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Nazar Rizun

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2878-2652>

Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine in Lviv

CHRISTIANIZATION OF POMERANIA AND SCANDINAVIA (9TH-12TH CENTURIES): BETWEEN CONSENSUS AND COERCION

The Pomeranian Slavs and the Scandinavians had accepted Christianity mostly simultaneously, specifically during the period of the 10th-12th centuries, which makes a comparative study of the conversion of the regions relevant and valuable. The goal of the article is the analysis of the Christianization of Pomerania and Scandinavia, particularly of the role of assemblies in the promotion of the new faith. The paper uses a comparative methodology, primarily the historical-typological method. The study of the written sources, namely chronicles, hagiography, and sagas, allows establishing the existence of unstable political structures in the region and significant influence of independent from political centers elites. They relied upon the ideological foundation of pagan belief systems and even after the acceptance of Christianity retained power in a number of places across both regions. Indeed, this was one of the main reasons to reject conversion. However, the majority of the Scandinavians rejected paganism by the middle of the 11th century. And the Christianization of the Pomeranian Slavs had occurred at the beginning of the 12th century as a result of the conquest by the neighbors. Until then local elites retained their preferred religion, social organization, and way of governance. Obviously, rulers and elites played a key role in the promotion of Christianity. However, assemblies formed an effective network for its propagation. Their importance for the power systems of the region was a tool in the hands of the highest strata of society, who in most cases in a peaceful manner were able to convince local inhabitants to change their faith. Gatherings played the role of important public space for regular discussions. The participants of such events debated whether to accept Christianity. Assemblies represented one possible way to promote the new faith, at them missionaries spoke to people. Gatherings provided a relatively controlled and safe environment in hostile territories. The conversion involved two main approaches: debates – seeking consensus and the use of force – various levels of coercion.

Keywords: Christianization, Slavs, Scandinavians, missionaries, rulers, elites, assemblies.

Introduction. The northeastern region of medieval Europe was the last one to accept Christianity. Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark) as well as the lands inhabited by the eastern and the western Slavs (Rus', Poland, and Bohemia) have converted during the 10th-12th centuries. It is one of the reasons that Wojtek Jezierski called this region "the final frontier"¹. Therefore, it is reasonable to compare various processes that shaped Slavic and Scandinavian societies during this period.

Numerous researchers have analyzed the conversion of northeastern Europe². Therefore, the article investigates only a specific aspect of the process, in particular, focusing on the role of assemblies

¹ Jezierski, W., Hermanson, L. (eds.) (2016). Introduction. *Imagined Communities on the Baltic Sea Rim, from the Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 11.

² Boroń, P. (2009). Nieudane próby chrystianizacji plemion słowiańskich. *Kościół w monarchiach Przemysłodów i Piastów. Materiały z konferencji naukowej (Gniezno, 21-24 września 2006 roku)*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 23-35; Piętkowski, P. (2017). Chrystianizacja i budowa struktur kościelnych na Pomorzu Zachodnim do przełomu XII i XIII wieku. Zarys problemu. *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski*, 32 (2), 31-42; Skre, D. (1998). Missionary Activity in Early Medieval Norway. Strategy, Organization and the Course of Events. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 23 (1), 1-19; Sanmark, A. (2004). *Power and Conversion – a Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia. Occasional Papers in Archaeology*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 34; Bagge, S. (2005). Christianization and state formation in early medieval Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 30 (2), 107-134.

in the Christianization of the region. The introduction of the new religion led to many tensions within Slavic and Scandinavian societies. Gatherings created a more or less ordered environment for the resolution of disputes and conflicts. Piotr Boroń analyzed the role of assemblies in the conversion of Pomerania and emphasized limited amount of information in the sources¹. Alexandra Sanmark mentioned the importance of gatherings for the Christianization of Scandinavia². For this reason, comparative study of Pomeranian and Scandinavian assemblies is especially valuable.

Sources for the paper are chronicles, hagiography, and sagas. The first group includes: “Thietmari Merseburgiensis episcopi chronicon” (1013-1018)³, the “Gesta Danorum” (1208-1219)⁴ of Saxo Grammaticus, the “Chronica Slavorum” (1163-1172)⁵ of Helmold of Bosau. To the second group belong: “Herbordi vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis”, “Monachi Prieflingensis vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis” (approximately 1140-1150)⁶, and the “Vitae Ansgari” (875)⁷ of Rimbart. And the third group includes: “Heimskringla” (c. 1230) of Snorri Sturluson (the “Olav Hákonar saga góða”, the “Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar”, and the “Ólafs saga ins helga”, specifically).

The purpose of the article. The study deals with Christianization processes in early medieval Pomerania and Scandinavia, which started in the region approximately in the middle of the 9th century and lasted until the early 12th century, and focuses on the role of assemblies in the promotion of the new faith.

Historical context. At the end of the 10th century Rus', Poland, and Bohemia accepted Christianity, while the Pomeranian Slavs remained pagan⁸. The first missions to their lands happened in the beginning of the 11th century and were unsuccessful⁹. Then, during the periods of 1116-1119 and 1121-1122 Duke Bolesław III (1107-1138) conquered Pomerania. In 1124 he invited Otto, Bishop of Bamberg, in order to convert this region¹⁰. The missionary relied on a military help from the ruler, but also participated in assemblies¹¹. The first attempts to convert Scandinavia started in the early 9th century¹². However, in most parts of the region public acceptance of Christianity happened only at the end of the 10th century¹³. The evidence shows that elites led the conversion of Scandinavia. Therefore, it has been a top-down process¹⁴. Invaders did not impose the new religion, local elites accepted it¹⁵.

Hakon Haraldsson (c. 935-961) was the first konung (ruler), who unsuccessfully promoted Christianity in Norway¹⁶. Olav Tryggvason made another attempt during the 990s¹⁷. Finally, under the rule of Olav Haraldsson (1015-1030), later named the Saint, Norway accepted Christianity¹⁸. Specifically, notes

¹ Boroń, P. (2004). Wiece słowiańskie a decyzja o przyjęciu chrześcijaństwa – możliwości poznawcze. *Pohanstvo a krest'anstvo. Zbornik z konferencie usporiadanej v Banskej Bystrici*. Bratislava: Chronos, 102.

² Sanmark, A. (2004). *Power and Conversion – a Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia. Occasional Papers in Archaeology*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 34; Bagge, S. (2005). Christianization and state formation in early medieval Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 30 (2), 84-85, 88-89, 90.

³ Berend, N. (ed.) (2007). *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 17.

⁴ Saxo Grammaticus (2015). *Gesta Danorum. The History of the Danes*. Jensen, K.-F. (ed.), Fisher, P. (transl.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, I, XXXIV.

⁵ Berend, N. (ed.) *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 49.

⁶ Ibid, 48.

⁷ Sawyer, B., Sawyer, P. (1993). *Medieval Scandinavia. From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500. The Nordic Series*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 17, 3.

⁸ Boroń, P. (2009). Nieudane próby chrystianizacji plemion słowiańskich. *Kościół w monarchiach Przemysławów i Piastów. Materiały z konferencji naukowej (Gniezno, 21-24 września 2006 roku)*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 23.

⁹ Berend, N. (ed.) (2007). *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 294.

¹⁰ Berend, N, Urbańczyk P., Wiszewski P. (eds.) (2013). *Central Europe in the High Middle Ages: Bohemia, Hungary and Poland, c. 900-1300*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 241.

¹¹ Ibid, 242.

¹² Sawyer, B., Sawyer, P. (1993). *Medieval Scandinavia. From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500. The Nordic Series*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 17, 100.

¹³ Ibid, 101.

¹⁴ Sanmark, A. (2004). *Power and Conversion – a Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia. Occasional Papers in Archaeology*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 83.

¹⁵ Berend, N. (ed.) *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 47.

¹⁶ Bagge, S. (2005). Christianization and state formation in early medieval Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 30 (2), 109.

¹⁷ Ibid, 108, 116, 122.

¹⁸ Ibid, 108, 116.

A. Sanmark, “in the early 1020s Olav Haraldsson ‘officially’ introduced the observance of Christianity at the thing of Moster”¹. The first mission to Sweden was led by Ansgar c. 829². In Denmark, states A. Sanmark, “Christianity did not however gain a strong hold [...] until the baptism of Harald Gormsson (Bluetooth) around the year 960”³. Finally, in Sweden the first Christian ruler was Olof Skotkonung⁴.

According to Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “the contact phase spans from the first encounter that people from the North had with Christianity [...] to the time at which Christianity became the official religion”⁵. He states that “in Denmark this phase came to an end around approximately 960 [...] in Norway c. 1020, and in Sweden around 1090”⁶. The cultural negotiation phase “extends from the official introduction of Christianity to the foundation of the three archbishoprics of the North”⁷ (in 1152/1153 in Norway and in 1164 in Sweden)⁸. In such a way, “new Christian monarchies were established throughout northern and central Europe”⁹. This is why the chronological framework of the article covers the period of the 10th-12th centuries. The mission of Ansgar is the only exception, inasmuch as it happened at the beginning of the 9th century.

In Pomerania local elites did not accept Christianity, and in Scandinavia rulers and their supporters promoted the new religion. The Pomeranian chiefs and princes did not want to reject paganism. Their conversion took place due to the initiative of foreign powers that sent missionaries and military. In some sense, foreigners also baptized Scandinavia. Hakon the Good came from England and brought priests as well as other Christians with him. Afterwards, Norwegian rulers sent missionaries to the Faroe Islands, the Island of Man, and Iceland. The inhabitants of Scandinavia did not want to change their religion. Local elites attempted to convert the region, but tried to avoid an open conflict with people and chiefs. As a result, Norway and Sweden accepted Christianity, while Pomerania remained pagan until the loss of independence in the first half of the 12th century.

Statement of the main material. In his chronicle Thietmar of Merseburg describes an assembly among the Lutici tribes: “All these, who are called the Lutici, have no single ruler. Their important matters they solve at gatherings during discussion and, in order to solve some matter, everyone must agree on it. If somebody is against an already made decision, he is beaten with sticks, and if someone openly opposes the gathering, he loses all his property, which is plundered or burnt, or pays a fine according to social standing”¹⁰. The majority of the people reached the decision and suppressed the opposition. Karol Modzelewski explains that “realization of political or judicial decisions of assembly sometimes had an opposition, which was necessary to defeat”¹¹. The “Gesta Danorum” depicts an assembly of the Rani tribe and the visit of bishop Absalon. At the gathering, unlike during the meeting of the Lutici, their ruler Tetislav made the decision¹². All the same, it is possible that various assemblies could be significantly distinct. In some situations, a ruler played an important role and other times was not even present.

According to “Herbordi vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis”, to an assembly in the Pomeranian city of Pyrzyce (1124)¹³ “from the entire province gathered up to four thousand people”¹⁴. The source also says:

¹ Sanmark, A. (2004). *Power and Conversion – a Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia. Occasional Papers in Archaeology*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 83.

² Ibid, 77.

³ Ibid, 81.

⁴ Sawyer, B., Sawyer, P. (1993). *Medieval Scandinavia. From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500. The Nordic Series*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 17, 60.

⁵ Garipzanov, I., Bonté, R. (eds.) (2014). *Conversion and Identity in the Viking Age. Medieval Identities: Socio-Cultural Spaces*. Turnhout: Brepols, 5, 227.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 231.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Berend, N. (ed.) *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 47.

¹⁰ “Hiis [autem] omnibus, qui communiter Liutici vocantur, dominus specialiter non presidet ullus. Unanimi consilio ad placitum suimet necessaria discucientes, in rebus efficiendis omnes concordant. Si quis vero ex comprovincialibus in placito hiis contradicit, fustibus verberatur et, si forinsecus palam resistit, aut omnia incendio et continua depredatione perdit aut in eorum presentia pro qualitate sua pecuniae persolvit quantitatem debitae” (Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi chronicon. (1889). *MGH S. Rer. Germ. in us. schol.* Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 54, 148).

¹¹ Modzelewski, K. (2005). Wiece i banicja. Z porównawczych studiów nad ustrojem plemiennym Germanów i Słowian, *Nauka*, 4, 48.

¹² Saxo Grammaticus (2015). *Gesta Danorum. The History of the Danes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2, 1230-1231.

¹³ Boroń, P. (2000). Zgromadzenie ludowe w Pyrzycach – relikw plemienny czy wiec grodowo-miejski. *Wieki stare i nowe*, 1, 30.

¹⁴ “illic hominum ad 4000 ex omni provincia confluisse” (Herbordi vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis. (1856). *MGH*. Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 14, 781).

“During the process of detailed and long discussion on their meeting they [local inhabitants. – *N. R.*] reached very good and helpful decision, and then affirmed it during broader meeting and with this decision came to people, that gathered as if for a celebration”¹. The elite made the decision and only afterwards the people accepted it. Most of them did not participate in the process in any meaningful way. However, their role was important, inasmuch as they legitimized the decision of the elite.

According to P. Boroń, “in the case of decision to accept the new religion in Rus’ significant role of elite is also visible. [...] the decision-making role of elite was significant only in some cases, in the other the role of crowd could be more important than simply to accept”². Helmold of Bosau describes a meeting in the city of Lubeck (1156): “A lot of people gathered from the land to the market in Lubeck, and bishop spoke to the people”³. As a result of the assembly the people accepted Christianity.

“*Monachi Prieflingensis vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis*” depicts gathering in another Pomeranian city such as Szczecin: “When they had a choice, pagans gathered a lot of people from villages and towns, carefully discussed, which one of two options to choose and, after making many speeches for the one and the other, finally [...] promised that they will fulfill all the orders”⁴. This information confirms that broad masses of people participated in assemblies. However, it is not obvious, whose voice was decisive, when a decision was reached. Inasmuch as Christianization concerned all people, the best way to legitimize it was to call for an assembly.

The information about the role of assemblies in the life of the Slavs and in their Christianization is quite scarce. In order to study this topic further it is necessary to analyze additional evidence. The “*Vitae Ansgari*” of Rimbert describes an unsuccessful attempt to convert Sweden at the beginning of the 9th century. According to the source: “On one occasion he [Ansgar. – *N. R.*] himself was sitting in an assembly of people, a stage having been arranged for a council on an open plain. In the course of a general discussion some praised their own gods, by whose favour they had secured great prosperity, while others heaped reproaches upon him because he alone, by accepting a worthless creed, had separated himself from them all”⁵. The passage shows that at assemblies people discussed the new faith. The text also says: “He [Herigar, local chieftain. – *N. R.*] brought forward a proposal in an assembly and advised that they should try more earnestly to ascertain who was God”⁶. The members of the elite promoted Christianity during the assembly. Another episode confirms this assumption: “As soon as his chiefs were assembled the king began to discuss the mission on which our father had come”⁷. This reminds of the information from *Herbordi vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis*. Members of the elite reached the decision and only then presented it to the people.

On the other hand, the *Vitae Ansgari* says: “On this account I [ruler. – *N. R.*] have not the power, nor do I dare, to approve the objects of your mission before [...] I can enquire the will of the people in regard to this matter”⁸. The passage shows that rulers did not always have the final word at assemblies. Occasionally,

¹ “*Verum ubi eam sententiam tam bonam tamque salubrem diligenti retractatione probaverant, primo quidem apud se in conclavi, deinde vero cum legatis et Paulicio ad plenum vigorem laxiori consilio firmaverant, cum eisdem ad populum egressi, qui sicut ad festum confluerat*” (Ibid, 781-782).

² Boroń, P. (1999). “*Universa populi multido*”. Problem uczestnictwa w słowiańskich wiecach plemiennych. *Średniowiecze Polskie i Powszechne*, 1, 17.

³ “*convenit universus populus terrae ad forum Lubicense, et veniens dominus episcopus habuit verbum exhortationis ad plebem*” (Helmoldi presbyteri Bozoviensis cronica Slavorum. (1937). *MGH S. Rer. Germ. in us. schol. separatim editi*. Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 32, 160-161).

⁴ “*Data itaque sibi optione, pagani de rure ac de villis plebeam innumeram convocantes, quid e duobus eligerent, diligenter inquirunt; multisque sermonibus ultra citraque habitis, tandem se omnia imperata facturos [...] promiserunt*” (Monachi Prieflingensis vita Ottonis episcopi Babenbergensis. (1856). *MGH. Scriptorum*. Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 14, 12, 893).

⁵ “*Quadam namque vice ipse in quodam sedebat placito, scena in campo ad colloquium parata. Ubi cum inter alia colloquutionum verba illi deos suos laudassent, quorum favore prospera sibi multa provenirent, et illi, quod solus a consortio omnium inani fide aberraret, verbis multiplicibus improperebant*” (Vitae Anskarii et Rimberti. (1884). *MGH S. Rer. Germ. in us. schol.* Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 55, 40. Slightly modified translation of Charles Robinson (Robinson, Ch. H. (transl.) (1921). *Anskar, the apostle of the North. 801-865. Translated from the Vita Anskarii by Bishop Rimbert, his fellow missionary and successor*. London: The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 62).

⁶ “*Quo facto, ipse in conventu populi publico eandem rem proposuit et, ut, quis deus esset*” (Vitae Anskarii, 43; *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 69).

⁷ “*Nam rex, congregatis primo principibus suis, de hac patris nostri legatione cum eis tractare coepit*” (Vitae Anskarii, 57; *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 92).

⁸ “*Quapropter et ego hanc legationem vestram confirmare nec possum nec audeo, priusquam [...] et populi quoque super hoc voluntatem interrogem*” (Vitae Anskarii, 57; *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 91).

ordinary people had some influence on the decision-making process. Birgit and Peter Sawyer share such an interpretation: “A king could not make such a decision arbitrarily; the consent, if not wholehearted approval, of the magnates and their man was needed, and the consent must have been formally expressed in assemblies that were themselves associated with pre-Christian rituals”¹.

Another passage confirms such an assumption: “Let your messenger attend with me the next assembly and I will speak to the people on your behalf. And if they approve your desire and the gods consent, that which you have asked shall be successfully carried out. [...] It is our custom that the control of public business of every kind should rest with the whole people and not with the king”². The source only presents general description of the events. It is possible that people were simply pressured to reach certain decision.

According to the “*Vitae Ansgari*”: “When the day for the assembly which was held in the town of Birka drew near, in accordance with their national custom the king caused a proclamation to be made to the people by the voice of a herald”³. And then: “The people were unanimously inclined to accept his proposal and at the same time to tell him that, while their action was entirely agreeable to him, he could not give his full consent until, in another assembly, which was to be held in another part of his kingdom, he could announce this resolution to the people who lived in that district”⁴. The “*Vitae Ansgari*” does not say why people accepted this proposal, and the approval of only one assembly was not enough.

A. Sanmark argues that “the decision to accept Christianity [in Sweden. – *N. R.*] seems to have been collective, and taken more or less voluntarily”⁵. Perhaps, in most cases the initiative to accept the new faith came from a ruler and only sometimes from people. Additionally, existed regional (within entire northeastern Europe) as well as local (within one country) differences. The “*Vitae Ansgari*” says: “When the time for the assembly came and the king had caused to be proclaimed by the voice of a herald the object for which the bishop [*Ansgar. – N. R.*] had come, and all that had been said and done at the previous assembly. [...] and so they adopted the resolution passed by the former assembly and declared that they too would give their entire and complete assent”⁶. The “*Vita Ansgari*” illustrates that the process of Christianization was complex and required approval of chieftains (*goðar*) and bonds (*bændr*) in as many locations as possible.

In “*Heimskringla*” Snorri Sturluson describes countless local and regional Norwegian assemblies. Most of them had nothing to do with the conversion. They approved new *konung*⁷, helped him to fight against competitors⁸, decided matters of war and peace⁹, resolved all kinds of disputes¹⁰. However, there are three sagas, which describe the Christianization of Norway and the role of assemblies in the process. These are the “*Hákonar saga góða*”, the “*Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*”, and the “*Ólafs saga ins helga*”. They illuminate the role of rulers in the conversion and occasionally present the reaction of local inhabitants.

Sagas idealize Christianization and portray Norwegian *konungs* in a positive light. This is how *Hákonar saga góða* depicts Christian virtues of the ruler: “King Hákon was a confirmed Christian when he arrived in Norway. [...] he adopted the course of practicing Christianity secretly, keeping Sundays and fasting on Fridays”¹¹. The source presents the conversion from a positive point of view, pays little attention

¹ Sawyer, B., Sawyer, P. (1993). *Medieval Scandinavia. From Conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500. The Nordic Series*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 17, 101.

² “*Sit missus tuus in placito mecum proximo, et ego pro te loquar populo. Et, si quidem diis fautoribus illi tuae consenserint voluntati, quod quaesisti prosperabitur. [...]. Sic quippe apud eos moris est, ut quodcumque negotium publicum magis in populi unanimitate quam in regia constet potestate*” (*Vitae Anskarii*, 57; *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 91).

³ “*Deinde cum dies placiti advenisset, quod in praedicto vico Byrca habitum est, sicut ipsorum est consuetudo, praeconis voce rex, quae esset eorum legatio, intimari fecit populo*” (*Vitae Anskarii*, 58; *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 93).

⁴ “*Mandans populi unanimitatem ad suam voluntatem conversam; sibi que hoc per omnia placere, necdum tamen se plenam licentiam ei concedere posse, donec in alio placito, quod erat in altera parte regni sui futurum, id ipsum populis ibi positus nuntiare*” (*Vitae Anskarii*, 58-59; *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 94).

⁵ Sanmark, A. (2004). *Power and Conversion – a Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia. Occasional Papers in Archaeology*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 85.

⁶ “*Cum ecce placiti tempus advenit, et rex praeconis voce legationem domni episcopi atque omnia pariter quae in priori placito dicta et acta fuerant intimari fecit. [...] ut prioris placiti consensum cuncti laudarent et se quoque his assentire velle modis omnibus faterentur*” (*Vitae Anskarii*, 59; *Anskar, the apostle of the North*, 94).

⁷ Sturluson, S. (2002). *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*. Austin: Austin University Press, 96-97, 193, 273.

⁸ *Ibid*, 791.

⁹ *Ibid*, 458.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 453.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 106.

to motivation of pagans. At the same time, the attitude of Snorri to them is not entirely negative. For example, it is evident from the favorable depiction of one of the pagan leaders jarl Sigurd¹.

Hakon Haraldsson made the first attempt to convert Norway. At the beginning of his rule konung gained support of Trondheim elites. In such a way he acquired enough power to promote Christianity. Afterwards, Hakon established several churches and called for a thing in Trondheim. However, local bonds did not want to reach any decision on their own and pointed him to the Frostathing. They planned to gather landowners from the whole region (from all districts)². In that case they would have more people on their side to oppose the konung. The attempts to spread Christianity had originated in the center (Trondheim) and then impacted the periphery. In those lands existed strong opposition of landowners.

During the Frostathing Hakon spoke to the bonds, but was met with an open hostility. One of them, Asbjorn of Methalhus, gave the speech against his proposition. Also, the bonds warned Hakon not to apply force, or they may choose a new konung. Both jarls and ordinary people held the same position³. This information demonstrates that bonds played a significant role during the debates about the conversion.

The “Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar” mentions thing meetings at which Christianization was discussed. Once, Olav Tryggvason called for an assembly in Rogaland. He asked bonds, who came fully armed, to accept the new faith. Inasmuch as they were not able to win the debate, everyone converted during the thing⁴. Perhaps, the bonds simply did not have enough military strength to reject konung’s proposal.

At the Gulathing (997) Olav asked local chiefs to accept Christianity and only then spoke to bonds. One of them, Olmoth the Old, rejected the conversion⁵. This information shows that in many cases an assembly was an elite institution. Then Olav called for a thing of bonds from Sogn, Raums Dale, and other places. Also, a lot of people came with the konung from the Rogaland and the Horthaland. As usually, Olav proposed the bonds to accept Christianity and threatened to fight against those who would reject his proposal. He understood that this time the majority of the people sided with him. And the bonds realized that they will not be able to defeat the konung’s forces and accepted Christianity⁶.

Then Olav went to Hålogaland and tried to convert this place as well. However, during the trip he realized that local bonds would fight against him. Olav made the decision to return to Vik⁷. Debates, which happened at assemblies, required at least some level of common ground. If it lacked, promotion of Christianity was met with an open hostility. The “Olav Hákonar saga góða” and the “Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar” describe unsuccessful attempts to convert Norway, and the “Ólafs saga ins helga” depicts how the country accepted Christianity. All the texts present roughly the same amount of violence, mostly used by konungs.

In the summer, Olav gathered an army, went to Trondheim and called for the Frostathing. Local bonds decided to reject peaceful negotiations and came to the assembly armed. Olav proposed that they accept Christianity, but they threatened to attack. The konung changed his tone and backed down⁸. Olav realized that he does not have enough people to force the bonds to accept Christianity. After the Frostathing the landowners, that opposed the konung, returned to their homes. During a new thing he finally forced them to accept Christianity. Then Olav went to Trondheim, where he met an armed opposition of local chieftains and bonds. The konung proposed them to accept Christianity, but they rejected the idea⁹.

The next spring (999) Olav gathered ships and army and went to the Hålogaland. Every time, when the expedition landed on a shore, he called for a thing and asked local inhabitants to accept Christianity¹⁰. All the information from the “Olav Hákonar saga góða” and the “Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar” demonstrates that the Christianization of Norway required a lot of effort and that not all elites, as well as landowners, supported the change of the faith.

Similarly, according to A. Sanmark: “in Denmark, the aristocracy appears to have agreed to accept Christianity at the meetings of the things. The rune stone at Jelling may however reflect a decision taken

¹ Sturluson, S. (2002). *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*. Austin: Austin University Press, 107.

² Ibid, 106.

³ Ibid, 108-109.

⁴ Ibid, 196-197.

⁵ Ibid, 197-198.

⁶ Ibid, 199.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 207

⁹ Ibid, 208.

¹⁰ Ibid, 212.

at a major thing meeting between King Harald Gormsen and the aristocracy. Harald may also have traveled around at the different things in order to introduce Christianity as the ‘official’ religion of the whole kingdom”¹.

The “Ólafs saga ins helga” describes the conversion of Norway. The source says that Olav Haraldsson went by the seashore and in every province (*fylki*) gathered a thing. At each assembly, the konung promoted Christianity and prohibited pagan customs, still practiced by some jarls. However, many inhabitants of mountains and valleys remained pagan, and so Olav forced them to accept the new faith².

Later he went to the Naumu Dale Fylki and gathered bonds for a thing. They accepted him as a ruler and agreed to follow Christian laws. Those who remained unconvinced were threatened. Olav left the province only after all the inhabitants accepted Christianity (1020)³. He also visited the Hålogaland, gathered many things and converted a lot of people⁴. In the spring, Olav went to the Vang, called bonds for a meeting and asked them to accept Christianity, however they wished to fight. Both sides started to prepare for a battle, but it did not start, because people accepted the new faith⁵. Accordingly, rulers used assemblies to pressure bonds to agree to their will.

Also, Olav went to the Valdres, where pagans still existed. He seized ships of bonds and only then called for a thing. There were many people and they were armed. Olav proposed that they accept Christianity, but bonds refused. The konung understood that he cannot win in an open battle, and so he changed the subject of debates. In particular, Olav asked whether there are people who have any complaints. It became obvious that many bonds have conflicts with each other. In such a way, he tried to use their fragmentation to his advantage. In addition, Olav burned houses of many bonds, and they accepted Christianity⁶.

Once, Olav received information, that in the inner Trondheim bonds celebrate winter feasts, drink to the glory of old gods, and perform animal sacrifices⁷. The konung went there with an army and captured a lot of powerful bonds, responsible for the organization of such events. Then he called for a thing and forced the rest of the landowners to reject pagan customs⁸.

A. Sanmark explains that: “in Norway, the thing meetings played an important part in the spread of Christianity. [...]. The kings instead used the thing meetings to introduce Christian legislation”⁹. The Christianization of Norway was far from peaceful, but was not violent either. The reason may be that a well-functioning network of assemblies provided necessary public space for discussions and conflict-solving. Also, argues Sverre Bagge, “it was easier to create loyalty to an authority over the whole country [Norway. – *N. R.*] than to a regional one”¹⁰. In any case, meetings only rarely became violent.

Conclusion. The process of Christianization of the Pomeranian Slavs and the Scandinavians indicates the existence of unstable political structures in the region as well as significant influence of elites, mostly independent from political centers. They relied upon ideological foundation of pagan beliefs, but even after the acceptance of the new faith retained power in a number of places across the region. Indeed, this was one of the main reasons to reject conversion. However, the majority of the Scandinavians accepted Christianity by the middle of the 11th century. And the Christianization of the Pomeranian Slavs occurred at the beginning of the 12th century, primarily as a result of the conquest by the neighbors. Until then elites retained their preferred religion, social organization, and the way of governance.

The chronicles and the hagiography indicate that both city dwellers and inhabitants of rural areas came to gatherings of the Pomeranian Slavs. Assemblies of the Scandinavians were also meetings of landowners, who represented local community or broader region. Additionally, members of elite and a ruler participated in most gatherings. A prince and local or regional chieftains controlled Pomeranian and Scandinavian

¹ Sanmark, A. (2004). *Power and Conversion – a Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia. Occasional Papers in Archaeology*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 88.

² Sturluson, S. (2002). *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*. Austin: Austin University Press, 290.

³ Ibid, 363-364.

⁴ Ibid, 364.

⁵ Ibid, 387.

⁶ Ibid, 388.

⁷ Ibid, 365.

⁸ Ibid, 367.

⁹ Sanmark, A. (2004). *Power and Conversion – a Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia. Occasional Papers in Archaeology*. Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 88.

¹⁰ Garipzanov, I., Geary, P., Urbańczyk, P. (eds.) (2008). *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs. Identities and state formation in early medieval Europe. Cursor Mundi*. Turnhout: Brepols, 5, 154.

assemblies. In most cases, initiative to call for a meeting came from them. After a ruler gained support from an elite, he proclaimed his decision to the people. At the same time, he required their approval.

Pomeranian and Scandinavian assemblies played an important role in the Christianization of the whole region. Gatherings presented one of the best ways to promote the new religion in the lands of the Scandinavians and the Pomeranian Slavs. For this reason, missionaries spoke at assemblies and rulers used them to reach their goals. Meetings played the role of an important public space for the discussion and the acceptance of the Christianization. Assemblies created a more or less controlled environment in a hostile territory. At Pomeranian and Scandinavian gatherings missionaries and rulers promoted the new religion. The conversion involved two approaches: debates (seeking consensus) and the use of force (various levels of coercion).

The hagiography, which describes the Christianization of Pomerania and Sweden, shows a peaceful picture. Most likely, the authors of these texts simply omit the violence. The sagas depict the conversion of Norway as somewhat violent. From the first text to the third the number of assemblies as well as conflicts increases. Nonetheless, the level of violence and coercion remains roughly the same.

In Pomerania and Scandinavia Christianity was promoted to people in different ways. Rulers and elites played the main role in the process. At the same time, meetings formed an effective network for the promotion of the new faith. An important role of gatherings in the power systems of the region was a tool in the hands of the highest stratas of society, who in most cases in a peaceful manner were able to convince local inhabitants to change the faith.

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