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Mihai Dragnea, *Christian Identity Formation Across the Elbe in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (Christianity and Conversion in Scandinavia and the Baltic Region, c. 800–1600, 1), New York–Bern–Berlin–Brussels–Vienna–Oxford–Warsaw: Peter Lang, 2021. ISBN 978-1-4331-8451-2

Mihai Dragnea, a young scholar in Baltic medieval history, with a wide range of activities and interests, has lately presented a thin yet compact monograph on the impact of Christianization on the Slavic populations settled alongside the river Elbe.

His monograph is divided into 8 chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction the author makes it clear that he attempts to answer many questions of importance to the understanding of medieval history (and human societies in general). M. Dragnea makes the audience aware of intermingling different sorts of social differentiation including ethnicity, culture and religion, based especially on the Ottonian evidence about Slavs with many overlaps in other periods of time and regions. He convincingly documents the numerous stereotypes perpetuated after the Christianization of the Slavs/Wends. Yet in many cases it is not fully clear to what extent the author distinguishes between the imagination of the Ottonian scholars and clerics (his main source of information) and reality. As in this case “reality” is a very problematic construct accompanied by lack of sources of information from the Slavic milieu, I would expect at least a more critical approach to the Ottonian chroniclers and hagiographers. The subsequent chapters are also introductory in nature, briefly summarising the history of Wends (11–24) and their

Christianization between the tenth and twelfth centuries in a wide context of European missionary politics and Christianization (25–44), shortly discussing many other topics like the Church and the vernacular and the political structures in the tenth-century Saxony.

Chapter 4 offers interesting insights into “Wendish idolatry” where M. Dragnea analyses a series of uprisings among Polabian Slavs since the late tenth century and its contemporary discourse. I would like to stress especially his analysis of Thietmar’s description of the 1018 uprising which convincingly demonstrates Thietmar’s careful handling of his knowledge of Roman goddesses and their feasts and use of this knowledge to present the uprising in dark colors (the February uprising related to the celebration of chthonic cults contrasted with the feast of the Purification of Virgin Mary). Of value is also the identification of the stress put in the imperial chronicles on the (lack of) subjection of the Slavs to the empire and their alleged disobedience to the emperor and to the lordship of his Saxon deputies. This was probably the main source of dissatisfaction of the Saxon chroniclers because in reality, “pagan” Slavs might have stayed loyal to the local Christian princely family – the alleged “paganism” of Slavs thus might have been either a factor in the conflict between the Slavic subjects and their Saxon lords, or part of the discourse that described the conflict over power and resources in the religious language (paganism vs. Christianity). The author goes back to the issue in chapter 7 where he mentions the importance of Saxon bishops in contemporary discourse. Here, it would be interesting to compare it with other descriptions of social conflicts, in a broader European context, with emphasis placed on Saxon uprisings against the Salian kings from the 1070s. Unfortunately, the sensitive and vital issue of chronicle discourse where M. Dragnea discovered many interesting details, is not discussed profoundly enough and the interesting analysis is lost in a wealth of information. The short chapter 5, dedicated to “Divination and Fortune-Tellers in Christianity” is an overview of the issue. Chapter 6 provides insight into the social dynamics of the *Liutici*. Here, the author discusses the famous description of their church, referred to as anti-church with its territorial organization and ecclesiastical hierarchy. In chapter 7, M. Dragnea deliberates on the issue of “pagan church” again and voices his severe doubts as he is convinced that only family deities and non-Christian customs are at play as anywhere in Europe, without referring to organized pagan church, or a developed, systematic pagan religion. Of importance is also his observation that while Thietmar condemned the idolatry of the *Liutici*, he did not criticize them for attacks on Christians. He concluded that the main issue in the struggles between Saxony (and the East Frankish

kingdom/the Holy Roman empire) on one side, and Polabian Slavs on the other, was not an act of disobedience to faith but to the legitimate authority, perceived as idolatry and paganism. According to Dragnea, the conflict was primarily “a question of power, justified with theological arguments”. The author is certain that the faith of the *Liutici* was a problem due to its detachment from the ecclesiastical system, not because of denial of God (which posed a problem to the Church but not necessarily to the Saxon lords). According to the Saxon chronicler who also spoke for the Saxon high clergy, the existence of an ecclesiastical organization (and tithes) was the key to Christian identity. However, it caused troubles because of the acceptance of a new faith by Wends. Therefore, the authors of the chronicles might have described the insurgent Wends as they did with the rebellious Saxon lords.

On the one hand, M. Dragnea’s slim monograph is full of interesting ideas related to the perception of the Church, authority, and power in the high Middle Ages. However, it deserves more extensive and systematic scrutiny. On the other hand, the structure of the book is not user-friendly. The numerous and redundant digressions take the readers off the course of the most important conclusions while many of the interesting insights are not supported by sufficient evidence.

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