

Christian pagans? Pagan idolaters? The Wendish religious identity according to tenth and eleventh century chronicists

Cristãos pagãos? Pagãos idólatras? A identidade religiosa dos Vendos, segundo os cronistas dos séculos décimo e décimo primeiro

¿Cristianos paganos?
¿Paganos idólatras? La identidad religiosa de los Wendos, según los cronistas de los siglos décimo y undécimo

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DRAGNEA, Mihai. *Christian identity formation across the elbe in the tenth and eleventh centuries*. New York: Peter Lang, 2021.

Christianization is undoubtedly a complex process, as is the formation of a Christian identity. That is where the central question of Dragnea's book lies: on the nature of Christianity (Dragnea, 2021, p. 4). The debate on whether becoming a Christian was a matter of faith or a political movement is not necessarily new, however Dragnea applies it to the Christianization of the Wends, which is his main focus throughout the book. One of the key points explored by the author is the importance of the *sacramentum* of baptism. To analyze the phenomenon mentioned above, Dragnea divides his book into seven chapters. The first three are concerned with contextualizing the reader, providing a concise explanation of the Wends and Christianity along the Elbe. The four last chapters address divination and idolatry, ranging from Fortune-Tellers in Christianity to divination among the Liutici.

Dragnea (2021, p. 5) intends to “[...] offer the reader both the context in which the religious identity of the Wends was formed, and to identify the architects”. In a somewhat similar approach to that of Koselleck's *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (2011) – although not cited – the author analyzes specific Latin terms from his primary sources, such as *statua*, *templum*, *effigies* and *sortes*. In addition to the social identity of the authors analyzed and their relationship with both the secular and ecclesiastical powers, Dragnea situates the construction of the Wends' identity within a broader European narrative tradition, tracing its origins back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Therefore, the author states that the religious identity of the Wends “[...] can be considered to some extent a product of otherness” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 7) as will be demonstrated throughout the text.

In Chapter 2 – *Who Were the Wends?* – Dragnea explores how German primary sources describe those peoples, specifically engaging with the chronicler Adam of Bremen. The Wends were a diverse *gens*, consisting of several tribes: *Wilzi - Liutici*, *Wagri - Wagiri*, *Warnabi - Warnavi*, *Polabi*, *Circipani - Zerezepani*, *Kycini*, *Retharrii - Rederi*, *Rani - Rugiani*, *Pomeranos*, *Heveli - Stoderani*, *Leubuzzi* and

Sorabi, scattered across the Elbe. However, as Dragnea points, Helmold of Bosau – an author that not only read Adam, but also copied him *ipsis litteris* – wrote that four tribes made the Wendish *gens*: the *Wagiri*, *Obotriti*, *Kycini* and *Circipani*. Dragnea states that the first two composed what is called the Obotrite confederation (*soci*), whilst the last two were a part of the Liutici union, along with the *Redarii* and *Tholenzi* (Dragnea, 2021, p. 16).

Dragnea explains that the main form of settlement for the Wends was rural, and when these settlements were large, the German chroniclers referred to them as *urbes* or *civitates*. This reflects the German model rather than a Wendish perspective, indicating the level of development (Dragnea, 2021, p. 13). In contrast to *civitates* and *urbes*, Adam of Bremen describes the old *Hammaburg* as an *oppidum*, meaning a fortification, but also as a *metropolis*, the metropolitan seat “for all the Nordic nations” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 14). Along with the latin terms above mentioned, the 12th century chronicler, Helmold of Bosau uses the Slavic term *Starigrad* – meaning old *civitas* (Dragnea, 2021, p. 14) – when describing a Wendish fortified settlement. However, Helmold seems to be the only one to make such a description, as most of the medieval authors utilized the term *urbs* to indicate a fortification typically made of wood.

Regarding the territory where these tribes lived, the term is *terra*, which Adam divides into rural districts called *pagos*, determining the smallest unit of a province (Dragnea, 2021, p. 16). Dragnea goes on to explain that *provincia* – in the *terra Obotritorum* – was a administrative-territorial unit of the principality, ruled by the elites (Dragnea, 2021, p. 17). The primary sources tell us that the Obotrites received tribute from other neighboring tribes, such as the *Drevani* and *Linones*. Another interesting mention both from Adam and Helmold is the reference of the Obotrite principality ruled by a single prince (Dragnea, 2021, p. 17). Dragnea notes that when the term was mentioned alongside other Wendish tribes, it suggests the tribe and not the principality. Therefore, Adam refers to the tribe by the term *Reregi*. Thus, the author demonstrates that what we call “Wends” is in fact not a single people, rather multiple ethnicities, established across the Elbe.

In Chapter 3 – *A Brief History of Christianity across the Elbe* – Dragnea begins by giving the reader a general overview of the clashes between Wends and Saxons, dating back to the time of Charlemagne. As he discloses, the Franks – much like the Germans – did view the Wends, or other Slavs, as a collective *gens*, as evidenced by the utilization of individual tribe names instead of the generic terms *Sclavi* or *Winedi* (Dragnea, 2021, p. 26). About the 10th century, Dragnea tells us that “the Elbe was for the Saxons what the Rhine was for Carolingians one century before, namely a natural border and the main east-west trade-route into the Wendish realms” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 26).

Through the account of Widukind of Corvey, Dragnea explains that the conversion of the Wends was possible only through the military campaign of Margrave Gero, assigned by Otto I (c. 963). By subduing Mieszko I of Poland, Gero brought the *Lusiki* under Saxon control, establishing a tributary relationship with the secular power. The same is true for Hermann Billung, Margrave of the Billung March, with the Wendish *subreguli*, Selibur and Mstivoj. Prior to that, Henry I defeated the Wends at Lenzen in 929. Adam of Bremen, writing about this aftermath, stated that the Wends promised to become Christians and pay tribute to Henry. Dragnea mentions that the German bishops became “[...] pillars of the Ottonian monarchy, acquiring secular rights in addition to ecclesiastical” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 28). Thus bishops commanded *milites armati* or *Panzerreiter*, becoming influential spiritual and temporal lords. With the expansion into Wendish territory, the bishops along the Saxon nobility maintained properties there that should be defended. In that scenario, Magdeburg became an ecclesiastical center in addition to “[...] the central fiscal hub of the Ottonian east” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 28). In 968, an archdiocese was founded in Magdeburg, with three dioceses under its jurisdiction: one in Merseburg, led by Bishop Boso, another in White Elster led by Bishop Zeitz, and a third in Meissen.

Dragnea discusses the account of Thietmar of Merseburg on the missionary activities of bishop Boso, stating that it “[...] is very important, because it highlights the catechumen status of the sorbs before receiving baptism” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 28). On conversion, the author draws attention to its

complexity. The first step was receiving the sign of the cross, granting the individual catechumen status until baptism. During this interval, the person underwent religious training and social education. To save their soul, priests would pray for the catechumen. Once the individual was “aligned” with apostolic virtues, they would be baptized. This process, which included familiarizing the individual with Latin and Greek religious terms, led to integration into Christianity both socially and spiritually.

Returning to the *Gesta Hammaburgensis* and the conversion of the Wends, the depiction of Adalbert is revisited. Adalbert, the first bishop of Magdeburg, is credited by Adam with converting the Wends through preaching, though Dragnea suggests that Adalbert’s missionary efforts may have involved coercion and intimidation, given the militarization of the German dioceses. This is not surprising, as ecclesiastical power had the right to defend itself against enemies of the *imperium Christianum*, including pagans, heretics, idolaters, and apostates, against whom war was considered lawful. Canon law only limited the use of force, making forced conversion legally acceptable. Therefore, it was common for bishops to engage in military campaigns alongside the nobility. Dragnea observes that in the mid-11th century, the Saxon nobility and the Archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen, led by Adalbert, were most concerned with acquiring tribute from the Wends, rather than with establishing ecclesiastical order in the region. This issue was, in fact, Adalbert’s primary focus.

Lastly, Dragnea addresses Adam’s distinction between pagans and Christians. For Adam, rebels who apostatized were considered pagans and idolaters, as were those who were not baptized, even if they were catechumens. As Dragnea points out, Wendish spirituality was considered evil because the Wends followed God “in their own style” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 37), rather than not following God at all.

In Chapter 4 – *Wendish Idolatry in a Broader Context* – Dragnea begins his text with an affirmation rather problematic. Regarding Thietmar’s *Chronicon* – whose author had contact with the *Liutici* – he writes: “This is why his *Chronicon* is one of the most credible medieval sources regarding the Slavic pre-Christian

religion, and the Wendish idolatry in particular” (Dragnea., 2021, p. 45). Taking a Christian account of paganism as credible is **always** complicated, even if the penholder saw the things he wrote about. Dragnea is very aware of this, for immediately after this statement he brings up the *interpretatio Christiana*, on the figure of Erwin von Wienecke (1939). Von Wienecke argued that “[...] the literary description of Slavic beliefs and cults are not reliable sources in the reconstruction of the old religion” (Wienecke, 1939 *apud* Dragnea, 2021, p. 45). That is attributable to the creation of a “pagan religion” along the lines of the bible. Yet, Dragnea proceeds to depart from Thietmar's account.

Dragnea elucidates on how the uprising of 983 affected the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen and its suffragans across the Elbe. Moreover, it “[...] led to a factual dissolution of the Northern and Billung marches” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 46). The author demonstrates that this uprising had an anti-clerical factor in play. The Wends were unhappy with the collection of revenues by the ecclesiastical authorities and its punitive campaigns.

With acceptance of Christianity, came the obligation to pay tribute. Dragnea is absolutely correct when he writes: “[...] the payment of tribute was a defining criteria of religious status and thus a sign of obedience to the *imperium Christianum* ruled by the emperor” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 47). With a somewhat well-organized political act against the Saxons, the Wends destroyed both fortifications and ecclesiastical buildings. For Adam, the uprising was a matter of greed and ambitions from the Saxon nobility, which was more interested in tribute and asserting dominance over the Wends rather than with the conversion and ecclesiastical organization in the Elbe. Writing about the uprising of 1018, Thietmar meant to warn the reader – by describing the atrocities against Christian clergy – about “[...] the consequences of pacting with apostates” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 51). After all, by rising against the ecclesiastical authorities, the Obotrites were rebelling against the Christian faith itself. With their refusal to be purified, they were considered idolaters.

After exploring both the 983 and the 1018 uprisings, Dragnea poses an interesting question:

Again, as in 983 and 1018, there are no further details regarding the beliefs of the rebels. If they gave up the faith once again, then what did they replace it with? Also with some local superstitions, fueled by pagan reminiscences? Were the rebels real pagans, or just apostates, seen as pseudo-Christians? (Dragnea, 2021, p. 55).

About the attack of the Redarians against Mecklengur, Adam writes that only John – the bishop there – was humiliated and tortured before being killed. This emphasizes the directness of the attack against the Christian faith. The almost martyrdom of John is consistent with the genre of the *gesta episcoporum*. However, as Dragnea points out, the killing of John is more related to his profession as a bishop, than to the fact that he was a Christian. Going about this martyrdom, Adam regards the destruction of the ecclesiastical authority of Hamburg-Bremen as an annihilation of religion and loss of faith (Dragnea, 2021, p. 56). As for the so-called apostates, we may regard them as Christians, even if the primary sources call them pagans, at least that seems to be the case with Wendish nobles as Gottschalk. The hostility towards Saxon ecclesiastical authorities appears to be more connected to the matter of tribute than of religion itself. As Dragnea puts it:

All Wendish uprisings were described by contemporary authors as acts of disobedience. Because of that, the Wends were depicted in various ways: pagans, apostates, rebels, and so forth. In some cases, these labels were somehow synonymous. In the context of the church reform movement, “idolatry” was used as an even more revolutionary term. In the middle of the eleventh century, the term would include even the clergy who supported German imperial power in its conflict with the papacy (Dragnea, 2021, p. 58).

The purpose of those depictions, as Dragnea argues, was to legitimize a forced conversion supported by secular power (Dragnea, 2021, p. 61). This model of conversion was not new, being reminiscent of the conversion of the Saxons by Charlemagne.

In the brief Chapter 5 – *Divination and Fortune-Tellers in Christianity* – Dragnea demonstrates that the practices of Kleromancy have deep roots in Christian religious history. He explores the *sortes sanctorum* and the *sortes biblicae*. As he explains, the *sortes sanctorum* is based on Roman tradition, which itself was built on Greek practices. These divinatory methods, according to Isidore of Seville, were associated with *sortilegi*, individuals who practiced a fictitious religion (Dragnea, 2021, p. 70). The main aim of “casting lots” was to predict the future, primarily through divinatory consultation of the Gospels. The Church condemned these practices throughout the Middle Ages. However, during the Late Antiquity, when Augustine and Isidore wrote about them, *sortes* may have been common, especially among Christians living far from ecclesiastical centers. As Dragnea observes, by the High Middle Ages, divination decreased. Nevertheless, early sources from the new millennium still describe pagan divination, influenced by Greco-Roman models. In this context, *sortes biblicae* were unorthodox practices based on the Bible, while *sortes sanctorum* seemed to be a broader term for all Christian divination (Dragnea, 2021, p. 72).

In Chapter 6 – *Horse Divination among the Liutici* – Dragnea starts with Tacitus' account of divination among the Germanic tribes. Both Tacitus and Thietmar of Merseburg describe horse divination. Along with divination, human and animal sacrifice were often interlinked. Dragnea builds his narrative on sacrifice by engaging with primary sources, including Adam's accounts. Regarding the temple of Uppsala, Dragnea notes that Adam describes the Old Norse gods through the lens of *interpretatio Romana*, making his accounts unreliable. One issue in Dragnea's work is that he doesn't always clarify whether he is directly recounting primary sources or making an argument about sacrifices. Concerning horse divination, Dragnea writes: “Like other forms of divination, it was more credible to the audience than the teachings of Christian priests” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 78). The medieval Christian religious model – which saw man as powerless before his destiny, with everything determined by God's will – made people submissive to God and the Church. However, Dragnea notes that the Wends were dissatisfied with this.

The Liutici had a somewhat organized religious system; Thietmar refers to

their priests as *ministri*. According to his account, which follows the *interpretatio Romana*, their ritual sacrifices were public, much like Christian liturgy, and there was no apparent distinction between social classes. Additionally, the *ministri* performed oracular rituals using horses. Thietmar offers few details on how the divination worked, likely due to his familiarity with Augustine's writings, which categorized such practices as demonic.

Regarding the *ministri*, Dragnea writes that they were “[...] agents of a well-organized religious institution led by the Redarian high priests” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 79). Thietmar describes a temple in Riedegost, led by these Redarians, who worshiped an idol, marking them as *infidelis*. These Redarians are portrayed as a religious tribe, militarily supported by the Tollensians, forming an alliance. However, there were two other tribes in this union: the Kessinians and Circipanians. Dragnea mentions that around 1057, a civil war broke out between these two factions, ultimately ending with the victory of the Kessinians and Circipanians. Later, the Redarians formed alliances with the Saxons (under Duke Bernard II), the Danish (King Svend II), and the Obotrites (Gottschalk), allowing them to take revenge on the two tribes. Dragnea argues that the civil war may have resulted from the lack of a single leader. He writes:

The chronicler does not mention the name of a single Liutician leader. Details about the system of government are almost absent. The only mention is that all important issues were submitted to the vote of a council of all leaders. Any decision was validated by a unanimous vote. The Redarian priests, who are also not described by proper names, played an important role in influencing the leaders when they voted (Dragnea, 2021, p. 80).

This evidence supports Dragnea's argument that the descriptions of Wendish paganism by Thietmar and Adam are fabrications. The accounts of human sacrifices, according to Dragnea, “hardly reflect historical reality” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 82) and should be regarded as literary fictions or even propaganda. Archaeological evidence supports this view, as no traces of human sacrifice have been found to date at sites like Uppsala, Birka, Lejre, or Visby (Dragnea, 2021, p. 83). While I agree with Dragnea, I believe these depictions are more

than mere propaganda. They are part of a power discourse, deeply intertwined with the narrators' cultural frameworks. Whether the chroniclers intended their audience to believe these depictions or merely reflected their own beliefs – shaped by ancient texts – is debatable. Nonetheless, as modern readers, we must be cautious about accepting them as “historical reality”.

Regarding the temple of Redigast, Dragnea begins the seventh and final chapter of his book – *Rethra as the sedes ydolatriae of the Liutici*. The author brings up the description of the supposed temple of Redigast, by Adam of Bremen. Which in fact – for the chronicler – was not a temple, but “the prince of demons” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 89). The matter arises of whether Ridegast was a real simulacrum or not. In that regard, I appeal for the thesis of Grzybowski (2021). His theory regards specifically the temple of Uppsala, also described by Adam. The temple was never found, despite numerous archaeological efforts. It seems to me that if the supposed temple of Uppsala is nothing but a construct made by Adam, the same could be said about the temple or simulacrum of Redigast. The reason why the chronicler would mention this in his narrative is explained by Dragnea as follows: “By comparing him [Redigast] to an idol, Adam wished to emphasize the deviation of the Redarians from the Christian faith, and their hostility towards the ecclesiastical authorities” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 89-90). Moreover, he argues:

When describing the ritual of divination, Thietmar and Adam were clearly inspired by ancient Greek and Roman mythology. Their writing also seems to contain some stereotypical images of “paganism” from the early Christian writings. The divination model was copied from the Greek and Roman writers. For example, Adam's Rethra is not a genuine name. Most likely he took the name of the Great Rhetra, the famous Spartan constitution dictated by the Delphic oracle in (Dragnea, 2021, p. 90).

Dragnea then briefly revisits the topic of horse divination to explain how it played a role in undermining the religious power of the Liutici. Since the horses used for divination were sacred, Christian bishops sought to weaken the Liutician priests by abducting these horses. Dragnea emphasizes that the

desacralization of the sacred pagan symbols “[...] was meant to reduce the influence of the Redarian *princeps* over the Liutici, who often instigated the Wends to organize uprisings” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 91).

Princeps were a generic term used to describe the Wendish rulers (those being Christian). One of the chroniclers that often utilized the term was Helmold of Bosau. The *ministri* described by Thiethmar – and named “demons” by Adam – might be regarded as simply rivals of the Saxon clergy, as Redigast as a competitor of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen (Dragnea, 2021, p. 93). Helmold, in the same fashion as the two other chroniclers, criticizes Henry the Lion for the Wendish Crusade (1147), likely arguing that it was a matter of material interests rather than the conversion itself.

As for the Liutician religion, those peoples did not challenge the existence of God, in fact when Helmold writes, “[...] the Wendish religion had more Christian influences” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 94). The uprisings were what made the Liutici pagans in the eyes of the Saxon chroniclers. Thietmar himself does not deny that the locals attended Christian churches, he merely says that they “[...] feared the sacred pool more than the churches” (Dragnea, 2021, p. 100). That might be explained as a form of distrust towards the Saxon clergy. The source of the local faith seemed to be the larger problem, for it did not come from Christianity.

The author concludes his text by stating that we should regard the Wends as apostates instead of pagans in the modern sense. Also the conflict between Wends and Saxons, as he points out, is a matter of politics, consequently theologically justified. He reiterates that most of the information about the Wendish beliefs is incorrect, which does not mean that the Saxons had no knowledge of their practices, rather that the gaps were filled with Roman mythology. The point of the pagan typifications is linked with the fact that the Wends refused to pay tribute to the Ottonians, hence not being regarded as Christians.

Dragnea’s book should be regarded as a significant contribution to the

study of Wendish Christianization. It provides a thorough examination of the complexities surrounding the conversion of the Wends, particularly through an analysis of primary sources. Dragnea successfully highlights the limitations and biases inherent in these sources, offering a nuanced view of the historical events.

Nonetheless, while the book demonstrates a clear engagement with the primary sources, the author could have been more explicit in explaining how he intended to use these sources, particularly in his introduction. He briefly states that some "[...] aspects will be interpreted not only in a historical way, but also theologically" (Dragnea, 2021, p. 6), but this statement is somewhat vague. Although the text itself helps to clarify the methodology, a more detailed discussion in the introduction would have provided the reader with a clearer understanding of how Dragnea integrated historical and theological perspectives throughout his analysis. This would have been especially valuable given the complex interplay between religious conversion, political power, and cultural transformation that he examines.

Furthermore, I perceived a need for greater clarity in distinguishing between when Dragnea is narrating the historical sources and when he is presenting his own argument. In several sections, the text shifts between recounting primary accounts and the author's analysis, and this transition is not always clear. A more explicit distinction between these two modes of writing would have enhanced the reader's understanding of Dragnea's interpretations and helped to avoid any confusion regarding the boundaries between source material and the author's conclusions.

In spite of this, Dragnea's work remains an invaluable resource for understanding the Saxon-Wendish relations in the tenth and eleventh centuries along the Elbe. His careful analysis of the cultural, political, and religious dynamics at play during the period offers a fresh perspective on the process of Christianization in the region. Dragnea's exploration of the intersection between Christianity, paganism, and political power provides essential insights into the way historical narratives are shaped by both religious and secular

forces. His research stands as a significant scholarly contribution to the field, offering a detailed and critical examination of a complex period in European history.

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Notas

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