Study into Socio-political History of the Obodrites

Roman Zaroff

Artikkelen behandler de polabiske slaviske stammene som bodde i området mellom elvene Elbe-Saale og Oder-Neisse, i perioden fra sluttet av 700-tallet til 1100-tallet. Artikkelforfatteren går imot det hevdvunne synet om at disse slaverne forble organisert i små, lokale stammer. Tvert imot mener forfatteren å kunne belegge at disse polabiske slaverne pga. sterkt ytre press i perioden organiserte seg i en større sammenslutning over stammenivå, sentrert rundt obotritt-stammen. Denne sammenslutningen var en politisk enhet på linje med samtidige tyske hertugdømmer og markområder og de skandinaviske landene.

Introduction

The Western Slavs once occupied the territory more or less corresponding to the former state of East Germany that is the area roughly between the Oder-Neisse and Elbe-Saale rivers. They are usually called the Polabian Slavs or Wends. They were the westernmost group of the Western Slavs (which includes the Czechs, Poles and Slovaks) who settled the region between the sixth and seventh centuries.\(^1\) The Polabian Slavs are usually divided into three branches: the Sorbs, who occupied roughly the southern part of the former East Germany; the Veleti in the northeast of the region; and the Obodrites in the northwest.\(^2\) Most of the Polabian Slavs were germanised in the course of time, and only a small Sorbian minority in southeastern Germany retains its linguistic and cultural identity until the present day.\(^3\)

---


\(^2\) Wasilewski 1977:57.

\(^3\) De Bray 1963:673.
The Polabian Slavs have never attracted much attention among western historians, with an exception of German scholars. There is no single work in English dealing with the subject of the Polabian Slavs as such or the Obodrites in particular. Usually they are mentioned very briefly in the context of Germanic expansion to the east. For example, in the 1964 edition of the *Cambridge Medieval History*, Joseph Peisker states:

Considerably more than thirty tiny Slav tribes in the former Old Germania from the Danube to Mecklenburg are mentioned there in four groups. None of the groups formed a State...The Bohemian group maintained itself and finally combined into a powerful Bohemian kingdom. On the other hand the remaining three groups, really some dozens of Lilliputian clans, succumbed to the Germans...\(^4\)

In another chapter of the same publication Austin Poole refers to the Slavs as:

These restless people dwelling in the forest and swamp lands between the Elbe and the Oder. \(^5\)

Or in the 1963 reprint of his earlier publication on the Slavs, Samuel H. Cross stated:

But the Slavs who occupied the course of the Elbe and the Baltic seaboard formed nothing more than weak tribal federations, which not only possessed little internal cohesion but also collapsed easily at any external shock.\(^6\)

Similar statements are very common in many other publications. They are a clear expression of the belief that beyond the Elbe-Saale Rivers there was a «wild east» inhabited by small clans of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, not worth consideration, whose territory provided a floodgate for Germanic expansion. However, it should not be overlooked that, with a general lack of research on the Polabian Slavs’ history, such views are lacking substance and are based on pure assumption. It appears to be a similar case to the history of white settlement of the

\(^4\)Peisker 1926:454.
\(^5\)Poole 1926:183.
\(^6\)Cross 1948:121.
«American West» or «Australian outback», in which for a long time, the native occupants were regarded as not worthy of consideration, and both territories were seen as virgin, nobody’s lands waiting for settlement. Furthermore, historians of medieval Germany will never be able to provide a full picture of the Empire’s eastern policies and the Germanic expansion to the east without understanding what was going on beyond the Elbe-Saale.

This article concentrates on the northwestern branch of the Polabian Slavs, people called Obodrites. The name Obodrites, a traditional generic term for the north-western Polabian Slavs, derives from a tribal name of a smaller tribe centred around their stronghold of Mecklenburg (a village at present). In this broad application the term Obodrites includes the Obodrites of Mecklenburg as well as the other tribes like Vagrove, Drevyane, Polabyane, Varnove, Glinyane, Smolintsy, Bitintsy and some lesser ones. For that reason the smaller tribe around Mecklenburg will be called the Obodrites Proper.7

### Historical Background

In the area we are concerned with, the German-Slavic linguistic frontier stabilised itself around the sixth century roughly on a line going southward from the modern port of Kiel, then east of Hamburg, and along the Ilmenau river, reaching the marshes between Celle and Gifhorn.8 To the east the Obodrites bordered their fellow Polabians the Veleti, roughly alongside Warnow River, and to the south the Sorbs.

During the migration period of the sixth and seventh centuries, the Polabian Slavs, and most of the other Slavs, were a clan-based society. A number of clans formed a larger political unit of a small tribe numbering something between two and five thousand people. It was an egalitarian society, where at least in principle all adult males were free and equal. There were not tribal leaders as such, and a popular assembly known as the veche for the duration of the conflict elected the war leaders.9

The Obodrite tribes found themselves in the unique and challenging but also favourable geo-political position. This no doubt played an important part in their socio-political development and their history. As the most north-western «out-

---

8 Łowmiański 1967:211.
9 Labuda 1990:534–537.
post» of Slavdom from the times of the settlement of the region they occupied, they were in contact with their non-Slavic neighbours and exposed to foreign influence. Military conflicts must have taken place, as the massive earthwork fortification across southern Jutland, known as Danevirke (Danish works) indicates. Its first stages, constructed in the first half of the eighth century, must have been a protective measure against Obodrite and Saxon raids. There must also have been extensive economic and trade contacts between the Obodrites, Danes and Saxons during the eighth century as Danish Hedeby and the Slavic settlement of Reric were reported to be flourishing ports in the early ninth century.

The Danes, Saxons and Obodrites of the seventh and eight centuries were on a similar level of civilization. For example, the Jutland peninsula and Danish islands were divided into handful of small kingdoms and the Saxons were also tribal people with clan-based societies. Their Germanic thing, a tribal assembly, served the same purpose as the Slavic veche, and their leaders, like the Saxon Widukind, were elected for the duration of conflict. Because the differences were not of a great scale, the Danes, Saxons and Obodrites were not a serious threat to each other's existence. During the eighth century the Obodrites came into the sphere of Frankish influence. But neither were the Franks a serious threat at that stage. Those northwestern Polabians were «shielded» from Frankish political domination by independent Saxons. As a result the internal socio-political developments among the Obodrites were not disturbed by Frankish political expansion, as occurred for example in the case of the Sorbian people further south.

Political Developments
The Obodrites first appeared in the Annales Regni Francorum, as Frankish allies in a campaign against the Saxons. Possibly they were the Slavs mentioned by the same chronicle in the entry for year 780. A few years later, in 798, they were again engaged in the conflict. According to the revised version of the chronicle the Saxons killed Frankish envoys, which prompted Obodrite intervention. Lead by their ruler Drazhko (Thrasco in ARF) the Obodrites inflicted a major defeat on the Saxons.

10 Leciejewicz 1981:177.
11 James 1988b:72; and Roesdahl 1982:144.
12 Hedeby and Reric: ARF, Year 808.
15 ARF, Year 780 & 789; also in Einhard, Vita Caroli, II.7.
16 ARF, Year 798 and The Viena Manuscript, pp. 42–43.

Collegium Medievale 2003
The question immediately arising from these events is: whom is the chronicle referring to by using the term Obodrites. As previously stated, there were four main Obodrite tribes, the Obodrite Proper, Vagrove, Polabyane and Varnove. The Saxons shared the border with the Vagrove and Polabyane, hence the term does not apply to the Obodrite Proper only, as they lived further east. Similarly, in 804, after the final subjugation of Saxony, Charlemagne deported a large number of Saxons from the area northeast of Hamburg and the area was given to the Obodrites for resettlement.\(^{17}\) In this instance again the term Obodrites was specifically used. And here again it need not refer only to the Obodrite Proper.

The very existence of a Franco-Obodrite alliance is also meaningful. It should be pointed out that, for Charlemagne, an alliance with a small insignificant tribe would be of no advantage at all, and an alliance with numerous small tribal leaders would be simply impractical. Therefore, it suggests the political importance of the Obodrites in the region, and that they were considered as valuable allies by the Franks.

So, in the light of the above evidence, it could be concluded as follows: Taking into consideration that the Obodrite Proper did not share a border with the Saxons, the term must have been used in a broader sense, to describe a larger political entity, extending over smaller tribal units neighbouring the Saxons, including the Vagrove and Polabyane. This is supported by the fact that, if the Obodrites reported in \textit{Annales Regni Francorum} were strong enough to achieve a big victory over the Saxons, they would have needed the strength of more than a single small tribe. And an alliance with the Franks points to the same conclusion, that they were a relatively larger polity. Hence, all this indicates that the Obodrites in question were a principality extending over a number of smaller tribal territories, and that they were a major player in the region. It is also worth noting that the \textit{Annales Regni Francorum} entries for the years 789, 795, 798, 808 and 821\(^{18}\) give the impression of the Obodrites being a single political entity.

As for the name Obodrites, there could be only one explanation. The tribe of the Obodrite Proper subjugated smaller tribes in the region and gave the name to a larger regional political entity, reported in \textit{Annales Regni Francorum}. This is not an unusual thing in history, as smaller tribes often gave names to larger countries or nations. For example, Allemagne, the French name for Germany derives from a tribal name of an early medieval small Germanic tribe of Alemani. Simi-

\(^{17}\) ARF Year 804; and Einhard, II.12.\(^{18}\) ARF, Year 789, 795, 804, 808, 815, 817 & 821.
larly, the name for Poland derives from a smaller dominant tribe of Polanye, who lived in the area around Poznań. The fourth, main tribe of the Varnove, scarcely mentioned in the earlier sources, must also have been under the domination of the Obodrite Proper. The principality further included a minor tribe, the Smolintsy, who dwelt on the west banks of the lower Dosse River. The status of the Glinyane tribe, on the eastern bank of the Elbe River around Lenzen, during the eighth and ninth centuries is uncertain. They were reported separately or alongside the Obodrites in 839, 858 and 877. However, it is very likely that they were in the Obodrite sphere of influence, and from time to time an Obodrite dependency. Geopolitically the Glinyane were in a vulnerable position, bordered by the Obodrite principality on all sides, and the Franks across the Elbe. Hence we can conclude that by the second half of the eighth century the Obodrite principality was a duchy-like, regional political entity, encompassing at least the territories of Obodrite Proper, Vagrove, Polabyane, Varnove and Smolintsy. Moreover, that the Obodrite Proper, who centred around Mecklenburg, were a dominant force in the principality. It was a regional polity on a par with political units such as Saxony or Bavaria among the Germans; and Southern Jutland, Zealand or Scania among the Scandinavians.

The process of the political centralisation of the Obodrites is obscured by the lack of historical records prior to 789. However, the excavations in the Mecklenburg region show an interesting pattern emerging. During the seventh century the region was dominated by small fortified as well as unprotected settlements, where artefacts suggest not well-marked social stratification. In the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, large and well-fortified strongholds became common and they dominated the landscape well into the twelfth century. Many of them grew from smaller settlements but others were deliberately founded in well-protected and strategic places. This has been interpreted by a number of scholars as a sign of centralisation of political power, as well as social changes, and the emergence

19 The Varnove were mentioned initially by Adam of Bremen in the eleventh century, and later disappeared from the records. However, Adam must have based his account on some earlier source, possibly from the ninth century. This is, because his description of flourishing port of Wolin (Jumne), in the same passage, fits better an earlier time, not the eleventh century, as Wolin was in decline by then. Moreover, the Obodrite Proper were called the Reregove, a name never used again. The name relates to Reric, the Danish name for Mecklenburg and belongs to the earlier times. AOB, II. XXI(18).

20 ARF, Year 809.

21 AB, Year 839, and AF, Year 858, 877.

of larger tribal units. The process began sometime during the first half of the eighth century. In the next logical step, political centralisation expanded beyond a single tribal unit. The process must have taken place around the middle of the eighth century, prior to the Obodrites' appearance in the historical records, as a regional political entity, ruled by Vilchan.

The Obodrites in the Eyes of their Contemporaries

The unique position of the Obodrites among the Polabian Slavs can also be deduced from the way contemporary people viewed and described their principality and their rulers. Sources can provide some clues as to how they compared with other kingdoms and duchies.

As early as the beginnings of the ninth century the *Annales Regni Francorum* used the phrase «royal power of Obodrites» in relation to a power struggle between Slavomir and Chedrog. In the description of the Obodrite lands the source known as *Bavarian Geographer* use the term *regio*. It is worth noting that the term *regio* was used again in the account only twice more, once in reference to Bulgaria and unidentified «Sittici». This clearly indicates recognition and a perception of the Obodrites as an important political entity. In the early twelfth century, during the reign of Gottschalk's son Henry, the chronicler Helmold of Bosau called his principality a kingdom. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, according to Helmold of Bosau in 1128/29 a Danish prince, Knut Lavard, was crowned as an Obodrite king by the emperor Lothar. Unfortunately this is not confirmed by other sources. Nevertheless, the importance of this account lies in the fact that it was not a surprising event for chronicler. The reign of Knut Lavard was however short-lived as in 1131 he was assassinated by his relatives during the Danish struggle of succession.

---

24 ARF, Year 789.
25 ARF, Year 817.
27 ibidem., and ibid., pp. 168-169.
28 HB, 1.49.
29 HB, 1.49.
30 HB, 1.49-50.

*Collegium Medievale 2003*
As for the early Obodrite rulers Vilchan, Slavomir and Chedrog, they were most of the time referred to as kings or princes by the *Annales Regni Francorum*.\(^{31}\) No doubt, calling the eighth and ninth centuries Obodrite rulers kings is an exaggeration, nonetheless, it indicates the unique position of the Obodrites among the other Polabian Slavs and recognition of this by their western neighbours. Furthermore it is worth noting that in the eleventh century German king Conrad III in a letter to the priest Vinzelin referred to Henry, Gottschalk’s son as *Hinricus Slavorum Rex*.\(^{32}\) The sources are usually inconsistent in relation to terminology for the Polabian political entities and the Polabian rulers. Unfortunately lack of space does not allow us to cite all relevant evidence.\(^{33}\) Nonetheless, all the evidence is cumulatively convincing that the Obodrite principality and its rulers stood out among the other Polabian Slavs in their importance. On the international scene, their contemporary western neighbours perceived the Obodrites as an important regional political entity on a par with duchies and smaller kingdoms such as Saxony, Bohemia, Denmark or Poland. This recognition is also visible in Saxon and German acceptance of the Mecklenburgian duchy as a separate principality within the Empire after 1167, and acceptance of the descendants of prince Niklot as the princes of the Empire, while the territory inhabited by Sorbs and most of the Veleti was incorporated into the Marches ruled by the German margraves.

**Dynasties and Dynastic Politics**

The early tribal societies, whether Germanic or Slavic, did not possess clearly defined leadership and popular assembly elected the tribal leaders, usually for the duration of military conflicts. The Polabian Slavs of the migration period that is from the late fifth to the seventh centuries were such a society.\(^{34}\) In this context, examination of the Obodrite history from the late eighth century onwards can provide insight into development of their post-migration political and succession system. At the same time these developments can be compared with the Germanic people, including the Scandinavians, who by that time were already predominantly ruled by the hereditary rulers.

\(^{31}\)ARF, year 817, 826.  
\(^{32}\)Christiansen 1984:294 (n10).  
\(^{33}\)For the Obodrite rulers commonly called prince, dux or rex and for their principality called duchy or kingdom, see: AF, Year 844, 862; and AB, Year 861, 870, 871; and TM, II.12, 14(9); III.18; IV.2; VIII.5; and AOB, II.LXVI(64); III.XIX (18); and HB, I.19,34, 36, 38, 41, 46, 48; and Versus De Vita Vincelini, verses 82, 88, 109; and Sidonis Epistola.  
\(^{34}\)Labuda 1990:534–537; and Russocki 1990:562–563.
As early as the turn of the ninth century, at least two rulers, Drazhko and Chedrog, were from the same family, father and son respectively. It is likely that Slavomir who ruled for a while between them was also their relative.\textsuperscript{35} Nothing is known about Vilchan, a predecessor of Drazhko. But a consistency in Obodrite foreign affairs under Vilchan and Drazhko and the alliance with the Franks indicates a continuation of state policies and possibly a dynastic policy as well. Furthermore \textit{Annales Regni Francorum} used the phrase «merits of his ancestors» in reference to Chedrog.\textsuperscript{36} The plural form indicates that it refers not only to his father Drazhko but someone else. And Vilchan fits perfectly there. It is worth noting that Louis the Pious’ intervention in an Obodrite succession struggle and his demand that Slavomir should share the principality with Chedrog\textsuperscript{37}, suggests that hereditary succession was already recognized among the Obodrites.

Lack of evidence prevents us from making any serious claims for the period between 830’s and the 950’s, and how the ninth century Obodrite rulers Gostomysł and Dobomysł may have been related to each other. On the basis that the second root of their names, «mysł», is the same, Timothy Reuter suggested that they were related.\textsuperscript{38} Although plausible, this is rather a weak argument. It is also unknown how those two rulers were related to their predecessor Chedrog or to the later rulers Stoignev and Nakon. From around the 950’s and possibly earlier, relatives of Nakon, who became known as the Nakonid dynasty, ruled the Obodrites. There is no doubt that the Nakonid dynasty was well established and recognized as legitimate at least since the middle of the tenth century when in 955 Nakon succeeded his brother Stoignev.\textsuperscript{39}

So despite some interruptions Nakonids were the undisputed ruling dynasty of the Obodrites. Writing about the times immediately after the assassination of the Obodrite ruler Gottschalk in 1066, Helmold of Bosau stated: «the principate passed by hereditary succession to his son Butue [Budivoy]».\textsuperscript{40} This clearly implies that the Germans also recognized them as rightful rulers. His eldest son Pribislav succeeded Niklot, the founder of a new dynasty, in 1160. His and his successors’ rights to rule the Obodrites and Mecklenburgian Duchy were recognized in 1167 by Henry the Lion and most likely by the Emperor. Niklot’s germanised descend-

\textsuperscript{35} ARF, Year 789, 798, 817 & 821.
\textsuperscript{36} ARF, Year 823.
\textsuperscript{37} ARF, Year 817.
\textsuperscript{38} Reuter 1992:49n.
\textsuperscript{39} Wasiłewski 1977:68–70.
\textsuperscript{40} HB, I.25.
ants carried the title of dukes of Mecklenburg from 1348 until collapse of the German Empire in 1918.

In medieval times people's ethnic affiliation did not go beyond the regional, tribal level. The cornerstone of the medieval world was a ruler, his dynasty, and the territory they controlled by right of inheritance. Therefore, most medieval politics revolved around these basic principles. It is therefore not surprising that the most common political practice to secure or strengthen alliances was arranged marriages between the ruling houses. Here again, by looking into the dynastic politics of the Obodrite rulers it can be revealed how their rulers were perceived by the other contemporary dynasts.

As early as the second half of the tenth century a daughter of an Obodrite prince Mstivoy was married to the Danish king Harald Bluetooth. The close Obodrite dynastic ties with Scandinavia continued in following centuries. Around the turn of the eleventh century, the Swedish king Olof Skötkonung married an Obodrite Estrith-Edla, again certainly a Nakonid. In the first half of the eleventh century, the Obodrite prince Gottschalk was married to princess Sigrid, a daughter of the Danish king Sven Estridsson. His son, prince Henry, probably also married into the Danish royal family, as some of his sons had Scandinavian names. In the 1150's princess Katherine, king Waldemar I of Denmark's sister, married the exiled Obodrite prince Priszlavus. In the second half of the twelfth century, Borivoy, a son of the Obodrite ruler Pribislav, married Matilda, an illegitimate daughter of duke Henry the Lion of Saxony. At that time, duke Henry was the most powerful and influential prince within the Empire, beside the Emperor himself.

All this evidence shows that by the close of the eighth century, and most likely earlier, hereditary succession was an accepted practice among the Obodrites. It is reasonable to assume that the succession was decided or accepted by the tribal assembly, the veche, but the choice must have been restricted to the members of the recognized ruling family. It has to be remembered that the survival of a tribal assembly among peoples in the region was nothing unusual. For example, the tribal assembly of Danish nobles was still influential and instrumental in the

---

41 Southern 1993:75.
43 AOB, II.XXXIX (37) and Tschan 1959:81n.
44 HB, 1.24–25.
45 HB, 1.38, 48.
46 Christiansen 1981:911.
47 For a role of Slavic veche in Polabian political process, see: Zaroff 2001:143–182.
confirmation of kings as late as the twelfth century. Without written records, it could be only said that the political process of gradual transformation from the «military democracy» to hereditary succession must have taken place sometime between the seventh and mid eighth century. It was firmly entrenched at the time of the early Nakonids, by the middle of tenth century, and customary from then onwards. This shows that, as in the rest of contemporary Europe, the Obodrites' succession was based on hereditary rights from relatively early times.

Furthermore, the dynastic links between the Obodrites and other ruling families of the region clearly show that the Obodrite rulers used inter-marriage for a political purpose as much as the other rulers. But above all, the very fact that such liaisons took place shows again that the Obodrites and their rulers were seen more or less as equals by many other European dynasts.

Socio-economic Changes and Regional Integration

Taking into consideration that political unification of the Obodrites began around the middle of the eighth century it would be expected that significant social and economic changes also took place in this period as well. After all, political, social and economic developments are reciprocal and do not take place in isolation. Absence of written records for the Migration Period and the times shortly after leaves no choice but to rely on interpretation of the archaeological evidence.

Excavations in the Mecklenburg region reveal that during the ninth century numerous smaller circular forts, measuring between 35 and 50 meters in diameter, appeared alongside the larger fortified settlements. Known as the «Ringwall» type, they were located in the lowlands, and on the lakeshores and riverbanks. Associated finds indicate changes in the distribution of wealth and those small forts are regarded as residences of emerging tribal nobility. The social stratification and the emergence of an Obodrite upper class is confirmed in historical sources from the beginning of the ninth century. According to the Annales Regni Francorum, prince Chedrog's envoys to the Emperor in 823 were Obodrite nobles. On another occasion «certain leading men of his people» negotiated the release of Chedrog from imperial internment in 826. In the second half of the tenth century, when the bishop of Oldenburg, Wago, visited Mecklenburg a number of so called «most illustrious» Obodrites came to greet him. During the 1147 crusade, a

48 HB, I.73.
50 ARF, Year 823, 826.
51 HB, I.14, in Strzelczyk & Matuszewski, ed. & trans., Helmolda Kronika Slowian.

Collegium Medievale 2003
number of Obodrite nobles defended Werle during the siege of the stronghold.\textsuperscript{52} Besides, prince Niklot was himself an Obodrite magnate who rose to power and replaced the Nakonid dynasty.\textsuperscript{53} Numerous other nobles or members of the tribal aristocracy were reported in the sources by name. A few examples will be cited. The \textit{Annales Regni Francorum} mentions Duke Godelaib in the early ninth century in relation to the Danish invasion of the Obodrites.\textsuperscript{54} Sometime in the first half of the eleventh century a magnate Blusso married prince Gottschalk’s sister." Bishop Gerold of Oldenburg and Helmold of Bosau himself in the 1150’s visited Tyeshimir, another «influential man» of Wagrien.\textsuperscript{55} And we know of the magnate Rochel (also called Race) of Wagrien who resided near Oldenburg and gained fame as a pirate.\textsuperscript{56}

Progressive social stratification and the formation of an upper class must have come with the emergence of dependent people. For example, one of the conditions of truce after the 1147 crusade was the release of Danish prisoners of war by the Obodrites. Helmold of Bosau reported a complaint that the Slavs only released some old ones, less productive.\textsuperscript{57} Also as late as the 1160’s and 1170’s the slave market at Mecklenburg offered a large number of Danish captives for sale on market days.\textsuperscript{58} That shows that war captives, Slavs and non-Slavs, were valued as serfs and labourers and formed part of a dependent population. The number of dependent people in the Obodrite principality must have been limited. A large section of the population, in fact a majority, must have remained free until the second half of the twelfth century. Most likely they were still organised into clans who lived and worked on their own land.\textsuperscript{59} The precise percentage of dependent people is hard to determine and there is no doubt that was smaller than in the West. So, although the picture is far from being complete, the archaeological evidence and historical sources indicate that social stratification of the Obodrite society became more marked sometime in the eighth century. The emergence of a distinct upper class came together with the appearance of bondsmen. Still, by the twelfth century the number of bondsmen formed a small proportion of the

\textsuperscript{52}HB, I.93(92).
\textsuperscript{53}Christiansen 1981:789 (n270); and Leciejewicz 1990:260.
\textsuperscript{54}ARF, Year 808.
\textsuperscript{55}AOB, III.LI (50).
\textsuperscript{56}HB, I.84.
\textsuperscript{57}HB, I.55, 69.
\textsuperscript{58}HB, I.65.
\textsuperscript{59}HB, II.109(13).
\textsuperscript{60}Łowmianski 1967:422–423.
Obodrite society, with all its economic implications. Furthermore, it seems to be reasonable to assume that the people who fell into dependency were recruited mainly from among those displaced by frequent military conflicts sought the protection of stronger leaders. There were also many prisoners of war and other captives. Many were resettled in towns or strongholds as serfs or craftsmen, or as dependent peasants on ducal or aristocratic land.

For the Slavs of the Migration Period the small tribe was the biggest socio-political unit known. In the Obodrite case this division into the Obodrite proper, Polabyane, Varnove, Vagrove, Drevyane, Glinyane, Smolintsy, Bitintsy and others finds its reflection in historical records. However, political centralisation and social transformation between the eighth and twelfth centuries, brought yet another important change in the Obodrite principality: a fusion of smaller tribal units into a regional ethnic entity. Beginning as early as the second half of the eighth century the Annales Regni Francorum referred to the Obodrites without mentioning any internal divisions into smaller tribes. The annals and other sources also give a general impression that the Obodrites were perceived as a single entity. This surely reflected the political situation in the region, but can also be interpreted as a sign of the emergence of a larger, regional ethnic unit.

Furthermore, an issue of the Obodrite division sometimes mentioned in sources should be addressed. The Vagrove of Wagrien were first mentioned in the sources in the tenth century by Widukind of Corvey, but not in the earlier sources. It is hard to believe that the earlier annalists would have been unaware of clear tribal divisions in the region, and would not report them, if they existed. Adam of Bremen was aware of old tribal divisions of the Obodrites and so was Helmold of Bosau, who based an early part of his chronicle on Adam of Bremen's work. But it has to be remembered that the same chroniclers divided the Nordalbingian Saxons into Holzatians, Sturmarrians and Ditmarshians, although the Saxons had already been a single people for a couple of centuries. In the case of the Obodrites on a number of occasions both distinguish only the Vagrove, as a western, and the Obodrite as an eastern branch of the same people, and occasionally mentioned Polabyane lands but rather as a territorial division. It also appears to be the same

---

61 AOB, II.XXI(18).
62 ARF, Year 789, 795, 804, 808, 817; and AB, Year 838, 867; and AF, Year 844, 858, 862, 889, 895; and HB, I.2.
64 Tschan 1966:34–35.
65 AOB, II.XVII(15); and HB I.47.
with Thietmar of Merseburg who distinguished between the Obodrites and Vagrove. Furthermore, Helmold of Bosau reported that during the Obodrite-Saxon conflict in the early 1160's, «Slavs of Oldenburg» who were obliged to join the Saxon army sympathised with Pribislav and provided him with the intelligence. In this context, it appears that the Obodrite division, sometimes mentioned in the sources, as in the case of the Saxons, was an echo of the past, rather than a real ethno-cultural division. It is hard to say when such a complex social and cultural process of regional ethnic integration was completed but it was probably sometime during the ninth, or at the latest in the early tenth century. Furthermore, some supporting evidence for the process comes from the disappearance of lesser Obodrite tribes such as Varnove, Smolintsy and Bitintsy from the historical records.

The historical evidence shows that the internal conflicts that plagued the Obodrites in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were dynastic and sometime religious, not caused by tribal divisions. If inter-tribal friction existed, it would certainly have been reported, such as the conflict within the Veletian Union between Redarove on one side and Chrerspyane together with Khyzhane on the other. Some separatist tendencies and revolts were reported in the principality by Helmold of Bosau but not among the Obodrites. In 1128 it involved the Khyzhane and in 1153 the Khyzhane and Chrerspyane. However, it has to be remembered that until 1057, both the Chrerspyane and Khyzhane had been for a long time members of the Veletian Union, and could not have been well integrated with the Obodrites. Moreover, in the course of history the Obodrite principality suffered a number of partitions but only as a result of involvement of external forces.

Summarising, both historical sources and archaeological data suggest that process of social stratification among the Obodrites intensified during the eighth century. It continued progressively over the next four hundred years of independent Obodrite existence. By the twelfth century the Obodrite upper class was a distinct social group, and so were the bondsmen. The latter were mainly recruited from war captives, of various Slavic and non-Slavic origins, and probably from some local people displaced and dispossessed by military conflicts. Still, both the

---

66 TM, VIII.5.  
67 HB, II.100(4).  
68 Leciejewicz 1990:59, 361.  
69 HB, 1.21.  
70 HB, 1.48 and 1.71.  
71 AF, Year 844 and HB, I.52.
upper class and unfree people formed a fraction of a society where the majority of the people remained free; a structure similar to that of contemporary Scandinavia. So, in this respect the Obodrites differed from their western neighbours (Empire), where unfree people formed a relatively large section of the society.

In the same period, together with the socio-political changes the Polabian Slavs of the northwest went through a process of regional ethno-cultural integration. It could be assumed that in the course of the ninth century the four major and some smaller tribes fused into a single Obodrite regional ethnic and cultural entity. Presented evidence suggests that the Obodrite people were bound together by the same ties and links as the other regional ethnic groups of contemporary central Europe, such as the Bavarians, Saxons, Bohemians or the Polyan of Great Poland. In this context the division of the Obodrites sometimes mentioned in the sources reflected only an old tradition, as in the case of the Saxons, rather then being an existing tribal reality.

Ducal Authority and Power Base
The issue of the authority and the power base of the Obodrite rulers is, again, obscure. There is not much direct evidence for the nature and the mechanism of the governing of the Obodrite principality, during its independent existence that is between the eight and the twelfth centuries. Hence, only a broad picture could be deducted from the secondary evidence. According to Helmold of Bosau, in the 1120’s prince Henry summoned a large army from his principality for the campaign against Ranove of Rügen.\textsuperscript{72} Prior to the crusade of 1147, Niklot constructed a new large fortification at the strategic stronghold of Dobin in a very short time.\textsuperscript{73} At the same time he assembled a large fleet and his naval force attacked Lübeck, by that time a town already controlled by the Saxons.\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, archaeological excavations, especially in Mecklenburg Land, have revealed numerous large forts and other large constructions. For example, at Mecklenburg a ducal fort enclosed around 1.5 hectares. Its fortifications of earthwork and stone with wooden frames were 12 metres thick and 10 metres high.\textsuperscript{75} At Bechren-Lübchin, a wooden bridge measured 300 metres.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{72} HB, 1.38.
\textsuperscript{73} HB, 1.62; and other defensive works: Christiansen 1981:726–727 (n57).
\textsuperscript{74} HB, 1.63.
\textsuperscript{75} Herrmann 1980:198; and Herrmann 1981:vol.2:577–578.
\textsuperscript{76} Hensel 1987:491; and Leciejewicz 1990:29.
750 in length was excavated, and at Alte Burg near Sukow a 1.2 kilometres two-
way log-paved road across the marshes was unearthed.

Common sense dictates that the ability of the Obodrite rulers to summon in a
short time a large army and fleet, and continue prolonged wars would not be
possible without a relatively high degree of authority and power exercised by
rulers. At the same time the ability to order and organize construction of defen-
sive forts, large fortified settlements and bridges, labour intensive enterprises,
point to strong ducal authority and dependent people to carry on the task. Moreo-
ver, according to the Jewish merchant Ibrahim Ibn Yacub. Nakon (955- c. 966/ 967) maintained a large and well armed, mounted retinue. The size of Nakon’s
retinue is unknown but it must have been relatively large, as he listed Nakon’s
principality together with Bulgaria, Bohemia and Poland as the four most impor-
tant Slavic states in central and southern Europe. A single member of the Slavic
retinue, known as «druzhina», required the support of about 10 people to be fed,
clothed and equipped. The retinues must have existed before and after Nakon.
Without professional or rather semi-professional soldiers the Obodrites would
have been unable to withstand a Germanic «offensive» between the ninth and
mid-twelfth centuries. At the same time, the Obodrite prince would have been
unable to maintain a large number of his troops on a permanent basis himself,
even taking into consideration that some members of his retinue were engaged in
crafts and commerce during peace time, a practice known from tenth century
Poland. This would only be possible when a large proportion of the goods, food
etc. were extracted from the wider populace. This was a reciprocal mechanism as
the princely retinue itself was the backbone of state formation, representing po-
litical and military might and ability to enforce ducal will. Hence, as a logical
consequence, some form of tax paid to the prince would also be expected. A hint
that such a tax existed comes from later times, from Adam of Bremen who said
about Gottschalk (reigned 1043-1066) that: «[the] Slavs payed him a tribute». Some other indirect evidence comes from Helmold’s chronicle. The following
account refers to prince Henry (c. 1093–1127), Gottschalk’s son:

But when all the Slavic peoples, those, namely who lived to the east and
south, heard that there had arisen among them a prince who said that they

79 ibid., 461.
80 Labuda 1990:543.
must obey the Christian laws and pay tribute to the princes, they were extremely indignant... All the nations of the eastern Slavs served Henry under tribute... He admonished the Slavic people that a man should cultivate his fields and do useful and appropriate work.\(^{83}\)

The last part of the account is of particular interest. Taking into consideration that the Polabian Slavic economy was always based on farming there was really nothing about which Henry could «admonish» his subjects in relation to agriculture. Hence, the meaning of the passage must be rather that Henry imposed some measures to extract some revenues from his subjects. So, all these accounts strongly suggest that a form of tax was paid to the Obodrite prince. Unfortunately, the details are unknown.

The Polish historian Gerard Labuda postulated that the above form of tax was a continuation of the so-called *Biskopovnitsa* – a Bishop’s Tax, imposed on the Obodrite lands by Otto I in the tenth century. Labuda argued that when the Obodrites regained their independence in 983, the Slavic princes continue to extract a tithe from their subjects.\(^{84}\) At the time when a Bishop’s tax was collected from the Obodrite lands, that is in the tenth century, there was no Imperial or Saxon administration there, at least in the Eastern Obodrite lands. In this context, it could be assumed that the Obodrite upper class participated in tax collecting. There is some supporting evidence for this in Helmold of Bosau, where the magnate Billug collected the tax for bishop Wago.\(^{85}\) It would be unusual for a ruler of any principality to miss the opportunity to extract some revenues; hence, with the system in place, Labuda’s claim that *Biskopovnitsa* was collected in the post-983 period is a reasonable assumption.

Similarly there is no direct evidence for what form of administration existed in the Obodrite principality. No doubt it would not have been a large, sophisticated apparatus. Helmold of Bosau reported concerning Henry of Lübeck, Gottschalk’s son, in the 1127:

> He became most famous among the Slavic peoples, nobly illustrious in matters pertaining to virtue and the blessings of peace... he exterminated from the earth robbers and vagabonds.\(^{86}\)

\(^{82}\) AOB, III.XIX (18).
\(^{83}\) ibidem.
\(^{84}\) Labuda 1981:25.
\(^{85}\) HB, 1.14.
\(^{86}\) HB, 1.34.
The account suggests that Henry imposed some stricter political control and maintained internal order in his principality. Unfortunately, the lack of evidence prevents us from making any detailed claims as to how he administered his domain. It seems reasonable to say that he must have stationed garrisons of his loyal retainers in major provincial strongholds to maintain order. The commanders of the garrisons had also most likely the authority to extract the tax, in whatever form it was imposed on the population.

There is a strong possibility for yet another obligation toward a ruler, that of providing support and maintenance for him, his associates and retinue while they were travelling around the principality. A practice well known in Merovingian and Carolingian kingdoms. The same practice is known from the other early Slavic states, for example from Poland. As for the Obodrites, the evidence is weak and circumstantial again. Helmold of Bosau reported about Lübeck that: «Henry (Gottschalk’s son) often sojourned there with his family». And this suggestion that he frequently travelled around his domain makes that type of service very plausible.

The other area where the revenues could come from were towns and commerce. As early as the second half of the eighth century the Obodrite town-port of Reric developed into a flourishing commercial and trade centre, becoming one of the most important ports on the south Baltic coast. In 808, during the Dano-Obodrite conflict, Reric was sacked by Danes who forcefully resettled a large number of its craftsmen and merchants in their own trade centre of Hedeby, near modern Schleswig. By the ninth century strongholds such as Demmin, Mecklenburg, Oldenburg, Schwerin and Ratzeburg developed into early towns. They were not of great size by the modern standards. Those centres were engaged in profitable sea trade with such Scandinavian trade centres as Hedeby, Birka, Sigtuna and others.

---

87 On Merovingians, see: James 1988a:183; and on Carolingians: McKitterick 1983:78–79.
88 Russocki 1990:568; and Wyrozumski 1984:82.
89 HB, I.34.
90 ARF, Year 808. The identification of Reric is controversial. Adam of Bremen on one occasion called the Obodrite Proper – «Reregi». AOB, Book II.XXI(18). This seems to be applying the name of town Reric to the people who lived around. As the main centre of the Obodrite Proper was Mecklenburg, most likely Reric was a Danish name for Mecklenburg itself. Váně 1977:228.
91 ARF, Year 808.
92 Leciejewicz 1990:546-559; and on the Baltic commerce, see: AOB, I.LX (62).
Following the destruction of Reric, Oldenburg dominated the Obodrite trade in the northwest. The settlement was founded in the seventh century, but grew into the main Obodrite centre during the ninth and tenth centuries when two fortified boroughs grew up around the main stronghold.93

The socio-political and economic changes in the Obodrite land were best visible in the emergence and rapid growth of a new «capital», Lübeck. It was a small settlement on the Trave river, founded in the ninth century. Initially it was of no significance as it lay in a sparsely inhabited area. Archaeological evidence shows that it underwent a rapid growth during the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the entire area became densely settled. Its political and commercial importance grew under Gottschalk and his son Henry. According to archaeological evidence, a stone church was built next to the prince’s residence. The retinue quarters, mint, granaries and storerooms all stood within a fortified stronghold. The settlement extended far beyond the fortification toward the Trave river where boroughs designated for craftsmen, merchants and servants stood. Across the river, there was a separate merchant and trading colony, which was inhabited mainly by Scandinavian and German tradesmen. Lübeck remained a ducal seat under Sventopelk and Knut Lavard; and continued as a Western Obodrite «capital» under Pribislav of Lübeck until 1139.94 It was also a junction for the main eastern trade route, which connected Lübeck with Szczecin (German Stettin) and beyond. To the west the route linked Lübeck with Westphalia.95 The Saxons acknowledged the political and economic importance of its location when in 1143 Adolph of Schaumburg founded a new Lübeck near by on the site of old Slavic fort Bucu.96 Furthermore, Henry minted the first Polabian coins there in the early twelfth century.97 It is worth noting against this evidence that in Richard Barber’s The Penguin Guide to Medieval Europe, published in 1984, it can still be read about Lübeck:

It was a trading post between the Christian west and the pagan east when it first appears in history, in the eleventh century. Destroyed by Slav raiders, it was rebuilt on a more secure site about 1143.98

---

96 HB, I.57.
97 Bartlett 1993:283.
98 Barber 1984:304–305.
As already shown, political and socio-economic changes stimulated the growth of large strongholds. Boroughs inhabited by service people began to spread around them. They attracted full-time craftsmen and traders who settled there for protection and convenience. Also, many captives were settled there as craftsmen or servants by dukes or magnates. Slowly many such strongholds grew into early urban centres. Still it has to be remembered, that, as in the rest of northern and central Europe, a relatively small number of people was involved in trade and it was mostly concentrated on luxurious goods. And the urban population formed only a fraction of medieval Slavic society, which was basically rural. Other Polabian Slavs, the pagan Ranove of Rügen, levied tax on commerce and although there is no direct evidence it would be unlikely that Obodrite rulers would not have capitalized on the growth of towns and trade and levied some form of tax on commerce, especially Henry, who was evidently instrumental in the growth of Lübeck. It has to be admitted that the evidence for the authority and power base of the dukes presented above is circumstantial. Practically nothing is known about their administration, but the Obodrite rulers from the middle of the tenth century onwards could raise large armies or fleets, organize and conduct extensive construction of defensive fortifications, etc. It is also worth noting that they managed to resist strong political pressure from the Saxons and the Empire for almost four hundred years. Furthermore, it should be remembered that the Obodrite rulers had extensive political, economic and dynastic links with the Empire, Saxony and the Danes; and at least Gottschalk had a monastic education. Hence, it would be very unusual if they did not try to imitate proven western models in their own principality. Consequently, a ducal authority must have been fully recognized, and there must have been mechanisms to execute a duke’s will. As for the size of the revenues, taking into consideration that the majority of population was free, the process of economic feudalisation was much less advanced in the Obodrite principalities than in the West. However, there are indications that it was on a par with Scandinavia. Continuation of a Bishop’s tax after 983 seems to be a reasonable claim, but its collection might not have been very efficient. As the case of Lübeck under Henry at the turn of the twelfth century indicates, craftsmen and trade in growing towns must have provided the rulers with some form of income. However, urban centres were smaller and less numerous than in the West. As a

99 HB, II.108(12).
100 Leciejewicz 1981:181.

Collegium Medievale 2003
result it has to be acknowledged that ducal revenues were limited, in comparison with other western and Scandinavian principalities.

**Obodrites and Christianity**

Finally the controversial issue of the Obodrite relationship to encroaching Christianity should be explored and addressed. There is a widely held view that the Polabian Slavs were strongly anti-Christian and fiercely resisted any attempt to convert them.\(^{102}\)

Medieval Christianity was much more than a collection of religious beliefs. Besides its theological aspects, no doubt the concept of Western Christendom was a powerful ideological and political philosophy. On the political scene of medieval Europe, the Empire was the dominant political force and often perceived as Western Christendom itself. In this context any ruler in Central and Eastern Europe could not be treated equally or even taken seriously without converting to Christianity. Hence, in reality conversion was the requirement for getting international (European) recognition. This was fully realized by dynasties of Great Moravia, Bohemia, Poland, Kievan Rus and Hungary, who converted in the course of the ninth and tenth centuries. Furthermore, Christianity had wide internal implications for any ruler of a pagan principality. The new religion sanctified a ruler and provided an ideological framework for the integration of various people into a more uniform political and ethnic unit. The Obodrites must have encountered Christianity as early as the second half of the eighth century when contacts with the Franks became more common. The first Obodrite of importance to convert was the exiled prince Slavomir, who converted to Christianity in 821, prior to his attempt to recover the Obodrite principality.\(^{103}\)

There is no evidence of any serious attempts for Christianisation in the region until the middle of the tenth century when the Empire forced a tributary relationship upon the Obodrites. Around the late 960's or early 970's the Eastern Obodrite chieftain Billug married the sister of a German bishop, Wago of Oldenburg.\(^{104}\) No doubt Billug must have been a Christian. It is worth noting that the church of St. Peter's was founded at Mecklenburg and a nunnery attached to it sometime between 968 and 973.\(^{105}\) At that time Mecklenburg was a major Eastern Obodrite

\(^{102}\) For examples of such views, see: Keen 1968:88; and Ryley 1926:304.

\(^{103}\) ARF, Year 821.

\(^{104}\) HB, L.12–14.

\(^{105}\) HB, L.12.

*Collegium Medievale 2003*
centre, and although in a tributary relationship with the Empire, it was under the firm control of prince Mstivoy (reigned c. 966/967 – after 995). Sometime around 980, the same Mstivoy asked for the hand of the niece of the Saxon duke Bernhard Billung. It appears that she was promised to him as he and the Obodrite troops participated in the imperial Italian campaign of 981. Although the marriage did not take place, for whatever reasons, the whole story indicates that Mstivoy must have been a Christian to have been considered. Thietmar of Merseburg, who mentioned a priest Awiko who was Mstivoy’s chaplain in the period after 983, confirms that.\textsuperscript{106} This evidence puts in question the assumed anti-Christian character of the Slavic uprising of 983 and 990, at least in the case of the Obodrites, because the same Mstivoy, no doubt Christian at least after 983, sacked Hamburg and pillaged Saxony.

Other members of the Nakonid dynasty were also Christians. Mstislav (reigned after 995 - 1018), allowed the bishopric of Oldenburg to be re-established around 1013/4.\textsuperscript{107} Mstislav was succeeded by Pribignev (c. 1018–1031) who was regarded by Saxo Grammaticus as a good Christian.\textsuperscript{108} Pribignev’s son, Gottschalk, was «being instructed in learned disciplines at Lüneburg», at St Michael’s monastery,\textsuperscript{109} most likely in order to become a priest. Pribignev received a «bad press» from Adam of Bremen, who called him a «bad Christian». This however could be easily explained by Adam’s biased view. There is evidence that Pribignev was reluctant to pay an Episcopal tithe and rarely delivered any payments.\textsuperscript{110} For that reason Adam of Bremen, a member of the German clergy at the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, could see him as a bad Christian. After the assassination of Pribignev the Obodrites were ruled by Ratibor (reigned 1031–1043), who according to Adam of Bremen was a Christian and allowed Christianity to be preached during his reign.\textsuperscript{111}

Gottschalk (1043–1066) as said before spent some time at the monastery of Lüneburg, and this strongly influenced his internal and foreign policy. His monastic background gave him an education and broadened his horizons beyond his peripheral principality. He fully realized the political implication of conversion and the international position of the Empire. There is evidence that he vigorously

\textsuperscript{106} Mstivoy story: AOB, II.42 & HB, I.16; and on the priest Awiko, see: TM, III.18.
\textsuperscript{107} HB, I.18.
\textsuperscript{108} Adam on Pribignev: AOB II.LXVI (64); and Saxo on Pribignev: SG, X.XVII.
\textsuperscript{109} HB, I.19.
\textsuperscript{110} HB, I.18.
\textsuperscript{111} AOB, II.LXXI (69): II.LXXIX (75).
promoted the Christianisation of his principality.\textsuperscript{112} Two new Obodrite bishoprics at Mecklenburg and Ratzeburg were established in 1059/60, besides that of Oldenburg.\textsuperscript{113} On a political stage, it appears that his further plans were to form a fully independent duchy, associated with the German Empire. Ecclesiastically he must have aimed for links with the Empire in a similar way to the Bohemia of the Plemyslid dynasty.\textsuperscript{114} There is also another possibility that his further aims were to establish an independent archdiocese, as in the case of Piast’s Poland. Gottschalk must have played a role in consecration of bishops of Mecklenburg and Ratzeburg and it is symptomatic that neither was of a German extraction.\textsuperscript{115} This would have been an attempt to reduce eastern German clergy influence in the region and possibly a first step toward the independence of the Obodrite church. The political climate was also favourable for such moves. Both emperors Henry III and Henry IV were not very happy with the growing strength and separatism of the Saxon duke Herman Billung.\textsuperscript{116} The year 1066 resulted in the assassination of Gottschalk and the destruction of all three Obodrite bishoprics. This was probably the only truly pagan rebellion in Obodrite history. In the following reign of leader named Krut (1066 – c. 1093) the Christianity suffered a serious setback. However, it is unlikely that it was totally wiped out. Its practice was probably allowed, but it lost its official status. Gottschalk’s son Henry (1093 – 1127) deposed Krut and reverted to the policies of his father and his commitment to Christianity is well attested.\textsuperscript{117} However, he did not attempt to re-establish the Obodrite bishoprics. Instead the church at the city of Lübeck became a religious centre for the Obodrites.\textsuperscript{118} Toward the end of his reign, around 1126, Henry allowed a prominent priest, and true missionary, Vicelin, a future bishop of Oldenburg, to carry out missionary work from Lübeck.\textsuperscript{119} Again lack of evidence allows us only to speculate that Henry might have waited for the opportunity to re-establish ecclesiastical structures in the Obodrite lands on his own terms, possibly with Lübeck as the all-Obodrite bishopric. Vicelin began his work around 1127 under Sventopelk, Henry’s son and successor. However,

\textsuperscript{112} AOB, III.XIX (18); and SG, X.XVII; and HB, I.20.
\textsuperscript{113} HB, I.22.
\textsuperscript{114} Váňa 1977:211.
\textsuperscript{115} HB, I.22, and AOB III.XXI(20) and Tschan 1966:96n.
\textsuperscript{116} Dvornik 1959:298.
\textsuperscript{117} HB, I.34, 41, 46.
\textsuperscript{118} HB I. 41, 54.
\textsuperscript{119} HB, I.46.
Sventopelk was assassinated in 1128/29 and with him a main line of the Nakonid dynasty expired.\textsuperscript{120}

The last Nakonid ruler from another branch, Pribislav of Lübeck, who in the 1130's controlled the Western Obodrite lands, and Niklot of the Eastern Obodrites were accused by Helmold of being hostile to the Christians.\textsuperscript{121} The claim was certainly made because Pribislav of Lübeck made a number of successful attacks on Saxony, and expelled some priests and monks from Segeberg. However, at the same time, his Lübeck church and Vincelin's mission functioned without problems. Pribislav of Lübeck was aware of the potential of Vincelin's mission, while he perceived a monastery at Segeberg as an outpost of the Hamburg archbishopric.\textsuperscript{122} Years later Helmold himself, accompanying bishop Gerold of Oldenburg, visited Pribislav, dined and slept in his residence, and they all attended mass.\textsuperscript{123} So, Pribislav of Lübeck was definitely anti-Saxon, but not anti-Christian as Helmold claims.

The crusade of 1147 against the Eastern Obodrites was evidently of a political and not a religious nature. It is worth noting that Helmold's vivid description of the preparations and crusade itself does practically not include any religious references.\textsuperscript{124} Niklot (1131–1160) himself was definitely a Christian as his name deriving from Nicholas indicates, although rather indifferent and cynical toward Christianity.\textsuperscript{125} Not long after, in 1149, the bishopric of Mecklenburg was again re-established.\textsuperscript{126}

Summarizing the issue of Christianity in Obodrite history, the emerging picture is different and much more complex than the popular assumption. The evidence presented indicates that many Obodrite rulers and prominent people understood well the realities of their contemporary world and fully realized the political implication and benefits associated with conversion. In this respect the Obodrites differed from their fellow Polabian Slavs who in their majority tried to stick to their old beliefs. From the foundation of the Oldenburg bishoprics, in 968, the Obodrite principality was formally Christian. The large-scale conversion of the Obodrite people must have taken place sometime around the middle of the tenth

\textsuperscript{120} HB, 1.48.
\textsuperscript{121} HB, 1.52.
\textsuperscript{122} HB, 1.53.
\textsuperscript{123} HB, 1.83(82).
\textsuperscript{124} HB, 1.62, 65.
\textsuperscript{125} HB, 1.84(83).
\textsuperscript{126} HB, 1.69.
century as indicated by Helmold of Bosau. This is at a time when the Eastern Obodrites, although tributaries of the Empire, retained their independence. Most Obodrite rulers, from Mstivoy onwards were Christians and the later Nakonids vigorously promoted Christianity for political reasons, but some probably out of conviction. From the time of Gottschalk, Christianity became an official policy. There are also strong indications that Gottschalk and his son Henry aimed for an independent Obodrite ecclesiastical structure. Furthermore, Helmold of Bosau wrote about thousands of converts among the Obodrites during Gottschalk’s reign. The chronicler might have exaggerated; nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that by the eleventh century a large section of the Obodrite upper class and many ordinary people were Christians, at least nominally. It is hard to believe that all the converts became Christians out of conviction, but it is also hard to believe that all converts relapsed into paganism after the 983 anti-Empire rebellion, and again after the pagan insurrection of 1066. Surely, large sections of the population must have remained pagan, but the conversion of an entire ethnic group or nation does not happen overnight. For example, Helmold of Bosau bitterly complained that the Holzatians, a northern branch of the Saxons, were still semi-pagan, many still worshiping holy groves and waters. This was in the twelfth century, long after the official Saxon conversion.

In this context, it appears that the alleged totally anti-Christian attitudes and obstinacy in defending the old faith, at least in the Obodrite case is a product of biased, but also contradictory reporting by the contemporary sources. It has to be remembered that these were written predominantly by German speaking clergy and that medieval Christianity in its eastern German version differed greatly from the Christianity of today. Ecclesiastical expansion had not only a missionary aspect. The Church had a less noble material incentive in its expansion to the east, as it meant more land grants and more tithes. Not surprisingly, the contemporary sources often gave the Obodrites a «bad press» simply because of a conflict of political and economic interests. Any independent developments and peaceful Christianisation from within the Obodrite principality deprived German speaking clergy and the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen of lucrative revenues. Consequently, the

---

127 HB, l.11.
128 HB, l.20, 22.
129 HB, l.16, 22.
130 HB, l.47.
132 HB, l.12.
destruction of the bishoprics in 983 and again in 1066 should not exclusively be seen in the context of religious conflict, but also as a destruction of the symbols of economic exploitation and the Empire’s «fifth column» on Obodrite soil. But this does not mean that all the Obodrites ran forward joyfully to be converted. There was a substantial opposition towards Christianity, as the events of 1066 show. Many Obodrites and other Polabian Slavs were much more hostile to the new faith than, for example, the Poles or Czechs. This however should not be a surprise. Many, if not the majority of the Polabian Slavs, perceived Christianity as an alien religion of their enemies as well as a vehicle of their political subjugation and economic exploitation. For most of them sword and cross became almost synonymous. In this context, Christianisation from within attempted by a number of the Obodrite rulers encountered greater opposition and difficulties, than for example, in the case of Poland, simply because, in Piast’s domain there was not a clear association of Christianity with foreign political power or economic exploitation.

Conclusion

Although many questions in relation to Obodrite history remain unanswered, and there are large areas awaiting research, the above work challenges the popular notion that the Obodrites were mere background or passive victims of the expanding Empire. The very fact that for over three and a half centuries they successfully resisted strong political pressure from the Empire and Saxony speaks for itself. It is also apparent that among all the Polabian Slavs the Obodrites were politically the most sophisticated, to a large extent due to their unique and challenging geo-political position.

Between the eighth and twelfth centuries, when confronted by Franks and later the Empire, the Obodrites responded with fundamental political, social and economic changes. The developments that took place can be summarised as follows.

First, the centralisation of power in hands of the Obodrite Proper rulers, which began sometime during the eighth century and culminated under the leadership of Gottschalk and his son Henry, brought the major Obodrite tribes into a single political unit. Despite a frequently tributary relationship with the Empire or Saxony the Obodrite principality remained basically independent until the second half of the twelfth century. It appears that the idea of the sovereign power of the ruler was not alien to the Obodrites. After all, they lived next to the Franks and the Empire. Not surprisingly, as early as the late eighth century hereditary succession was recognized by the Obodrite people. At that stage the tribal assembly must have had a big say in the succession but its influence declined over time.
Second, over this vital period, the cultural and ethnic affiliation of the Obodrite people shifted from small-scale tribalism towards a larger, regional ethnic identity. Definitely by the twelfth century the tribes of Eastern Holstein, Wagrien and Mecklenburg had fused into the single Obodrite people.

Third, signs of social stratification and labour specialization are clear in the eighth century archaeological records and in the earliest written sources. Progressively, the upper class was formed from tribal princes, regional and local chieftains and leading military men. Although the majority of the population remained free, there emerged a small but significant group of dependent people. The un-free must have been mainly recruited from among the people displaced and impoverished by the frequent wars and from among the war captives.

Fourth, a ducal retinue of professional or semi-professional warriors became a political power base as early as the tenth century, and possibly earlier. At least from the late tenth century a form of tax was extracted from some sections of the populace, and there are some indications that the Obodrite rulers capitalized on growing towns and commerce. In general the economic and political power base of the Obodrite state was modelled on the contemporary German duchies, albeit still far from the fully developed feudal economic relationship.

Fifth, the claim of a universal hostility of the Polabian Slavs toward Christianity is a broad generalisation and dangerous simplification of the complex issue. While the general population, with good reasons, was largely hostile to the new faith, many Obodrites and especially their rulers fully realized the political implication of conversion and vigorously promoted the new religion in their principalities. The degree of Christianisation in the twelfth century Obodrite principalities was most likely not smaller than in the case of contemporary Poland. The claims of their paganism, frequent in the sources written by clerics, served a more down-to-earth purpose, as it was used for the justification of conquest. And in turn it meant ecclesiastical expansion and more revenues.133

Sixth, in the context of the Frankish, Imperial German and Saxon history it is clear that eastern policies and relations with the Obodrites was an important part of their politics. The expansion to the east was a long struggle and over the centuries much effort and resources were directed there. In a sense a long lasting imperial Italian involvement diverted the Empire’s attention from the east. But at

133 Besides the Obodrites a number of the Stodorane rulers were Christian, such as prince Pribislav of Brandenburg, and his brother Ludolf, a monk: TM, IV/64; or the twelfth century Slavic ruler Meinfrid: Vlasto 1970:153; and Wasilewski 1977:67. On Pribislav-Henry of Brandenburg, see: Myśliński 1970:245-258.
the same time, eastern, and especially Obodrite affairs, diverted the Empire's attention and resources from the Italian and papal affairs.

Furthermore, it could be said that in a certain sense the Duchy of Mecklenburg was a continuation of the Obodrite principality. After all, Pribislav’s submission to Henry the Lion in 1167 cannot be viewed as an abrupt political change. An Obodrite remained hereditary ruler, there was no Saxon administration imposed and the Obodrite upper class retained its privileges and most of its possessions. Over the centuries the Duchy of Mecklenburg lost its Slavic character and became an integral part of modern Germany, and its people of the German nation. However, the process of Germanisation was gradual and Slavic speakers were reported in Mecklenburg region as late as the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{134}

In the light of the presented evidence, a common assumption that all the Polabian Slavs remained a politically fragmented small tribal society does not hold. It also totally contradicts the views expressed by Peisker, Poole and Cross cited at the beginning, as well as many similar claims, that on the Polabian territory no political structure larger than a small tribe emerged. We may therefore conclude that in the context of the above work, it could be said that the Obodrite principality did not differ much from other contemporary political entities. To be sure, it was less advanced than Western countries, but was developing along the same lines. There are much closer similarities in socio-political developments between the Obodrites of the contemporary Scandinavia, for example with Denmark of the tenth and eleventh centuries.\textsuperscript{135} Also, it was a polity in which development was much more similar to that of the other Western Slavic countries such as Poland and Bohemia. But in the context of central and northern Europe those differences were rather of degree than kind. This was fully recognized by the contemporary chroniclers and annalists.

There is no single, uniformly accepted, definition of a state, but some main characteristics of an early state can be reasonably postulated. Using the criteria for an early state postulated by Henri Claessen and Peter Skalnik,\textsuperscript{136} the Obodrite principality, at least from the middle of the tenth century, meets all the listed requirements, although in various degrees. Therefore, there is no reason why the Obodrite principality should not be viewed from then as an early medieval state, rather than as Joseph Peisker’s «Lilliputian clan».

\textsuperscript{134} Wasilewski 1977:72–73.
\textsuperscript{135} Collins 1991:332–335.
\textsuperscript{136} On the early state formation, see: Cohen 1978:39-49; and Claessen & Skalnik 1978:20
Obodrittene i middelalderen – En studie av sosio-politiske endringer i vestslaviske grupper

Tidsrammen for denne studien spenner fra sent 700-tall til 1100-tallet. Fokus rettes mot det området i Nordøst-Tyskland som inntil nylig utgjorde den nordvestlige delen av Folkerepublikken, sammen med naboområdet i Forbundsrepublikken østenfor Hamburg. Emnet er den sosiopolitiske utvikling blant vestslaverne her, sett i forhold til deres nabør: det tyske keiserriket vestenfor dette området, og de skandinaviske folk i nord.

Siden slaviske kilder er mangelfulle, må man i hovedsak ty til tyske og skandinaviske historieskrifter, annaler og andre dokumenter. Slike skriftlige kilder gir bare begrenset informasjon om disse slaverne, og gjennomgåelsen av dem gir ikke noen fyllestgjørende belysning av spørsmålene. Nye tverrfaglige innfaldsvinkler er derfor benyttet, slik som: arkeologiske, lingvistiske, typonymiske og etnografiske data.

Resultatene sår tvil om den vanlige antagelse at de polabiske slaver, som engang levde mellom Elben-Saale og Oder-Neisse elvene, aldri utgjorde noe mer enn et lite stammesamfunn. Tvert i mot kan det vises at slaverne i dette området, på grunn av sterkt ytre press, organiserte seg rundt den lille obodritt-stammen. De fikk tidlig i middelalderen en politisk organisasjon på linje med de vestlige hertugdømmene og marker og de samtidige nordiske land. Undersøkelsen viser også at prosessen som resulterte i denne etno-kulturelle integrasjonen av de forskjellige slaviske stammer i regionen, begynte allerede omkring 900. I løpet av 1100-tallet får man klare konturer av en større obodrittisk kulturenhet, som kan sammenliknes med Sachsen eller Skandinavia. Dessuten viser det seg at de fleste av de obodrittiske ledere i perioden slutt ikke stilte seg så fiendtlig til kristendommen som det ofte er blitt antatt. Tvert i mot var det mange av dem som, av ulike årsaker, støttet fremveksten av kristendommen i sitt fyrstedømme.

Abbreviations
AB - Annales Bertiniani
AOB - Adam of Bremen Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum
AF - Annales Fuldenses
ARF - Annales Regni Francorum
HB - Helmut of Bosau Chronica Slavorum
TM - Thietmar of Merseburg Chronicum
SG - Saxo Grammaticus Danorum Regum Heroumque Historia

Collegium Medievale 2003


Bibliography

Primary sources


Modern works


Collegium Medievale 2003

Roman Zaroff is Ph.D. in History from The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. His main field of research is Medieval Slavdom. Since 1998 he has published several papers and articles on the subject.