest. However punitive actions were considered legitimate and were legally and morally justified, especially by the clerics, when a wide range of rebels committed crimes. In the primary sources these were described as defensive campaigns aiming to protect the Christians and to bring back the apostates to the Church. The promoters of this type of speech were the clergy, who used certain biblical passages to affirm their authority and emphasize ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Keywords: *Christianity, Paganism, Disobedience, Apostasy, Rebellion, Idolatry, Elbe Slavs, Polabian Slavs, Wends, Saxony, Saxon Marches*

Introduction

It is generally considered that apostasy is a full departure with no intent to return within the Church. Although it is often followed by rebellion, disobedience offers the voluntary chance of return. Both were considered sins and attracted more or less hostile reactions. In the Middle Ages, apostasy was seen as a permanent and deadly sin, lethal when it came to salvation, compared to disobedience, where the focus was on the severity of the departure. Apostasy was worse than heresy. It was a rejection of religion, in theory and practice. It was not only the *fides Christiana* that was rejected, but also the Church as an institution, and its representatives. Rebellion and apostasy were connected in the minds of medieval clerics. This is not surprising, considering that the Bible

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contains several passages where disobedience is equated with rebellion.² In the Old Testament it appears as insubordination which originates from the vice of pride, one the seven deadly sins.³ A disobedient person is someone who is unwilling to obey God. Disobedience was also equated with idolatry⁴ and various pagan practices such as divination.⁵

In Christian theology, the first apostates were the “fallen angels.” Through the sin of pride, they rejected God and established a rival satanic kingdom. Medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas equated heresy and the lack of faith with apostasy and labeled them as originating from human pride. A thirteenth-century canonist, Henry of Segusio (Hostiensis), distinguished three categories of apostasy. The first was called *apostasia a perfidia* and meant rejecting one faith and converting to another. The departure from the *fides Christiana* after receiving the holy grace was considered a greater evil than never having previously known faith. Those who did that were considered traitors and infamous and were able to lose their wealth and even life. The second category of apostasy is directly linked to disobedience (*apostasia inobedentiae*). This was a voluntary violation of one of the major commandments. The best examples are Adam and Eve who due to their “illegal” act had been expelled from Heaven and thus lost their chance for the eternal life. The third category of apostasy, *apostasia irregularitatis*, is related to priests, monks, and nuns who broke their sacred vows. They became renegades in society and were expelled from their homes and sent to jail (Goodich 1988, 61).

In the last few decades, scholars have focused on the theological arguments used by chroniclers to define pagan identity on the Southern Baltic coast (Goetz 2015, 103-118; Cusack 2011, 33-51; Ingrao – Szabo 2008; Kaljundi 2008, 113-127; Lübke 2008, 189-203; Jensen 2002, 173-193; Scior 2002). Such approaches questioned the validity of sources who mentioned the Slavic religious beliefs and rituals beyond the Elbe, which had to be discussed much more critically (Dragnea 2021a; Dragnea 2021b, 243-273; Rosik 2020; Hardt 2015, 263-268; Müller-Wille 1999). The political, social and cultural interaction between pagans and Christians on the Southern Baltic coast were also analyzed in different ways (Dragnea 2019a, 5-33; Hardt 2005, 35-49; Zaroff 2003, 5-36; Petersohn 2003, 99-139; Lübke 2002, 91-110; Althoff 1999, 267-292; Hoffmann 1998, 23-49).

The influence of theology (religious world-view) on concepts like disobedience, rebellion, and apostasy in Middle Ages, the strong connection between them, and the legitimacy of power, has been underappreciated. Clerical writings are extremely important sources in understanding the ideological component of the medieval warfare. A few scholars who worked on various research areas focused on the justification of military campaigns against the apostates and their forced conversion in relation to canon law and theology (Jensen 2016, 227-250; Becher 2013, 23-52; Hen 2006, 33-51; Warner 2006, 11-35; Kahl 1955, 161-193, 360-401). The influence of crusading ideas in the discourse of twelfth-century chroniclers, the way in which they were implemented in the Baltic Sea region, their social and cultural effects, and their adaptability to the regional context were also discussed (Dragnea 2024, 247-262; Dragnea 2021c, 41-61; Dragnea 2019b; Güttner Sporzynski 2014; Gładysz 2012; Fonnesberg-Schmidt 2007; Lotter 1989).

² While describing the nature of disobedience, Samuel used three key words: rebellion, insubordination, and rejection (1 Samuel 15:22-23).

³ Satan is described as an illegitimate king over “all the children of pride” (Job 41:34). Disobedience is linked to the widespread myth of Satan’s rebellion against God in the New Testament as well (Ephesians 2:2-3).

⁴ Disobedience was seen as idolatry because it replaced God’s sovereign will and authority. The veneration of carved idols was forbidden (Exodus 20:1-3; Isaiah 42:8). Insubordination was a kind regarded as a kind of iniquity and idolatry (1 Samuel 15:23).

⁵ Divination was a pagan practice that rooted in idolatry (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). While serving God, obedience is better than sacrifice, and the refusal to obey God’s commands due to pride is considered rebellion and it is equal to the practice of divination (1 Samuel 15:22-23).

The theological arguments used to justify the punitive campaigns against rebels have been neglected by scholars in the last decades. Although moral theology does not allow conquest, punitive actions were thought legitimate and legally and morally justified, especially by the ecclesiastical authorities, when a wide range of rebels committed crimes. These were considered defensive campaigns aiming to protect the Christians and to bring back the apostates into the Christian fold. This speech mostly belonged to the clergy, who used certain Biblical passages to affirm their authority and emphasize ecclesiastical hierarchy.

This article focuses on biblical concepts such as disobedience, rebellion, and apostasy in clerical writings. An analysis of these allowed to understand that the pagan identity was a literary construction made with the help of certain theological filters of what is usually called *interpretatio Christiana*. This does not exclude the existence of pre-Christian beliefs and rituals, whatever they were, but rather diminishes their importance in the definition of medieval paganism. After a careful analysis of the primary sources, it can be observed that the transition from disobedience to rebellion and then apostasy was influenced by the political context. First, disobedience was seen as rebellion and treated as an offensive action. Second, the rebellious acts were perceived as apostasy. Third, apostates were designated as idolaters and pagans and thus could be treated with severe methods.

Studies focusing on such kind of approaches will refresh research on pagan identity in the medieval Latin periphery.⁶ Idolatry and paganism are fluid concepts. Paganism in Early and High Middle Ages should not be associated with modern paganism. Medieval paganism was rather related to the rebel instinct, disobedience, immoral behaviour and lack of discipline. This study shows that in the process of making the pagan identity, it is important to consider what is behind the label because it reveals how its architects thought about pagans and what was their mentality. This is obvious since the medieval pagans did not call themselves in this way, nor did they leave written testimonies regarding their identity. The way in which the pagan identity was created can be observed in the primary sources, which provide enough data in this regard, but the interpretation must be done after a hypercritical reading.

The rebels questioned in this article are the Elbe Slavs, also known as the Polabian Slavs. They lived not only along the Elbe river as one might think, or on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea,⁷ but in a vast area between the Elbe and Saale in the west, the Baltic Sea in the north, the Ore Mountains in the south, and the Oder in the east. Both collective terms are not accurate, but the second one is even more problematic. Its use, with reference to all Slavs in this vast area, might create confusion. First, because the Polabians (*Polabi*) were a minor tribe living in a small territory around Ratzeburg, in what Helmold of Bosau called *terra Polaborum* (Helmold of Bosau I, 52, 56, pp. 196, 210). Since Polabia is clearly defined by the twelfth century chronicler, there are no logical reasons to extend its name and include other regions. Second, because the Slavs east of the river Elbe never developed a political or cultural unity and did not even create a political community with a specific name (Mühle 2023, 266). The Early Slavs in general were neither culturally nor genetically homogeneous.

⁶ After the Second World War, Hans-Dietrich Kahl and Reinhard Wenskus pointed out that the pagans beyond the Elbe between the 10th and 12th centuries were no pagans in the modern sense of the word, but rather apostates (Kahl 1955; Wenskus 1956). This approach was somewhat slowed down later, but it has aroused the interest of researchers in the last two decades (Janson 2009, 171-191; Janson 2010, 11-30).

⁷ “Baltic Slavs” is also used sometimes for all the Slavs in this vast area, but it should only refer to the northernmost tribes bordering the Baltic Sea.

The eleventh-century German chronicler Adam of Bremen, an important source for the history, geography and ethnology of Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea region,⁸ mentioned several Slavic tribes beyond the Elbe with various identities and political status. The most important were the Obotrites (*Obotriti*, also known as *Reregi*), who lived between the Bay of Wismar and Lake Schwerin in Mecklenburg, the Luticians (*Leutici*, known as *Wilzi* before the late tenth century), who stretched between the Warnow and the Oder, up to the Peene, the Rugians (*Rumi*, *Rani*) on the island of Rügen, the Pomeranians (*Pomeranos*) across the Oder, the Hevelli (also known as *Stoderani*), located on the Havel in Brandenburg, and the Sorbs (*Sorabi*) in Lusatia, between the Elbe and Neisse (Adam of Bremen II, 21-22; III, 20, 22; IV, 13, 18, pp. 76-75, 162-163, 165, 241, 244-245).

Another term widely used in modern studies written in English is Wends. This is also not accurate, because it suggests almost the same thing, namely the unity of the Slavs from a vast area, ignoring their cultural, social and political diversity. It comes from an exonym sporadically used in vernacular languages throughout the Middle Ages. In skaldic poetry they are labeled by using the collective name *vinder*. In some cases, the Scandinavian (Varangian) leaders were called *Vinða myrðir* (“murderer of Wends”) and *Vinðum hátr* (“danger to the Wends”) because they defeated the Slavs from the southern coast of the Baltic Sea.⁹ One of the most active Scandinavian monarchs in these campaigns was the Norwegian King Magnus the Good (d. 1047). In 1043, together with the Danes he brutally suppressed Slavic invasion of Jutland at the battle of Lyrskov Heath, located north of Hedeby. This happened with the miraculous support of his father, Olaf II Haraldsson (later St. Olaf), who appeared in a dream.¹⁰

Current knowledge about the identity of the Early Slavs is, to a large extent, a legacy of the nineteenth-century ethno-romanticism. The Slavic pre-Christian religion as it is perceived in the modern sense is often projected onto the very different medieval political realities by those seeking to hijack and distort the interpretation of history. Some faithful pioneers of this approach are still trying to prove the existence of “a common pan-Slavic heritage” (Dynda 2020, 127-150) of the Early Slavs through language and what can hardly be called mythology. The focus is only on Slavic paganism seen in a modern and fashionable way,¹¹ and not on what this concept meant in the Middle Ages and how the Slavs became pagans.

The history of the Early Slavs has been a subject of controversy and has generated heated debates. The Slavic expansion is often explained by the traditional models of migration of people, which implies to some extent the existence of a native culture. Such models completely reject the idea that in some cases, the Slavic identity was also formed through the transformation of existing populations, involving the spread of language, social identities, or economic and communication patterns.¹² The Slavs beyond the Elbe are very important when it comes to the identity of the Early

⁸ A relevant volume about the origins and context in which Adam wrote his *Gesta* as well as various interpretations of his accounts is Bartusik – Biskup – Morawiec, 2022.

⁹ For the Viking raids on the Baltic coast inhabited by Slavs, see Morawiec 2006, 707-717.

¹⁰ His cult reached up to the Byzantine Empire, in Constantinople. For the Varangians in Constantinople and Olaf’s cult in Greek and Latin Churches, see Dragnea 2020, 145-167.

¹¹ On May 20-21, 2024, the Institute of Slavonic Studies in Prague (Czech Academy of Sciences) organized the international conference „Understanding Slavic Paganism”. This brought together specialists from various disciplines, who discussed the „primordial monotheism of the Slavs”, visual representations of the Slavic deities in written sources (sic), the „Slavic pantheon”, and other trending topics.

¹² The traditional model of migration is questioned in other parts of Europe. For example, Florin Curta has numerous studies on the ethnicity of the Early Slavs in the Lower Danube region, where they are mentioned for the first time in the 6th century sources. In one of his recent studies, he pointed out that the spread of the Slavic language in this area was not the result of a migration (Curta 2024, 1-16).

Slavs because they were described as the last bearers of old cultural features (Leciejewicz 1989, 215). Therefore, any approach that would question the importance of indigenous features in their “paganism”, is seen as an attack against the native culture of the Early Slavs and often attracts aggressive reactions by the defenders of the traditional models of migration.

From the archaeological perspective it seems that at least for the moment, the Early Slavic settlement in north-eastern Germany, which appeared no earlier than the last decades of the seventh century, could be explained as “a complex of migrations”, rather than the Slavicization of the existing (Germanic) populations. There are no indications of continuity between Germanic and Slavic settlements (hiatus) and patterns of the two groups are different.¹³ Archaeology is indeed useful to explain the Slavic expansion and the development of the Slavic settlement in the region. However, it cannot clarify particular issues about the formation of religious identity beyond the Elbe, like those addressed in this study.

The Redarian rebellion seen as apostasy in the time of Henry I

A major confrontation between the Saxons and the Slavs took place in the first half of the tenth century. The first Ottonian king, Henry I (d. 936) subdued the Slavs. This brought peace beyond the Elbe only for a short time, because the Redarians rebelled against the king. Although this was a political rebellion most likely caused by the tribute, the tenth-century Saxon chronicler Widukind of Corvey said only that the Redarians “moved away from faith.”¹⁴ Their rebel status in the beginning of the chapter is emphasized only through apostasy.

The Redarian rebellion had innocent victims, which could not be tolerated. The Redarians crossed the Elbe and seized Walsleben, a Saxon border stronghold, killing its entire Christian population. These actions aroused rebellious feelings among the Slavs. All the Slavic groups – probably also those obedient or at least not hostile who had accepted the payment of tribute – were inspired by this attack and rebelled again.¹⁵ In 929, at Lenzen (*Lunkini*) Henry I (d. 936) crushed a large multi-ethnic coalition led by the apostate Redarians.¹⁶ After its defeat, the Obotrites, Wilzi, Hevelli, Daleminzi, Bohemians and Redarians, became tributaries of Henry (Widukind of Corvey I, 36, p. 51).

What should be noticed in this narrative is the direct connection between apostasy and rebellion. It is important that what would be later labeled as rebellion was started by the only ones described as apostates. What the audience had to understand is that the rebellion was started not because of political reasons, but from the desire to depart from the faith, that is, by committing a sin. Therefore, the Saxon punitive actions could be legitimate, because the rebellion had victims, Christians from Walsleben. Widukind is not the only one who connected the rebellion of the Slavs with their apostasy. Their status (rebels and apostates) after the battle of Lenzen was clearly emphasized by Adam of Bremen as well, who said that “the Bohemians, the Sorbs, and other Slavs, promised to Henry the payment of the tribute, and to God that they would become Christians” (Adam of Bremen I, 56, p. 56).

¹³ For the results of the dendrological analysis in this matter and literature on the two models proposed for the Slavic expansion (see Biermann 2020, 77-90).

¹⁴ “Redarii defecerunt a fide” (Widukind of Corvey I, 36, 51).

¹⁵ “Quo facto omnes barbarae nationes erectae iterum rebellare ausae sunt” (Widukind of Corvey I, 36, 52).

¹⁶ This episode is part of Henry’s military actions in the east which also included Prague and should be placed in the context of organizing the defense against the Hungarian invasions. Some Slavic tribes like the Hevellians were allies of the Bohemians, who had permitted access through their territory for the Magyars when they raided into Germany (Bachrach 2014, 28).

The Slavs as rebels after the foundation of bishoprics by Otto I in their territory

It is generally assumed that Henry's son, King Otto I (d. 973, emperor from 962), conquered the whole territory up to Oder and converted most of the Slavs. In 948 he founded the dioceses of Brandenburg (east of the Elbe) and Havelberg (at the confluence of the Elbe and Havel). In 968, three other dioceses were founded. Merseburg (on the Saale), Zeitz (later Naumburg, on the White Elster), and Meissen (on the Elbe). All these five dioceses were suffragans of Magdeburg, founded in 968. A sixth diocese in the Slavic territory was Oldenburg in Wagria, a suffragan of Hamburg-Bremen. It is not known how many of the Slavs were converted, or how those who accepted baptism practiced Christianity. The members of the Obotrite dynasty Nakon, and other ruling families, were Christian.¹⁷ As long as they were obedient to the Church and the secular rulers, usually they were not described by the chroniclers as pagans or idolaters.¹⁸

In 1003, King Henry II (d. 1024) managed to make the Luticians his friends after he offered them gifts and certain promises. In a letter written to Henry around 1008 or 1009, when he was already emperor, Bruno of Querfurt (d. 1009) was outraged by his alliance with what he called the *pagani Liutici* against the Christian Poles. Bruno rebuked Henry, complaining that he would not compel them to enter Christianity (*compellere intrare*), "as the Gospel commands."¹⁹ In this case, H. D. Kahl's idea remains valid. Bruno saw the Luticians as apostates; a distinct group outside the church, to which they had to be returned by any means. It is, as Stanisław Rosik argued, a narrower version of the Augustinian principle of *compellere intrare*, in this case applied only to apostates, and not to other categories like pagans, Jews, or schismatic Christians.²⁰ Furthermore Bruno's attitude could be explained by the fact that at that time, the two dioceses – Havelberg and Brandenburg – still did not have titular bishops in the territory, and the Emperor, the supreme authority to wage wars in defense of the Church, did nothing to fix this.

Following the Ottonian conquest, the Slavic princes like the Obotrite Nakonids accepted Christianity and became tributaries to the Saxon margraves. The relationship between them was based on verbal "pledges" (*sponsiones*) made by the Slavic princes. These implied fidelity and obedience to both *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, which were seen as indivisible parts of the Christian empire. For Adam of Bremen, a true conversion also implied obedience to archbishops and acceptance of Church decisions (Kłoczowski 1998, 32). As long as they paid tribute and tithes, and maintained a Saxon ecclesiastical organization, the Slavs were accepted as part of what can be called the Saxon *Imperium Christianum*. This power relation made the Saxons consider themselves the legitimate rulers of the Slavic territory.²¹

¹⁷ Gazzoli 2022, 401. Some members of the Hevellian ruling family were Christian as well. They tolerated pre-Christian practices among their subjects. However, to some extent, this ensured continuity of Christianity in some areas beyond the Elbe (e.g. Brandenburg) (Mühle 2023, 280).

¹⁸ The same applies to the Danish king Sweyn Forkbeard (d. 1014), who was depicted as a pagan rebel by Adam of Bremen. Although he was a Christian, he rebelled against his father, Harald Bluetooth – who introduced Christianity to Denmark – and sought to maintain the independence of the Danish Church from the Archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen (Adam of Bremen II, 27, 87).

¹⁹ *Epistola Brunonis ad Henricum regem*, 104. It has been emphasized that Henry marched against the Poles also because of disobedience of their duke, Bolesław I (d. 1025), who intervened in neighboring Bohemia and refused to pay homage (Körntgen 2024, 171).

²⁰ For the polemics on the religious status of the Luticians in Bruno's letter, see Rosik 2020, 82-83.

²¹ One relevant example can be found at Adam of Bremen, who considered the Sorbian territory to be part of Saxony. "Eam partem Saxoniae, quae trans Albiam supra incolitur a Sorabis" (Adam of Bremen I, 1, 4). In the first half of the twelfth century, Saxons also considered themselves the owners of the Slavic territory

The Slavs did not always implement these agreements. Often, their disobedience resulted in armed rebellions. In the autumn of 955, on the river Raxa, Otto I's armies crushed a rebellion led by the Obotrites. Widukind clearly described this event and even mentioned the requirements of the rebels. Before the Battle of Raxa, a delegation (*legatio barbarorum*) made up of representatives of the tribes from the Obotrite association (*socii*) said that their rulers were willing to pay the tribute to the king according to the "custom" (i.e. following the previous agreements),²² on the condition of maintaining a dominant position at the regional level. This is how the rebels wanted peace with Otto. If the agreement did not hold, the Slavs would have to "fight for their freedom" (Widukind of Corvey III, 53, 132).

Widukind said nothing about the religious status of the Obotrite prince, Stoinef, his subjects, or allies. This should not raise major concerns for scholars, since after 968 the ecclesiastical network beyond the Elbe expanded. It was not important how many of the Slavs were Christians, but that their territory was part of *Imperium Christianum*. When they described their religious identity, the chroniclers took into account their relationship with the missionaries, their level of submission to the archdioceses in charge of conversion (Hamburg-Bremen and Magdeburg), and the obedience to the clerical representatives. The best example is Adam of Bremen, for whom the most important criterion for evaluating the Slavs east of the Elbe was religious affiliation (Grzybowski 2021, 1, 16; Scior 2002, 102).

The Slavic rebellion of 983 seen as mass apostasy

One of the most reliable sources for the 983 rebellion is Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg (d. 1018). The rebellion was mentioned in other late sources as well, but their information relies mostly on four independent accounts from Bruno, Thietmar, the *Annals of Hildesheim*, and Adam of Bremen and does not provide any different details.²³ In the *Annals of Hildesheim*, compiled in the eleventh century at St. Michael's Benedictine abbey, with additional information in the twelfth century, it was mentioned that the Slavs became rebels against the Saxons in 983.²⁴

According to Thietmar, following the rebellion, which had several episodes,²⁵ the Slavs expelled the Saxons from their territory. This led to mass apostasy and almost the entire Saxon marcher infrastructure and ecclesiastical network collapsed. It was a catastrophe impossible to fix in a short time. The episcopal sees beyond the Elbe were abandoned and territorial jurisdiction was lost. Titular bishops (*episcopi titulares*) were appointed in exile. Brandenburg and Havelberg were

by the inheritance of the Billung lands. This was divided between Saxon nobles. For the legal inheritance of the Billung territory through marriage (see Dragnea 2021a, 45; Dragnea 2019c, 127).

²² Sometimes, such agreements included, in addition to the payment of tribute, often very high, the obligation to build and maintain fortifications beyond the Elbe, with the aim of defending the eastern border. This is what most likely happened to the Slavs (*Lusiki*) in the northern parts of Lusatia in 963, when they were defeated by the Margrave Gero (d. 965), who compelled them to accept the heaviest burdens of servitude. "Ad ultimam servitatem coegit" (Widukind of Corvey III, 67, 141-142). Neither conversion nor apostasy were mentioned in this account.

²³ *Annales Altahenses* (c. 1075), *Gesta archiepiscoporum Magdeburgensium* (c. 1142), *Annales Magdeburgenses* (c. 1176), *Chronica Slavorum* (after 1171), the *Annalista Saxo* (1148-1152), the *Chronicon sancti Michaelis Luneburgensis* (c. 1229), *Chronicon principum Saxoniae* (c. 1280).

²⁴ "Sclavi Saxonibus rebelles effecti sunt." *Annales Hildesheimenses*, year 983, p. 24.

²⁵ The 983 rebellion has been interpreted in different ways. However, the interpretation as apostasy is marginal and does not offer convincing theological arguments in the context of the relations between the Slavs and the Saxons (Gazzoli 2022, 406-408; Büker 2008, 8-60; Lübke 1998, 109-21; Weinrich 1988, 77-87; Saherwalu and Escher 1983; Fritze 1984, 9-55; Herrmann 1983, 9-17; Brüske 1983; Fritze 1958, 1-39).

abandoned until the twelfth century. Bishops of Havelberg were appointed as *episcopi in partibus infidelium* in exile, and had no real power beyond the Elbe. For a while, Havelberg and Oldenburg had no bishops at all, not even titular ones (*sede vacante*) (Lees 1998, 55-56).

The diocese of Merseburg, dissolved in 981, was refounded as a prince-bishopric in 1004 by Emperor Henry II (Thietmar of Merseburg V, 39, 44, pp. 265, 271). The dissolution meant that Merseburg was merged with the Archdiocese of Magdeburg. This made the Merseburg bishop Giseler (d. 1004) Archbishop of Magdeburg. The abolition of the diocese was seen as a sinful damage to the Church. The patron of the Diocese of Merseburg was the martyr saint Lawrence, an important figure in Ottonian proselytism, whose image was connected to the struggle against pagans and apostates (Hehl 2024, 260). During the series of Slavic rebellion, an abbey dedicated to him in Anhalt was devastated. From this perspective, the rebellion was interpreted by Thietmar as divine punishment for this sacrilege (Körntgen 2024, 178).

To the south, the see of Zeitz was relocated in Naumburg – further away from the border – in 1028, with Hildeward (d. 1032) as bishop (Brüske 1983, 36). In 984, following the invasion of Meissen by the Bohemians, Bishop Volkold of Meissen was expelled by Prince Boleslav II (d. 999), and took back his see only some years later (Thietmar of Merseburg IV, 6, pp. 137-138). The bishopric of Oldenburg was restored in 1013/1014 with the help of the Obotrite prince Mstislav, but the episcopal see was in Mecklenburg, where the prince resided (Petersohn 2003, 110). Following another rebellion in 1066, with a strong anticlerical character, the dioceses of Starigrad (Oldenburg) and the newly founded Mecklenburg were abandoned until 1149. The episcopal see of Oldenburg was moved to Liubice (Lübeck) in the early 1160s.²⁶

The main protagonists of the rebellion series were the Luticians. Their Christian identity before 983 was confirmed by Wipo (d. c. 1050), a chaplain to Emperor Conrad II (d. 1039) and confessor to his son Emperor Henry III (d. 1056). According to the eleventh-century chronicler, “some time ago” (most likely before 983), the Luticians were “half-Christians” (*semichristiani*). Because of their “evil apostasy”, they became “altogether pagans”.²⁷ Anyway, following the apostasy, the Luticians were not completely pagan,²⁸ but rather they all became “pagans” (*omnino* can also be translated as “altogether”). If Wipo had in mind a diversification of apostasy, then he would have at least briefly defined the differences between the categories of apostates, from a canonical point of view. He only said that the campaign of Conrad II beyond the Elbe in 1035 was meant to avenge one of the “superstitions” of the Luticians. As usually, this came as a result of a rebellion with an anti-clerical character and meant the desecration of Christian symbols (in this case, the vandalism of a wooden effigy of Jesus Christ).²⁹ What mattered was how many rebels became apostates, and not the size of their apostasy. When they all became apostates, any hope of restoring the ecclesiastical infrastructure was through a military campaign.

Taking in consideration the existence of an ecclesiastical network beyond the Elbe before 983, *semichristiani* could emphasize formal acceptance of Christianity (Baptism, Sacraments, and

²⁶ A volume dedicated entirely to the medieval town of Lübeck is Jahnke 2019. For the re-establishment of Oldenburg under Bishop Vicelin (see Hoffmann 1976, 115-142).

²⁷ “Deinde collectis copiis de Saxonia super eos, qui Liutici vocantur quique olim semichristiani, nunc per apostaticam nequitiam omnino sunt pagani, imperator venit ibique conflictum implacabilem mirabiliter diremit” (Wipo 33, 52).

²⁸ “Omnino sunt pagani” was translated as “fully pagans”, a result of an apostasy which meant the return to the old beliefs. It was interpreted as a clear evidence of a “total repaganisation”, namely an “apostasy” as “transition to paganism” (Rosik 2020, 83).

²⁹ The effigy had been captured by the pagans, who mocked it in a blasphemous way – spat on it and slapped it – and gouged out its eyes and cut off its hands and feet. The pagans were “mutilated” by the emperor in the same way, as a revenge (Wipo 33, 53).

maybe tithes), but with illegitimate practices and rituals. Even if the Slavs did not fully embrace Christianity, at least they did not organize armed rebellions resulting in the killing of clerics and desecration of Christian symbols. What mattered was that Church authority was not fully abolished. The term *semichristiani* has been used since Late Antiquity in polemical theology. It was useful in the practice of proclaiming the truth with reference to specific errors such as heresy and superstition. Faustus of Mileve, a fourth-century Manichaean bishop, said that Augustine of Hippo and all the “Orthodox” were *semichristiani* because they did not reject the “Jewish superstition”. In response, Augustine labelled Faustus and the Manichaeans as *pseudochristiani* due to their heresy.³⁰ The term has not disappeared in the Middle Ages, nor has it significantly changed its meaning. In the thirteenth century, it was linked to apostasy, heresy, and blasphemous behaviour and referred to a sort of illegitimate Christians. The citizens of Venice and many Italian towns were called *semi-Christiani* by the English chronicler Matthew of Paris (d. 1259) because in 1250 they fell into apostasy. They rejected ecclesiastical authority and venerated what can be called “unauthorized saints,” that is outside of canonical regulations (Matthew Paris 2012, 170).

The Slavic anticlericalism

The anticlericalism of the 983 rebellions is confirmed by Bruno of Querfurt, a distant relative of Thietmar and a contemporary of the events. Bruno, who was consecrated as missionary archbishop in 1004, stated that the instigators of the rebellion were the Luticians. They had a single aim, namely to free themselves not from the Saxon domination, as it has been misinterpreted by many scholars over time, but from the “yoke of Christianity.”³¹ Significant damage occurred in the western part of the Northern March. The ecclesiastical infrastructure and the existing defense network connected to it were the rebel targets. Killing of clergy and the exhumation of a bishop’s body and the public desecration of his vestments are also recorded in connection to the rebellion.³²

It is unlikely that the Slavic anticlerical manifestation started from theological reasons. There is no information that would confirm this. Instead, there are enough mentions about the Slavs’ dissatisfaction with the payment of the heavy tribute. Research conducted in this direction shows that under the early Ottonians, the Slavs were exploited through tribute usually paid in silver coins.³³ This could have been received by the Saxon margraves from the Slavic rulers – as a sign of obedience to the Emperor – who collected it from their subjects. Besides the tribute, there was a tax that the Slavs had to pay to the bishoprics. The tithes (*decimae*) were most probably collected by churchmen and used for the fulfilment of the church activity and the needs of the bishops. The Slavs saw the tribute and tithe not as natural obligations, but rather as means of submission to a single (Christian) entity. This can be explained by the fact that according to Christian views, obedience to the secular rulers was inseparable from that to the ecclesiastical authorities. This was one of the main reasons why a peaceful coexistence with the Saxon clergy on one side, and Christian indigenous rulers on the other, was extremely difficult and sometimes impossible. When the Obotrites and

³⁰ For the polemic between the two on the legitimacy of Christianity, see Perrin 2018, 389-392.

³¹ “Ea tempestate effrena gens Lutici pagani iugum christianitatis deponunt et cum quo errore adhuc laborant, post deos alienos erecto collo currunt” (S. Adalberti Pragensis episcopi et martyris 10, 49).

³² The second bishop of Brandenburg (Brenna), probably a Hevellian, was Dodilo (Dragnea 2021b, 95).

³³ An exception was in the southern marches, where the local elites were replaced to integrate the Slavic territory in the Ottonian system (Halsted 2018, 17-18). The Slavs living there did not have the strength to rebel against the Empire and thus they were not labeled as apostates, idolaters, or pagans (Rosik 2013, 61).

the Wagrians rebelled against their Christian prince in 1018,³⁴ inspired by the Lutician rebellious attitude, they were also labeled by Thietmar as rebels against Christ.³⁵ The rebellion against the secular and ecclesiastical powers acquired the dimension of apostasy.³⁶

The anticlerical attitude of the Slavs is also explained by the fact that clerics participated in the punitive Saxon campaigns meant to crush their rebellions. One example was somewhere in late summer of 983, when several Saxon nobles stopped the Slavic advance at Balsamgau.³⁷ Most of the Slavs were killed. The hastily assembled Saxon troops were led by the Archbishop of Magdeburg himself, Giselher (d. 1004) and the exiled bishop Hildeward of Zeitz (Thietmar of Merseburg III, 19, pp. 121-122; Brüske 1983, 36). What could be the reaction of the Slavs in such a situation? How would they perceive the clerical involvement in warfare? They must have been confused. Such situations generalized the anticlerical attitude and sparked hostile reactions against the clerics. The Slavs were not able to distinguish between peaceful and vengeful clerics and between the greed of the Saxon margraves for the tribute and land ownership, and the right of the Church to receive tithes, and the clerical possession of their land.

Saxon rebels against the Ottonians and the Church

Disobedience to a higher authority was often blamed by the medieval writers. First because it was considered a sin and second because it was contagious. Sometimes, the Slavic rebellions were presented as minor acts in a wider context of disobedience involving people with a higher status and closer to the center of power. Regardless of their identity and status, rebels were often united in doing evil things, which could justify the ruler's revenge.³⁸ Widukind shows that the Obotrite rebellion suppressed in 955 was not an event isolated from the internal conflict within the Ottonian state. The Obotrite rebellion was instigated by the Saxon nobles from the Billung family, Wichmann the Younger (d. 967) and his younger brother, Egbert the One-Eyed (d. 994) (Widukind of Corvey III, 52, p. 131). Both were well-known rebels against Otto and often associated with evil deeds.³⁹ The whole scene was part of a conspiracy against Otto I, publicly denounced as an act of treason⁴⁰ and avenged at Raxa.

Thietmar did not consider that the source of the 983 rebellion was the desire to return to the pre-Christian beliefs, but rather the immorality of the Saxon nobles. The Slavs started the rebellion because they were "irritated" by the excessive pride of the margrave of the Northern March, Dietrich of Haldensleben (Thietmar of Merseburg III, 17, p. 118). In the medieval world,

³⁴ According to Adam of Bremen, 60 priests were killed in Oldenburg by the Wagrians, including the Cathedral Provost Oddar, a relative of the later Danish king, Sweyn II (Adam of Bremen II, 43, 104).

³⁵ "Christo seniorique proprio rebelles" (Thietmar of Merseburg VIII, 5, 499).

³⁶ Rosik correctly pointed out that at Thietmar, the Slavs (Luticians in this case) were a sort of *gens apostata* (Rosik 2020, 187).

³⁷ Thietmar's father, Siegfried of Walbeck, and other Saxon nobles took part in the campaign.

³⁸ "Quod scelus imperator ulcisci gestiens, victoria iam de Ungariis patrata, regiones barbarorum hostiliter intravit". Widukind of Corvey III, 53, p. 132.

³⁹ "Wichmannus vero et Eberhtus scelerum conscii in Galliam profecti..." (Widukind of Corvey III, 55, 135). "Wichmannum [...] numquam aliquid inique consilio aut actu facturum" (Widukind of Corvey III, 60, 136).

⁴⁰ "Consultum de Saxonibus, qui cum Sclavis conspiraverant, iudicatum est Wichmannum et Eberhtum pro hostibus publicis habere oportere" (Widukind of Corvey III, 53, 132). Widukind has many records on Wichmann's rebellious acts (III, 50-70). Based on the association of events beyond the Elbe it has been deduced that in 963, being an outlaw, Wichmann found shelter among the Redarians, one of the most rebellious tribes (Mühle 2023, 232).

the vice of pride, known in Latin as *superbia*, was the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.⁴¹ It was seen as a distinct sign of serving idols,⁴² together with *avaritia* (avarice or greed for riches). In those times the term “idolatry” was used in a broader sense. It also included Christian nobles or high-rank clergy who sometimes supported the emperor in the conflict with the papacy. Disobedience to the pope and denial of his prerogatives as the supreme head of *Christianitas* was labeled as idolatry (Dragnea 2021a, 58). At the same time pride, also interpreted as arrogance, was considered the root of all evil. Therefore, obedience to ecclesiastical authorities was a moral act that legitimized true faith.

Thietmar was not confused when it comes to the religious identity of the Slavs. He made it very clear that they have already accepted Christianity and served the German kings and emperors with tribute. Only in certain circumstances did they “unanimously” decide to take up arms against the Saxons.⁴³ In the Northern March, the source of their rebellion was a sin very popular in those times among Christians. The rebellion did not start from an irresistible desire for independence. Readers had to know that the rebellion was not an innocent and legitimate reaction for freedom. Its source was the arrogance of the margrave, an evil thing, criticized by clerics over the centuries.

The tributary status of the Slavic rulers also included the offering of military assistance to the Ottonians in their external or internal conflicts. If this did not happen, the tributaries could be punished for disobedience. When he wanted to punish the Obotrite prince Mstislav in 1018, who was a Christian (previously he allowed the Diocese of Oldenburg to be re-established), Henry II did not send the Saxon armies, but asked his Lutician allies to do so (Rosik 2020, 183).

Usually, a rebel against the emperor, regardless of his status or origin, was labeled by the faithful clergy a rebel against the Church as well. The Saxon Duke Bernard II (d. 1059) is one of the best examples. He was described by Adam of Bremen as a sinner lacking humility and piety and criticized because around 1019 he dared to rebel against Henry II.⁴⁴ Bernard’s hostility to the Archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen was also emphasized by the chronicler. If Archbishop Unwan (d. 1029) made huge efforts to preserve the wealth of the church and was faithful to the Ottonian monarchs, Bernard took up arms against both the emperor and the Church.⁴⁵ Driven by the sin of pride, Bernard not only raised all of Saxony against the emperor, but also attacked the Saxon churches, especially those in Hamburg-Bremen.⁴⁶

Bernard had a similar profile to that of the margrave of the Northern March, Dietrich of Haldensleben. Because of his pride and avarice, he oppressed the Slavs so hard that they rebelled again around 1018. Pride before God, whose churches were attacked and servants killed, offended the cosmic order. His sins were commensurate with the consequences they caused. It was his

⁴¹ A volume about the seven deadly sins in medieval communities, focusing on Christian ethics and institutional imperatives within the Church is Newhauser 2007.

⁴² For key-terms like idolatry in connection to disobedience in Early Middle Ages, and their interpretation, see Dragnea 2021b, 58-60.

⁴³ “Gentes quae suscepta christianitate regibus et inperatoribus tributarie serviebant [...] presumpcione unanimi arma commoverant” (Thietmar of Merseburg III, 17, 118).

⁴⁴ “Dux Bernardus, Heinrico imperatori ausus rebellare” (Adam of Bremen II, 48, 108).

⁴⁵ “Nunquam discordia cessavit inter geminas domos, scilicet archiepiscopi et ducis, illis impugnantibus regem et ecclesiam, istis pro salute ecclesiae ac fidelitate regum certantibus” (Adam of Bremen II, 48, 108).

⁴⁶ “Deinde per superbiam beneficiorum immemor totam secum ad rebellandum caesari movit Saxoniam. Novissime surgens in Christum ecclesias huius patriae non dubitavit impugnare, precipue vero nostram, quae et dicior eo tempore ceteris et longinquior videbatur a manu imperatoris” (Adam of Bremen II, 48, 109).

pride, avarice, and cruelty that annihilated the Christian faith in Mecklenburg area.⁴⁷ The Slavs had no choice but to throw off the yoke of slavery and take up arms to defend their freedom.⁴⁸

Conclusion

A closer examination of the primary sources shows that throughout history, the association between disobedience and rebellion on the one hand and apostasy, idolatry, and paganism on the other, was a rhetorical device to justify the punitive campaigns against the Slavs. Although the authors emphasized Slavs' apostasy, this does not necessarily mean that they have returned to certain pre-Christian beliefs and rituals. They could have been rebels against the Church, who rejected everything that involved ecclesiastical authority (a sort of illegitimate Christians). Of course this identity had to be defined somehow, and the easiest way to do it was by connection to what was known at that time about idolatry and paganism in a practical sense from ancient Greco-Roman writings and from the Bible.

The rhetorical device used by the authors is not necessarily a diversion to manipulate the audience. It describes well the medieval realities beyond the Elbe. It shows how the authors saw the Slavs and how they created their religious identity. Certain labels applied to the Slavs which had been banned by theology since late Antiquity had less to do with any features of what can hardly be called Slavic mythology, and more to disobedience and rebellion as well as the Saxon desire to legitimate superiority and justify conquests. Disobedience, an evil thing that led to rebellion, came from sin. When sinners were important people, their rebellious actions were condemned to arouse shame and guilt, feelings useful for repentance, which was necessary for salvation.

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⁴⁷ The 1018 and 1066 rebellions were presented in a similar way to that of 983. An analysis of the rebellions in relation to disobedience to secular and ecclesiastical authorities, anticlericalism, apostasy, and idolatry in a broad sense can be found in Dragnea 2021b, 48-62. The deeds made by the rebels in 1018 and 1066 were briefly discussed in Mühle 2020, 276-277 and more details can be found in Rosik 2020, 183-187; 240-247.

⁴⁸ “Tunc vero et Sclavi a christianis iudicibus plus iusto compressi tandem iugo servitutis libertatem suam armis defendere coacti sunt.” *Adam of Bremen* II, 42, p. 102.

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