

## What made the pagans pagans

### Introduction

The conflict between paganism and Christianity has always been an important theme in history writing about early Scandinavia. "Pre-Christian Scandinavia" is a well-established concept referring to the time before ca year 1000. Until then the Germanic speaking population of the North is believed to have embraced a monolithic religious system called the "old-Norse" or, more recently, the "old-Scandinavian" religion (Näsström 2001, p. 11). This religion and its mythology are almost entirely reconstructed on the basis of the Eddic literature from 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland. When earlier continental sources in a less elaborated way make remarks on *pagani*, *paganitas* and *idolatria* in this region it is generally assumed that it is the "Asatrá" of the Eddas they refer to. The model brings identity. It creates a sharp borderline between Viking age Scandinavia and Christianity – i.e. between Germanic barbarism and Christian civilisation – and it is fundamental for the preservation of different ethnic identities from earlier centuries.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will try to explore one small but nevertheless important detail in this picture: what made the pagans pagans.

### The problem of the violent Christianisation of the Luticians

Until the 1950s scholars were often puzzled by a formulation in the writings of the Saxon monk and archbishop of "the pagans", Bruno of Querfurt. The problem was that Bruno seemed to argue for conversion by force of the pagans across the Elbe, i.e. the Luticians. (Kahl 1955, pp.170-178). It was of course nothing novel in the use of violence in it self. The Church had for centuries sanctioned the *bellum justum* when it came to breaking down political and religious structures that threatened or hindered the preaching of the true belief, the *fides catholica*. In the process of conversion, however, it was the word of the Gospel and good examples that should break through to the sacred rooms in the hearts of the pagans.

What made Bruno's formulations problematic, however, was that he in the Lutician case argued for a brutal form of missionary war in which force alone should make the pagans enter the Church. The archbishop accordingly appeared a most extreme propagandist for a kind of "direct missionary war" not otherwise seen before the age of the Crusades. There was however a difficulty in such an interpretation. It was contradicted by other parts of Bruno's writing. When talking of peoples other than the Luticians, he explicitly condemned the use of violence as an instrument of conversion. How was this contradiction to be resolved?

In the middle of the 1950s Hans-Dietrich Kahl was discussing these problems with Reinhard Wenskus, who at the time was working on Bruno's political "*Gedankenwelt*". Suddenly the solution struck Kahl "*blitzartig*" as he says (Kahl 1955, p. 179 n. 85). The reason why the Luticians could be forced into the Church by purely violent means was of course that unlike other peoples dealt with in Bruno's writings, the Luticians were not pagans outside the Church. It was well known that since long before Bruno's time the Luticians had been Christians and tributaries of the increasingly Saxon Empire. Consequently they were also an integrated part of Christianity. In 983, however, when Bruno was a young boy, they had brutally broken away from Saxon hegemony. They stopped paying tax and, according to many commentators, they had also rejected Christianity.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Näsström 2001, s. 11: "Uttryck som fornordisk religion eller norrön religion är allt för flytande, medan fornskandinavisk religion utgör en avgränsning mot samernas förkristna religion och den finskugriska religionen, som bör behandlas för sig."

Accordingly, in the Lutician territory there were not only a lot of holy churches that had been cut off from the body of the Lord by the uprising of 983. There was also a Church in a more abstract sense – a divine structure of rights to preach the gospel, to celebrate Holy Communion, and to use the riches of the Church. This sacred structure, however, did not perish with the Lutician revolt. It was eternal unless the Church itself altered it, and here lies the explanation for the apparent contradiction in Bruno's teaching (Kahl 1955, esp. pp. 178 ff. and 362 f.).

The Luticians were not pagans in the sense of not being Christians. They were pagans because they had rejected the Church and the Empire of the Saxon Christ. They were pagans because from the point of view of the Saxon nobility they now lived their lives in obstinate apostasy from Christ. This does not quite fit with our sense of the word 'pagans', but Hans-Dietrich Kahl could show that in Bruno's time the word *pagani* was commonly used also to designate apostates (Kahl 1955, esp. pp. 184 and 379; cf. Wenskus 1956, pp. 151 f. with n. 397). To Bruno the Luticians were apostate pagans within the Church, and consequently different rules applied. They were to be treated with the much more severe methods that had been prescribed since late Antiquity for heretics and apostates.

The crucial point, to which I would like to draw some attention in this paper, is in what moment exactly a Christian became pagan again. By which act did for example a Lutician qualify him-/herself as a pagan? We would normally think that the magic moment was when he/she turned back to some "old-Slavic" cult and began to worship "old-Slavic" gods again, but is this in fact the constitutive breakpoint?

#### **The conversion and renewed apostasy of the Christian Danes**

Scholars have sometimes in passing noted the intimate connection between "Christianisation" of the inhabitants across the Elbe and their political subjection and tributary status to the Empire of the Franks and later the Germans. This aspect will be discussed more thoroughly in other contexts (cf. Janson 2003b and forthcoming). Here I would only like to take up a few illustrative examples, beginning with the famous conversion of Harold Bluetooth in the 960s, often seen as the great turning point for all of Scandinavia.

Widukind of Corvey, the immediate contemporary commentator to the event, is frequently quoted in this connection but it has not been fully appreciated that what he says in fact directly contradicts what King Harold himself says on his famous rune-stone in Jelling. According to the inscription King Harold himself had made the Danes Christians, *kristna*. Nevertheless Widukind could state that the Danes by then had been *christiani* "since ancient times" (III:65). Consequently the question presents itself whether the Danes, as Harold wanted us to think, became *kristna* in connection with his conversion, or if they by then, as Widukind clearly states, had been *christiani* since ancient times.

To King Harold and Otto the Great the constitutive moment in the Christianisation of the Danes was obviously the subjection of Harold's kingdom to Otto's *imperium christianum* (see Janson forthcoming). Widukind however had some problem with this picture. According to him it existed Christianity among the Danes long before and still did, though there were some serious problems with its cult. This is in fact also the impression given by the slightly younger Thietmar of Merseburg writing in the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. According to him the conversion of Danes was in fact a "renovation" of their *christianitas*. The Danes had, he writes, "deviated from the cult [*cultura*] of their predecessors" and opened up the gates for "gods and demons" [*dii et demones*]. (Thietmar II:14).

A century after the event Adam of Bremen displays a perspective more in line with Harold's and Otto's. According to him a peace agreement was made between the two:

“Harold was subjected to Otto, and taking the kingdom from him he promised to receive *christianitas* in Dania.” (Adam II:3).<sup>2</sup> A few years later, however, Harold’s son Sven (Forkbeard) inspired the Danes to a revolt against Harold and the Empire. By these acts both Sven and the Danes rejected not only Harold and the Empire but also *christianitas* according to Adam. When Eric the Victorious soon thereafter attacked Denmark Sven was, as Adam puts it, “in vain trusting in his idols” [*frustra sperans in ydolis suis*](Adam II:27-30).

Adam gives the impression that Sven was converted to Christianity around the year thousand, but this is only an effect of his ambition to make this year a great shift in history (see Janson forthcoming). The contemporary observer Thietmar of Merseburg knows nothing of such a conversion. According to him Sven had “transformed the God of Heaven and earth to a devil” [*Deum caeli et terrae diabolo mutavit*] and under this lord he also died in 1014 (Thietmar VII:17-18). From other sources we know however that Sven during all this years was a fairly normal Christian King.

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The question of fidelity to the right power structure seems to have been of great importance in deciding the status of religion in the North. Sven Forkbeard revolted against the Empire and at the same time he transformed [*mutavit*] the Christian God to a devil according to Thietmar. According to Adam he rejected Christianity and put his faith in idols. In reality he was a Christian all the time.

A similar case can be found among the peoples who revolted against the Saxons in 983. One of their most prominent leaders was a certain Mistvi, “Duke” of the Obodrits, who by the way was Sven Forkbeard’s maternal grandfather. Adam of Bremen pictures him as a cruel, bloodthirsty and extremely brutal pagan who ravaged Hamburg, burned all the Churches in *Scalavonia*, and he did not leave one single trace of Christianity across the Elbe (Adam II:42). Thietmar’s picture is not very different but between the lines we learn from him that Mistvi had at least one priest in his service when he harried Hamburg in 983 (Thietmar III:18)<sup>3</sup>, and the area controlled directly by Mistvi was, as becomes clear in a later chapter in his Chronicle, covered with churches still in 1018 (Thietmar VIII:5). The “paganism” of the revolt in 983 might therefore not have so much to do with old-Slavic religion as with the failing subjection under the Saxons and their Church and Empire.

The intimate connection between Christian religion and political subordination becomes explicit in the words by which Thietmar opens up his description of the revolt of 983: “Peoples”, he says, “who by accepting Christianity served [our] kings and emperors with tributes [*Gentes, quae suscepta christianitate regibus et inperatoribus tributarie serviebant*] ... unanimously revolted” (Thietmar III:17) By accepting Christianity the inhabitants across the Elbe had bound themselves as tributaries to the *imperium christianum*. To these groups tributes and Christianity seems to have been different aspects of one and the same thing, or at least it ought to be so if they wanted to satisfy their oppressors, the Saxon nobility. Fidelity [*fidelitas*] to Christianity was shown by fidelity to the Saxon lords. Humble faith/belief [*fides*] in God was demonstrated by submissive tributary service to the Saxons. Failing to pay tribute to the Saxon lords was failing to pay appropriate respect to God. Revolt against these Saxon lords was accordingly a rejection of the Christian Lord himself, a rejection of Christianity. In principle it should therefore have nothing at all to do with old-Slavic religion. It was the rebellion in itself that decided the status of their religion. It simply did not matter what these

<sup>2</sup> *Haroldus Ottoni subicitur, et ab eo regnum suscipiens christianitatem in Dania recipere spondit.*

<sup>3</sup> There seems to be no confessional problems in question here because the priest referred to, who’s name was Avico, was in fact later to become a “spiritual brother” of Thietmar in Merseburg himself, Thietmar III:18: *capellanus tunc eius et spiritalis frater meus postea effectus.*

peoples did in their cult as long as they did not humble themselves to offer peace and satisfaction to the Saxons and their Church.

Adam of Bremen articulates this perspective when writing about the revolt of 983. After his account of the violence against *christianitas* made by Mistvi he concludes:

Consequently all the Slavs living between Elbe and Oder ... in this way [*i.e.* by the violent acts of Mistvi and others] cut themselves off from the body of Christ and the Church to which they earlier had been attached (Adam II.44).<sup>4</sup>

Nothing is said here about a return to the pre-Christian religion. What mattered was the great “cut”, *i.e.* the revolt that separated the “Slavs” from the imperial power structure. This revolt made the necessary submissive service impossible, and the whole area therefore lost contact with its Lord. But did this really mean that all traces of Christianity – all churches, sacred objects and religious ideas – were totally wiped out of these societies? Not only does this seem extremely unlikely. It is also contradicted for example by the already mentioned fact that Thietmar indirectly let us know that the lands under Mistvi’s direct control were filled with churches still in 1018. However, from the point of view of the Saxon Church a religious disaster really took place in after 983. From their perspective Christianity were in fact totally wiped out because the revolt was in itself a relapse in *paganismus*. Worship of objects that had earlier been sacred became diabolical. Worship of God and his saints became idolatry. In churches that once were temples of God Christ had perished, and there only remained places of worship for the misdirected and diabolic religion of the rebellious population. It was still a Christian land, but the Devil and his demons had invaded its holy places and objects through the hearts of the Christian pagans.

### Christian cult and idolatry

The idea that a Christian feature in a certain moment could be transformed into an object of pagan cult is clearly illustrated by the descriptions of the famous idol Svantevit in Arcona on Rügen. Scholars have enthusiastically tried to fit this Svantevit into an “old-Slavic” pantheon, but the sources, *i.e.* Helmold of Bosau and Saxo Grammaticus, strongly oppose such an interpretation (cf. Janson 1998, pp. 17 ff., 2003a and 2003b). According to them Svantevit was originally *Sanctus Vitus*, patron of the Saxon abbey of Corvey. In the Carolingian era the island of Rügen had been made tributary to the Empire and given to Corvey. Later the people of the island wanted their freedom [*libertas*] back. To achieve this they cut the ties to Corvey and the Empire, drove away the Frankish priests, and kept the tax revenues on the island. They were, as Saxo puts it, quite happy with their own Vitus, and hereby they “turned service into superstition” [*servitudinem in superstitione mutarunt*] (Saxo XIV:39,13). “Saint Vitus”, says Helmold, “whom we acknowledge as a martyr and a servant of God, is venerated by them as God, and thus they put the created before the Creator” (Helmold I:6, cf. I:83). By doing so they had “turned the Christian religion into superstition” [*Christicolis religionem verterunt in superstitionem*].

To both Helmold and Saxo the people of Rügen were *pagani*. Their god however was originally a Christian saint that by a revolt “was cut off from the body of Christ and the Church” to use Adam’s words about the revolt 983. At least according to Helmold and Saxo the inhabitant of Rügen upheld the worship of *Sanctus Vitus*, but because of the revolt against their Christian superiors this worship had no longer anything to do with God and *christianitas*. It was idolatry. What is true in this picture is not so important here. The

<sup>4</sup> *Omnes igitur Slavi, qui inter Albiam et Oddaram habitant ... talique modo se abscederunt a corpore Christi et ecclesiae, cui antea coniuncti fuerant.*

important thing is that Helmold and Saxo looked upon such a transformation of a Christian cult into *idolatria* as a very natural development. It must in fact have been a widely accepted way of thinking because the monks in Corvey made claims on Rügen maintaining the identity between their *Sanctus Vitus* and the pagan Svantevit.

How widely accepted this idea actually was at the time can be shown if we move our attention more into the centre of the Church. Bishop Benzo of Alba was a ferocious enemy of the Gregorian reform party in Rome during the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. He was writing from the 1060s until the 1080s, and because of his open animosity to the Gregorians he presents a perspective free from diplomatic restraint. According to Benzo terrible things had begun to happen in the middle of the 1050s, around a group of evil “monks”, who had infiltrated the Roman Church. When Pope Victor II died in 1057 these monks inspired the Romans to break with their legitimate lord, the German king, who’s right it was, at least according to Benzo’s opinion, to appoint the successor on the papal throne. However, without consulting the German court the Romans in August 1057 illegitimately appointed a new Pope, Stephen IX. They hereby broke with their legitimate superiors and Benzo consequently refer to this event by saying that they set up an idol [*hydolum*] in the Lateran Church. After Pope Stephen’s death in 1059 one of the evil monks, Hildebrand, without even the consent of the Romans, “put up another false and illusive idol” on the papal throne, Pope Nicolas II. In a hitherto unheard of ceremony Hildebrand “crowned his idol with a royal crown”, and then he fed him “in the Lateran palace like a donkey in a stable” (Benzo VII:2).

When Nicolas II died in 1061 the situation became, even worse from Benzo’s perspective. Hildebrand and his companions now brought the Normans to Rome to help them put up the next *hydolum*, i.e. Pope Alexander II. He explains that the Gregorians, with the help of the Normans, “the excrement of the world”, had raised up Alexander in *sede apostolica* (III:2 and II:4). He constantly speaks of Alexander as an idol, statue etc. [*simulacrum/hydolum/statua/sculptile*] of the Normans (e.g. III:1, III:20), of the Gregorian party (II:4), and even of the German court after Anno of Cologne’s coup d’état in 1062 (III:1). Consequently, the religion of those who confessed to Alexander was *hydolatria* (II:15). Alexander himself – “the head of the heretics” [*Heresiarchas*] (III:22), “the new Arius” (VII:2), and “the new Antichrist” (VII:2) – worshipped “Constantine’s horse” (II:15).

Benzo’s opinions might have been extreme, but they were not different in kind from those of other critics of the Gregorians. It was only a difference in degree of outspokenness. In fact, the words of the North-Italian bishop show us what kind of polemic language and theology that was possible in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. We get an idea of what actually could be preached in the churches of the *imperium Christianum* in the age of the Ottonians and Salians. From Benzo’s perspective, however, the worst was still to come. Hildebrand himself ascended the holy throne in 1073, taking the name Gregory VII, and Gregory’s language and theology was just as radical and dramatic as Benzo’s. He also liked to think of his opponents as enemies of God, the Church, and the Christian religion, and they were of course *membra Diaboli* (See Benz 1991). After meeting with the ingenious opposition of the German episcopate led by Archbishop Liemar of Bremen, Gregory even began, early in 1075, to describe disobedience to himself as idolatry [*idolatria*] (Schneider 1972, pp. 118-123; cf. Hageneder 1978, esp. pp. 34 ff., Janson 1998, pp. 245 ff.). Later the same year he made public the grounds for this claim:

For how very dangerous it is, and how far removed from the law of Christ, not to be obedient, especially to the apostolic see, you may learn from the words of blessed Samuel the prophet which the most holy Pope Gregory [I.] undertook to expound in the last book of his *Morals*. In order that we may have them before us we are setting them down in writing; you may thus know beyond doubt that we are addressing no new teaching to you, but are rehearsing the ancient teaching of the holy fathers: Hence Samuel says: ‘To obey is better than sacrifices and to hearken than to offer the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.’ [1 Sam. 15:22-23] Now obedience is rightly placed before sacrifices, because by sacrifices we put to

*death flesh which is not our own, but by obedience our own will. A man pleases God the more readily in proportion as he curbs his own pride of will and sacrifices himself before God's eyes by the sword of his precept. Disobedience, on the other hand, is likened to the sin of witchcraft in order that it may appear how great is the virtue of obedience: by contrasting them it may the more clearly be seen how highly we should praise it. For if 'rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry', only obedience has the reward of faith, since without it a man is proved to be unfaithful even though he appear to be faithful* (Ep.vag. 10, transl. by H.E.J. Cowdrey).

Obedience counts before sacrifices. We are confronted here with the biblical and patristic ground for identifying disobedience as idolatry. It was obviously through Gregory the Great that this important idea had made its way into western Christianity. Disobedience was idolatry, but disobedience to whom? The Bible had spoken in general of obedience to God and God's commandments, but who actually represented God here on Earth? Gregory the Great was primarily concerned with the moral life of a true Christian, but there was of course an extremely far-reaching aspect of power in what he said, and this materialised later as a central political instrument for the rulers of *imperium christianum*. It became especially important for the Ottonians and their successors in the relation to the northeastern neighbours of the Saxons. As an ideological resource it became central for the development of a "Holy Roman Empire of German Nation" during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. The obedience that was the only way to keep contact with God should in this Empire be paid to Otto the Great and his successors.

The Gregorians challenged this dogma. They accepted however totally the construction as such. They found nothing wrong in this hierarchical world-order, but they wanted to let the Pope take the Emperors place on its top. This was the actual ground for the so-called "investiture contest" (See Janson 1998). Hildebrand/Gregory VII tried to rip the government of the World out of the hands of the German king and *futurus imperator*. The *obedientia* that proved a true Christian belief had according to Gregory VII blindly to be paid to the apostolic see, *i.e.* to him.

In 1079 he made the consequences of disobedience to his commands explicit in a letter to "everyone in the kingdom of the Italians and Germans who exhibit obedience to St. Peter". After once again having cited 1. Sam. 15:22-23 and the Morals of Gregory the Great, he concludes:

Therefore anyone falls into the sin of heathenism [*paganitas*] who, while claiming that he is a Christian, disdains to obey the apostolic see. I beseech you, obey our apostolic precepts so that you may attain to your inheritance in the heavenly kingdom (Ep.vag. 32, transl. by H.E.J. Cowdrey)<sup>5</sup>.

The revolutionary message in this formulation was not that a person who conducted *inobedientia* relapsed to *paganitas* even if he himself claimed to be a Christian. This was, as we have seen, already a well-established order in the *imperium christianum*. The revolutionary claims made by Gregory VII laid in the fact that the *obedientia* in question so unrestrictedly had to be paid to the apostolic see, *i.e.* to himself.

## Conclusions

To sum up: Hans-Dietrich Kahl and Reinhard Wenskus made an important contribution to North-European history by pointing out that the pagans across the Elbe were no pagans in the modern sense of the word. They were in fact apostates. However, a closer examination of what qualified them and others as *pagani* in contemporary theology shows that it had nothing to do with any return to "old-Slavic" religion. What decided the status of their religion was

<sup>5</sup> *Peccatum enim paganitatis incurrit quisquis, dum Christianum se asserit, sedi apostolicae obedire contempnit. Vos queso apostolicis praeceptis obedite ut ad hereditatem celestis regni mereamini pervenire.*

instead the relation to the legitimate superiority, in this case the Saxons and their church. The sharp dividing line went between *obedientia* and *inobedientia*. *Inobedientia* was idolatry and paganism. *Obedientia* was the most beautiful gift to God and counted before sacrifices, something that seems to imply that sacrifices under *inobedientia* were not sacrifices to God. This is probably the explanation for that sacrifices to *Sanctus Vitus* on Rügen were looked upon as sacrifices to a pagan god by the old masters and their associates. This has of course interesting implications also on Scandinavia, but I must leave that for another occasion. Here I will have to stop now by concluding that what more than anything made the pagans pagans in northern Europe during the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages was disobedience to the evolving Holy Roman Empire of German Nation.

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