

Grzegorz Bartusik, Radoslaw Biskup, Jakob Morawiec (ed.), Adam of Bremen's »Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum«. Origins, Reception and Significance, London, New York (Routledge) 2022, 308 p., 19 fig. (Studies in Medieval History and Culture), ISBN 978-1-032-12105-5, GBP 120,00.

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Joseph P. Huffman, Carlisle, PA

This volume contains papers presented at the Second Jónsborg Conference (Jónsborg of the Icelandic sagas, now named Wolin, Poland), which was held online on 19 November 2020 because of the COVID pandemic. The Jónsborg Conference series is the joint creation of the Institute of History and the Center for Nordic and Old English Studies at the University of Silesia (Katowice, Poland) as well as the Regional Museum of Andrzej Kaube in Wolin. The theme of the 2020 conference was »Gesta Hammaburgensis Pontificum. Origins, reception and significance of Adam of Bremen's account«. These founding organizations were joined for that year's conference by the Department of History of Scandinavia and Central and Eastern Europe at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Poland), whose faculty participated as presenters. The Third Jónsborg Conference took place on 19-20 May 2023 in Wolin¹.

The 2020 conference's avowed purpose was established by this volume's editors: to bring a scholarly focus on Adam's »Gesta« as a pivot toward finally producing a Polish translation of the text to join Polish language editions of the chronicles of Widukind of Corvey, Thietmar of Merseburg, and Helmold of Bosau, all of whom included the Polabian/Wendish Slavs between the Elbe and Oder in their texts. The historiographical value of Adam of Bremen's »Gesta« is reflected in the geographical reach of the conference participants, ranging from universities, academies, and museum from Iceland, Brazil, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Austria, and no less than nine different Polish universities.

In the introduction the editors declare that Adam of Bremen's »Gesta« »... belongs to the most important historical accounts medievalists have at hand«. Yet Henrik Janson's article begins: »Adam of Bremen's »Gesta hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum« has been described as a raw and undigested pile of material, and his eagerness to collect all this material is said to have made its author completely neglect narrative form and beauty« (p. 13).



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¹ [https://muzeumwolin.pl/pl/the-3rd-jomsborg-conference-program/\(23/08/2023\)](https://muzeumwolin.pl/pl/the-3rd-jomsborg-conference-program/(23/08/2023)).

Thus the conference papers comprise a collective effort to better understand and digest Adam of Bremen's highly valued yet sometimes enigmatic text. And thus the resulting foci of the papers are dedicated to historiographical quests for narrative coherence and for potential contexts to frame the text. The papers as a whole share the approach of literary and rhetorical analysis, from which five themes emerge.

The first theme around which three papers revolve could be called »Depictions and their Credibility«. Henrik Janson (»Imperial Politics and Visions of the North«) transformed his conference paper into a proper, twenty-two-page article, which posits that the fundamental influence on Adam's »Gesta«, especially in his depictions of the North and its political and religious history can be found in Archbishop Liemar's political-ecclesial conflicts. According to Janson, Adam, who dedicated his »Gesta« to Archbishop Liemar, wrote to defend the church of Hamburg-Bremen from increasingly severe attacks by Pope Gregory VII, and Adam's own research eventually provided material for the forged papal documents which Liemar later used to defend himself against Gregory's criticisms about him and his archdiocese.

Laura Gazzoli (»Adam of Bremen and the Early [pre-995] History of Norway«) produced the volume's second-longest article to argue that Adams' political depiction of Haakon princeps (i. e. Hakon, jarl of Hladir) is an exemplary case of modern historians' critical assessment of Adam's credibility. Challenging the traditionally negative academic appraisal of the »Gesta«, Gazzoli makes the case that Adam's depiction of Haakon as a royal figure, even though he lacked a formal coronation, should be understood in the context of the saga tradition in which coronations were not essential to royal authority. This saga context confirms then that »Rather than being a side-note on Norwegian history, we should be investigating 10th- and 11th-century Norway with Adam as an absolutely key source« (p. 117).

Marcin Böhm (»The 11th-Century Normans of Normandy in the View of Adam of Bremen«) offers a very brief synopsis of Adam's depiction of the Normans, concluding that Adam's focus on William the Conqueror's life indicates detailed attention the Hamburg-Bremen church gave to the Norman conquest of England, as understood as an extension of Danish and Norwegian settlement in England with its implications for relations between the English and the Hamburg churches.

The second theme of the volume could be called »The Social and Political Construction of Adam's Narrative«. Jakub Morawiec (»Sven Estridsen as Adam's Informant«) analyzes the narrative construction of the Danish king Swen Estridsen as Adam's alleged trustworthy and accurate informant. Morawiec considers recent scholarly doubts about Sven's role, and concludes that Adam's representation of the Danish king was a homiletic attempt to construct Sven as an exemplar of transformation from violent



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pagan to a good Christian ruler as a result of the archdiocese's effective missionary and diplomatic efforts.

Maciej Lubik («St. Olaf and Adam of Bremen's Narrative Pragmatics») studies Adam's narrative construction of St. Olaf as a glorious saintly king whose conversion to Christianity enabled subsequent advancement of further missionary work in Scandinavia. Lubik concludes that in order to emphasize the missionary jurisdiction of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen over Scandinavia, Adam chose to narrate contacts between king and missionary-archbishop as proof that the saintly monarch accepted the archbishop's primacy over Scandinavia.

Piotr Pranke («Adam of Bremen and Visions of the State in Early Medieval Scandinavia – A Comparative Approach to Chieftdom, Leadership, Kingship, Segmental Tribes») notes Adam's geographical and historical knowledge, especially regarding rulers within the missionary authority of the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen. Pranke argues that Adam's narrative construction of the »Gesta« demonstrates a subordination of historical narrative to the current social and political organization of that frontier region. Adam thereby is said to have constructed narratives about Scandinavian rulers according to the degree of their subordination or resistance to the missionary goals of the archbishopric.

Marta Rey-Radlińska («Ars moriendi and Figures of Power in Adam of Bremen's ›Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum«») provides a glimpse into how Adam depicted the dying and death of powerful individuals. According to Rey-Radlińska, Adam's depictions of archbishops' death scenes indicate those whom he respected as worthy of honor and those whom he did not. Those whom he did enjoy a »good death«, while those he censured suffered various forms of punishing deaths.

The third theme of the volume focuses on a theme we could call »Reception Studies: Intertextual Connections between the ›Gesta« and Scandinavian Texts«. Jules Piet («Religious Conversions in Adam of Bremen's ›Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum« and in Saxo Grammaticus' ›Gesta Danorum«: a Comparative Approach») compares the Wendish conversion narratives of Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus to demonstrate how Saxo made consistent use of Adam's narrative while adapting it to his own purposes. Both constructed Wendish conversion narratives which contrasted the generous conquering Danes with the obdurate yet eventually converted Wends. This rather unsurprising conclusion is then argued as evidence that both authors crafted ideologically guided conversion myths to justify the independence of the Hamburg-Bremen church and in turn its domination over the Polabian/Wendish populations of the Baltic area.

Annett Krakow («On the Influence of Adam's Gesta on Yngvars saga viðföla») considers the influence of Adam's ›Gesta« on the old Icelandic ›Yngvars saga viðföla« (Yngvarr the widely-travelled), a saga written by the learned 12th-century Benedictine monk Oddr

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Snorrason of Þingeyrar (northern Iceland) who also wrote a saga of King Olaf Tryggvason. Krakow avers that clear and obvious connections exist between the two texts on the subject of Yngvar's ancestry, when King Olaf Skötkonung died, and narratives about King Harald of Sweden.

Lukasz Neubauer (»*Proselytus et advena*: Reading the Opening Lines of Adam's Prologue in the Light of Biblical Viewpoints on Foreigners and Converts«) notes that we only know Adam's name from Helmold of Bosau's »*Gesta Sclavorum*« written a century after the »*Gesta*«. In the latter Adam only introduces himself as »A. minimus sanctae Bremensis ecclesiae Canonicus«. Within the »*Gesta*« itself the only other clue to his identity is the enigmatic self-identification in the prologue of himself as a »*proselytus et advena*« (likely drawn from Tobit 1:7, Ezekiel 14:7 in Jerome's »*Vulgate*«). Neubauer thus speculates that Adam was not from Bremen but a newcomer/ foreigner who had arrived at the invitation of Archbishop Adalbert. Not a surprising deduction, although the even more conjectural thesis that *proselytus* indicated Adam's own religious awakening to seek a canonical life in a cathedral chapter is no less enigmatic than Adam's own words.

Carina Damm (»*Ad insulas Baltici*. Role and Reception of Scholia in Adam of Bremen's »*Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*«) analyzes Adam's *scholia* in his revised editions of the »*Gesta*« as well as those added in the margins by later medieval and early modern scholars. Asserting that these *scholia* commentaries are »an undervalued literary treasure« that provide evidence helping to reconstruct the *stemma* of manuscript transmission. This claim is peculiar, since Bernhard Schmeidler's edition of the »*Gesta*« already made use of the material and textual evidence of the twenty-five surviving manuscripts to reconstruct the *stemma* a century ago². This short article, which was not presented at the conference but was added afterward, merely points out potential for further research without providing much more substance.

Lukas Gabriel Grzybowski (»Female Characters and the Meaning of History in Adam of Bremen's »*Gesta Hammaburgensis*«) describes Adam's depictions of women in the »*Gesta*«. Grzybowski asserts that Adam depicted women according to their relationship to the archdiocese's missionary work (*legatio gentium*) and thus they were as defined by the missionary narrative as the male clergy. The implications of this finding are not explored further.

Kendra Willson (»Of Gunnhildr and Gyðas«) assesses references in the »*Gesta*« to two queens: Gunhild and Guda. Willson looks for additional context to the Icelandic sagas where women similarly named are mentioned, and concludes that these two queens

² Bernhard Schmeidler, Einleitung, in: id. (ed.), *Magistri Adam Bremensis Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum/Adam von Bremen, Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, Hannover, Leipzig ³1917 (MGH. SS rer. Germ., 2), p. VII-XXXIV.



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were women of non-Scandinavian origins whose strong will was therefore depicted by Adam with ambivalence, but through whom one can link generations in otherwise confusing passages.

The fourth theme of the volume could well be labelled »Adam of Bremen’s Cultural Geography«.

Miriam Mayburd (»At the Edge of Time: Adam of Bremen’s Imaginary North and *Horror Vacui*«) ponders Adam’s cultural framing of the »Gesta« by contextualizing his representation of the Baltic region within 11th-century theological and philosophical concerns. The trope of *horror vacui* is traced across several early medieval cultural layers of reception to the »Gesta«, the use of which is said to infuse Adam’s sense of urgency and concern about achieving missionary goals throughout the region. Mayburd sees a linkage between Adam’s sometimes eschatological depiction of the Scandinavian-Baltic periphery of Christian Europe and a larger Christian world history tradition, thus revealing early clerical attitudes toward Scandinavia as the terror-inducing wilds of the North in need of conversion and Christian civilization. Readers would benefit by also reading Babette Helleman, »Horror Vacui: Evil in the Incarnated World of the Bibles Moralisées«, in: Nienke Vos, Willemien Otten (ed.), *Demons and the Devil in Ancient and Medieval Christianity*, Leiden 2011, p. 231–248.

Tatjana N. Jackson (»Scythia and the Scythian Sea on the Mental Map of Adam of Bremen«) briefly reviews Scythian names mentioned in Adam’s »Gesta«, and contextualizes them with contemporary historical and geographical sources. Adam, using Greco-Roman precedent for locating Scythia in the Northeast of the inhabited world, took to describing the Baltic Sea as the Scythian Sea and the pagans of the circum-Baltic lands as barbarians.

Leszek Gardela (»Harald Bluetooth and the Western Slavs: Cultural Interactions in Light of Textual and Archaeological Sources«) addresses interactions between Scandinavians and Western Slavs during Harald Bluetooth’s reign using archaeological and toponymic data. Gardela argues that such a multidisciplinary approach extends our knowledge of contacts beyond the elites, and calls for further multidisciplinary research into the Baltic region during the Viking Age. Adam’s »Gesta« itself only plays a framing role in this survey of material culture evidence outside of the »Gesta«.

The final theme focuses on the location of the museum hosting the conference: Wolin. Piotr Piętkowski (»The Description of the Oder [Odra] Estuary in Adam of Bremen’s ›Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum‹. The Oldest Accounts of the River Until the End of the 12th Century«) places Adam’s extensive descriptions of Jumne (Wolin) and the Oder River estuary in general into its historical and archaeological contexts. Piętkowski concludes that Adam’s descriptions reflect a deepening geographical knowledge about the Oder region in the 10th through 12th centuries.



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Wojciech Filipowiak (*»Est sane maxima omnium, quas Europa claudit, civitatum. Adam of Bremen and the Estimation of Size and Population of Early Medieval Wolin«*) very briefly considers the current state of archaeological knowledge about early medieval Wolin.

Paweł Migdałski (*»Adam of Bremen's ›Gesta Hammaburgensis Pontificum« as an Inspiration for Polish Politics of History in Wolin after WW2«*) is an extremely short synopsis of the impact of Adam's »Gesta« accounts of Wolin on post-World War II Polish historiography and on Western Pomerania in particular. This information is useful public historiography but does little to advance the volume's effort to deepen an understanding of the »Gesta« itself as an early medieval text.

Three papers were presented at the conference that did not make it into the volume for one reason or another: Arngrímur Vídalín (*»Marginal Island of Wonders. Adam of Bremen's Influence on the Perception of Iceland«*), Leszek P. Slupecki (*»Between Gamla Uppsala and Rhetra. Adam of Bremen describing circum-Baltic paganism«*), Radosław Biskup (*»Towards the Polish edition of Adam of Bremen's ›Gesta«*). Each of them look as though they would have been very useful additions to the volume's themes and purposes.

These papers present intriguing topics as promising future research pathways. When one considers that nineteen papers appear in one volume of three hundred pages, one quickly realizes that the majority of these papers remain in their brief conference form and were not thereafter developed into fuller article-length publications. Indeed only five articles (i. e. 25%) appear in this volume of more than fifteen pages in length, and only one is over twenty pages long. On the other hand, the remaining fourteen (75%) are still conference papers of eleven pages or less; indeed, four of these fourteen are eight pages of text and six provide only five to seven pages of text. The shortest six (i. e. one third of the volume's offerings) contain footnotes and bibliography sections that are at least as long and sometimes longer than the text sections themselves.

Therefore the reader comes away with a sense of possibilities not yet fully realized, as if the authors offered grant proposals rather than research and fully finished scholarly projects. Nonetheless, collectively they have exhibited the rich potential for further historiographical study of the »Gesta«. How we should then make use of the »Gesta« as a primary source in our own historical research still remains little explored here beyond understanding it as a literary and rhetorical text containing intriguing cultural geography.

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