

SCLAVOS, QUI DICUNTUR ABODRITI, WILZI ET SURBI. NOTES ON THE TRIBAL ORGANISATION OF THE POLABIAN SLAVS

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Abstract

The conception of the history of the Polabian Slavs, and the interpretation of tribal structures, has changed several times since the formation of critical historiography. The article set the goal of summarising and expanding on some of the crucial points in historical research into the development of Slavic society in the Polabian area. Since the 19th century, researchers have adhered to the division of Slavs into three groups, Obodrites, Veleti/Lutici and Sorbes, which corresponds with the quantitative use in surviving contemporary sources. These three groups, and the entire tribal organisation, must, however, be put into the context of the history of barbarian Europe. The segmental structure of the Polabian tribes showed some signs of a tribal democracy, and given the military character of individual federations, the whole system could be called a military democracy; but because of the strong ties with religion and religious rites, the current discourse rejects the strict division of military and sacral characters of tribal institutions. Therefore, it is not quite possible to determine whether the tribal organisation of the Polabian Slavs was an equal alternative to Medieval states, as we know from Bohemia, Poland and Hungary.

KEY WORDS: Polabian Slavs, tribal structures, tribal union, military democracy, Obodrites, Veleti/Lutici, Sorbes, barbarian Europe.

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Anotacija

Nuo kritinės istoriografijos susiformavimo Paelbio slavų ir jų gentinių struktūrų istorijos interpretacijos keitėsi kelis kartus. Šiame darbe siekiama apibendrinti ir išplėtoti kai kuriuos svarbiausius slavų visuomenės raidos istorinių tyrimų aspektus Paelbio regione. Nuo XIX a. mokslininkai laikosi slavų skirstymo į tris grupes – obodritus, veletus / liutičius ir sorbus, kurie išskiriami šiuo metu išlikusiuose rašytiniuose šaltiniuose. Šios trys grupės ir jų gentinė organizacija nagrinėtinos įtraukiant jas į bendrą barbariškosios Europos istoriją. Paelbio slavų segmentinė struktūra rodo kai kuriuos gentinės demokratijos požymius ir, atsižvelgiant į atskirų federacijų karinį pobūdį, ši sistema galėtų būti įvardijama kaip karinė demokratija, bet dėl glaudaus ryšio su kultu ir religinėmis apeigomis dabartinis tyrimų diskursas atmeta griežtą gentinių institucijų karinio ir sakralinio pobūdžio dalijimąsi. Dėl šios priežasties sunku pasakyti, ar Paelbio slavų gentinė organizacija buvo tapati alternatyva mums žinomoms viduramžių valstybėms, tokioms kaip Čekija, Lenkija ir Vengrija.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: Paelbio slavai, gentinės struktūros, genčių sąjunga, karinė demokratija, obodritai, veletai / liutičiai, sorbai, barbarų Europa.

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Introduction

In 2006, the Czech historian Libuše Hrabová published the only complete monograph so far on the history of the Polabian Slavs and their image in Medieval historiography. In the title, the author called this group of West Slavs ‘forgotten people’, and thus indirectly pointed out several difficulties in historical research. If we define the borders of their homeland by the rivers Elbe and Saale in the west, the Oder in the east, the Baltic coast in the north, and the Ore Mountains and the Lusatian Mountains in the south,¹ it is necessary to keep several important facts in mind. First and foremost, the group of inhabitants in the defined region was numerous, and it has not survived to these days as an ethnic or national unit. Therefore, there are no direct successors, whose ethnic, national (tribal) or historical identity might be traced by using retrospective methods.² This fact is connected to the absence of any written domestic source, and the dependency of historical research on partial information mediated by people from different cultural and intellectual worlds. The Polish historian Karol Modzelewski aptly remarked that historians must put on ‘Roman glasses’, which can only be removed by removing all available sources.³ The awareness itself of numerous Slavic groups, whose names were often preserved in written sources as ethnonyms (sometimes as exonyms) and choronyms, is very complicated. Therefore, it is also difficult to determine whether the preserved names of individual tribes (*gentes*) were necessarily related to the tribal identity itself. This question is mainly asked by the current medievalist discourse, whose effort to reinterpret established concepts at the beginning of the 21st century excited researchers’ interest in the tribal structures of late barbarian Europe and their transformation into early Medieval states.

The concept of the history of Polabian Slavs and the interpretation of tribal structures has changed several times since the formation of critical historiography. Older historiography considered tribal units to be a lesser form of social structure, of which the peak was represented by a model of a Medieval state, known in Central Europe from the examples of Bohemia, Poland or Hungary. This evolutionist approach led some researchers to the conclusion that the long-term stability of a social system could only be achieved through successful transformation into an early Medieval state. According to Lothar Dralle, the Slavs in the Polabian area differed from their neighbours in the south and east, mainly in the fault in national development

¹ This definition is used with certain reservations by all works cited.

² For more on this issue, see: LÜBKE, Christian. Christianity and Paganism as Elements of Gentile Identities to the East of the Elbe and Saale Rivers. In *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs. Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe*. Ed. by Ildar GARIPZANOV, Patrick GEARY, Przemysław URBAŃCZYK. Turnhout, 2008, p. 190.

³ MODZELEWSKI, Karol. *Barbarská Evropa*. Praha, 2017, p. 336.

(*Fehlen einer Nationsbildung*), whereby the land of a large number of tribes (according to Wolfgang Fritze, an *unhealthily large number*) was never recognised as a political unit similar to the model of a Medieval state.⁴ In his work on tribal organisation in Central Europe, Hansjürgen Brachmann described the Polabian Slavs as *geschichtslose Vorbevölkerung*.⁵ According to this concept, attempts were made in the past to fully understand the tribal organisation of Slavic society using the conclusions of sociological research, especially in the area of the social relations of natives in former British colonial Africa. This research also gave birth to the term *society without a state*, defined by the lack of a central authority and a deterministic course towards a higher centralised society.⁶

At the turn of the century, opposition to the idea of the tribe as a primitive organisation was born. Its supporters believed that the tribal units of barbarian Europe were different, but no worse than Medieval states. At least in the sense of an organised society, the tribes fulfil their role equally efficiently, but in a different way. These roles included the construction and upkeep of fortifications, the organisation of the collection of certain taxes (such as the joint payment of tribute), guarding the border, etc.⁷ Wolfgang Bruske saw the main reason for the decline of tribal organisation in the central and northwest Polabian area in the unwillingness to accept Christianity, which made the status of the local Slavs untenable, because it became a wedge between the expanding Ottonian Empire and Poland's expansion to the north.⁸

While older historiography considered tribal identity to be an automatic part of every recorded tribe, the more recent direction of current Medieval studies questions this proposition.⁹ The crucial point in this movement is the rejection of a certain gen-

⁴ DRALLE, Lothar. Wilzen, Sachsen und Franken um das Jahr 800. In *Aspekte der Nationenbildung im Mittelalter*. Hrsg. von Helmut BEUMANN, Werner SCHRÖDER. Sigmaringen, 1978, S. 205. Older theories summarised in LÜBKE, Christian. Forms of Political Organisation of the Polabian Slavs. In *Origins of Central Europe*. Ed. by Przemysław URBAŃCZYK. Warsaw, 1997, pp. 115–125.

⁵ BRACHMANN, Hansjürgen. Tribal Organizations in Central Europe in the 6th–10th Centuries A.D. Reflections on the Ethnic and Political Development in the Second Half of the First Millennium. In *Origins of Central Europe...*, p. 15.

⁶ Significantly SIGRIST, Christian. Gesellschaften ohne Staat und die Entdeckungen der social anthropology. In *Gesellschaften ohne Staat. Gleichheit und Gegenseitigkeit*. Hrsg. von Fritz, KRAMER, Christian SIGRIST. Frankfurt am Main, 1978, S. 28. Newly: URBAŃCZYK, Przemysław. Changes of Power Structure During the 1st Millennium A.D. in the Northern Part of Central Europe. In *Origins of Central Europe...*, p. 121. Even Karol Modzelewski was inspired by Michał Tymowski, the Polish Africanist, and his conception of the segment system (*system segmentarny*): MODZELEWSKI, K. Op. cit., p. 272.

⁷ TŘEŠTÍK, Dušan. Počátky přemyslovské státnosti mezi křesťanstvím a pohanstvím. In *Stát, státnost a rituály přemyslovského věku. Problémy, názory, otázky: sborník příspěvků z konference konané dne 18. října 2005 v Brně* (Země a kultura ve střední Evropě, sv. 4). Přípr. Martin WIHODA, Demeter MALAŤÁK. Brno, 2006, s. 30.

⁸ BRUSKE, Wolfgang. *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Lutizenbundes: deutsch-wendische Beziehungen des 10.–12. Jahrhunderts*. Münster, Köln, 1955, S. 2.

⁹ For example, Walter Pohl claimed that in contrast with a more developed political unit such as Maroboduus' Marcomannic kingdom, there was also the early less developed Kingdom of Alemanni,

eralisation, with which the older theses worked. The Polabian Slavs should be put in the context of barbarian Europe, which can be understood as a diverse political and socio-cultural product of the time, from late Classical antiquity to the culmination of the Christianising process in the northern and eastern regions of the European continent.¹⁰ The mixing of Celtic, Germanic and Slavic elements significantly hinders us in finding common criteria that could be considered a source of tribal or ethnic identity. This problem is intensified to a certain degree by the informative aspect of the sources, which is always foreshadowed by the locality from which the source comes, and the distance between its location and the imaginary border of Christian Europe.¹¹

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Therefore, the current discourse tries to question the relevance of individual determinants, and especially bearers of this tribal identity. Walter Pohl compared individual Germanic groups in detail, and concluded that criteria set by Tacitus (language, customs, traditional armour, hairstyle, clothing, etc) were not accurate, considering the bilingualism of individual Germanic tribes, or their willingness to give up their own language without any sign of an identity crisis.¹² If we characterise tribal identity as a coherent and homogenous social and cultural group perception of shared common ancestors, language, customs and religious rites (*Wir-Gefühl*), the question of the bearer of this identity will inevitably arise. Between 1960 and 1990, a Vienna school led by Reinhard Wenskus tried to prove the importance of elites as bearers of the tribal traditions and identity.¹³ Although Wenskus' research was based on research into Germanic society during the Migration Period, his conclusions were also extended to Slavs arriving later. This theory is currently rather sidelined, especially after the criticism by Walter Goffart during his tenure at the University of Toronto. The size of many *gentes* (such as the Franks, or later the size of tribal unions of the Polabian Slavs) prevented their members from mutual communication, and, according to Goffart, that would eliminate the application of a group identity through direct participation in rites.¹⁴

The same arguments are also valid for the Slavs in the Polabian area, despite the lack of attention from Latin authors, unlike that directed at Germanic tribes settled *infra*

so it is obvious that there was no cohesive system of government among the Germanic tribes (POHL, Walter. *Die Germanen*. Oldenbourg, 2010, S. 65).

¹⁰ According to MODZELEWSKI, K. Op. cit., p. 18–39.

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of the main written sources, see: FRAESDORFF, David. *Der barbarische Norden – Vorstellungen und Fremdheitskategorien bei Rimbart, Thietmar von Merseburg, Adam von Bremen und Helmold von Bosau*. Berlin, 2005.

¹² POHL, Walter. Telling the difference. Signs of ethnic identity. In *Strategies of distinction: the construction of ethnic communities, 300–800*. Ed. by Walter POHL, Helmut REIMITZ. Leiden, 1998, p. 67.

¹³ WENSKUS, Reinhard. *Stammesbildung und Verfassung. Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen gentes*. Köln, 1961, S. 113–124.

¹⁴ Summed up in: GARIPZANOV, Ildar; GEARY, Patrick; URBAŃCZYK, Przemysław. Introduction: Gentes, Gentile Identity, and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe. In *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs...*, p. 3.

limes. Migrating Slavs did not come into contact much with advanced Roman law and the tax system, agricultural techniques or the prevailing socio-political model of the former Roman Empire. Their internal organisation was not based on the Roman model, which made it difficult for many authors.¹⁵

So how should we approach the question of the Polabian Slavs and their tribes? Let us divide this question into three parts: Polabian Slavic society itself, its tribal organisation, and the internal structure of individual tribes.

Main points

Because of the position of settlements of Polabian Slavs on an imaginary border between the Christian world and the aforementioned barbarian Europe, Slavic society on one hand and Germanic (Franco-Saxon) society on the other can be called by the sociological term *frontier society*, with a slightly modified meaning.¹⁶ Traditionally, this term is used for a group of people on a higher technological level colonising new territory inhabited by natives on a lower technological level. In the case of the eastern border of the Ottonian Empire and the later Salian Empire, it was an accultural contact zone between two or more different ethnic or cultural groups, which could be found in various locations throughout contemporary Europe, in Spain, the Crusader states in the Levant, the Polish-Lithuanian border, etc. In the case of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 13th century, a multi-ethnic society consisting of a Lithuanian-speaking minority and a Slavic-speaking majority formed and constantly struggled with its expanding neighbours, Poland and the Teutonic Order.¹⁷ Basically, it did not matter if the clashes were between Roman Catholics and pagans, Christians of the Western Rite or the Eastern Rite, or Christians of other nationalities.¹⁸ Besides mutual awareness, the bilingualism of the people, or at least of the elites, is mostly a characteristic trait of this type of society. The Annals of Fulda mention the year 849, and Thachulf, Margrave of the Sorabian March, who was supposed to

¹⁵ GEARY, Patrick. *The Myth of Nation. The Medieval Origins of Europe*. Princeton, 2002, pp. 144–145.

¹⁶ Sociological definition ELWELL, Frank. Glossary of the social sciences, retrieved 24.3.2019, URL: <https://www.alanpedia.com/sociology_glossary_of_the_social_sciences/frontier_society.html>.

¹⁷ KNOLL, Paul. The Most Unique Crusader State: The Teutonic Order in the Development of the Political Culture of Northeastern Europe during the Middle Ages. In *The Germans and the East*. Ed. by Charles INGRAO, Franz SZABO, West LAFAYETTE. 2008, pp. 37–48. About the multiethnicity in Lithuania: SCHILLER, Christiane. Sprachgrenzen – Sprachen im Grenzraum. Sprachverhältnisse im Grossfürstentum Litauen. In *Grenzräume und Grenzüberschreitungen im Vergleich. Der Osten und der Westen des mittelalterlichen Lateinneuropa*. Hrsg. von Klaus HERBERTS, Nikolas JASPERS. Berlin, 2007, S. 279–289.

¹⁸ LÜBKE, Christian. „Germania slavica“ und „Polonia Ruthenica“. Religiöse Divergenz in ethno-kulturellen Grenz- und Kontaktzonen des mittelalterlichen Osteuropa (8.–16. Jahrhundert). In *Grenzräume und Grenzüberschreitungen im Vergleich. Der Osten und der Westen des mittelalterlichen Lateinneuropa*. Hrsg. von Klaus HERBERTS, Nikolas JASPERS. Berlin, 2007, S. 176.

have some knowledge of the Slavic language and customs.¹⁹ The famous adventurer Wichmann II also had a good knowledge of the language and solid contacts among the northern Slavs, among whom he spent his time in exile, where he received a warm welcome and military support.²⁰ According to the Saxon chronicler Widukind, even Otto I could speak not only Latin, but also a Slavic language, even though he rarely considered using them to be necessary.²¹ The Polabian Slavs were an integral part of northeast (barbarian, according to Latin authors) Europe, showing typical signs of a society living on the ethno-cultural border. Like other barbarian groups, they did not produce any records of themselves, and therefore it is very difficult to re-enact the socio-political system using Latin sources.

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The second part of the question involves tribal organisation. In written sources, terminology using three levels is mostly used. Primarily, it is a general denomination of affiliation to a certain cultural and geographical area according to ancient Roman tradition (the Roman world contra the barbarian world). Therefore, Adam of Bremen described the town of Hamburg as '*omnibus barbaris nationibus Danorum, Sueonum itaque Sclavorum aliis in circuitu coniacentibus populis*'.²² The chronicler Helmold of Bosau described the town of Volhynia as the biggest town in Europe: '*quam incolunt Slavicum aliis gentibus permixtis, Grecis et barbaris*'.²³ Individual chroniclers used three basic Latin descriptions, *gens*, *natio* and *populus*, and each author used them differently, depending more or less on Roman examples.²⁴ Most detailed descriptions of the Slavic ethnic group used the simple ethnonym *Sclavos*, *Slavi*.

Since the 19th century, researchers have divided the Slavs into these three groups, Obodrites (Latin *Abodriti*), Veleti/Lutici (Latin *Wilzi sive Lutici*) and Sorbes (Latin *Surbi*, *Sorabi*), which corresponds with the quantitative use in contemporary sources. Generally, these three groups are recognised as tribal federations or unions, which were seen mainly by the evolutionary movement as primitive pre-state formations; the opposition considered them to be an alternative to the Medieval states, and the modern discourse considered them to be a permanent truce of individually organised subjects, where the hegemony of one of them could play the role of a bond or

¹⁹ *Annales Fuldenses*, a. 849. In *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum* (hereafter, *MGH SS*). T VII. Ed. Georg Heinrich PERTZ, Friedrich KURZE. Hannoverae, 1891, p. 38.

²⁰ ALTHOFF, Gerd. Die Billunger in der Salierzeit. In *Die Salier und das Reich 1*. Hrsg. von Stefan WEINFURTER. Sigmaringen 1992, S. 309–330.

²¹ Widukind monachi Corbeiensis *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum libri tres*. In *MGH SS*. T. LX. Ed. Paul HIRSCH, Hans-Eberhard LOHMANN. Hannoverae, 1935, Lib. II, cap. 36, p. 96.

²² Magistri Adami Bremensis *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*. In *MGH SS*. T. II. Ed. Bernhard SCHMEIDLER. Hannoverae, 1917, Lib. I, cap. 16, p. 22–23.

²³ Helmoldi presbyteri Bozoviensis *Cronica Slavorum*. In *MGH SS*. T. XXXII. Ed. Bernhard SCHMEIDLER. Hannoverae, 1937, Lib. I, cap. 2, p. 8.

²⁴ According to: BECHER, Matthias. *Rex, Dux und Gens. Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des sächsischen Herzogtums im 9. und 10. Jahrhundert*. Paderborn, 1996.

a source of internal conflict. However, the break-up of this structure did not signify the downfall of any of its segments.²⁵

While the two previous approaches were characterised by a certain degree of generalisation and structuralist classification, the modern approach seems to be more flexible. It would explain to a certain degree the ambiguity of these tribal federations, mainly the often unclear affiliation of individual smaller groups (or tribes) with these three main groups, while at the same time, the lesser tribes constituted the lowest level of the aforementioned terminology of the Latin sources.

As an example of the ambiguities, we can look at the unclear relations of the Rujani, the Hevelli, the Sprevani and the Redarians with the independent Veleti Union, which has appeared since the beginning of the 11th century in sources under a new common name, the Lutici. In relation to the campaign of Henry the Fowler in 927/8, the chronicler Widukind mentioned 'Wilti' among the subjugated Slav *gentes*.²⁶ However, both Redarians and Hevellians are differentiated from the Veleti in his list, even though approximately a hundred years later, Redarians would represent one of the main groups of the new Lutici Union. In his description of the siege of Branderburg, Widukind also mentioned the Hevelli prince Tugumir and his unnamed sister, who were taken by Henry as guarantees of peace.²⁷ In the described period, the Hevellians were allied with the Veleti, but it is not clear how much they were involved in the federal structure. The understanding of a tribal union as a more or less permanent truce of individually organised subjects explains the composition of the Obodrite Union in the mid-11th century: during the reigns of Prince Gottschalk (circa 1043–1066) and Henry (circa 1093–1127), tribes recently belonging to the core of the Lutici Union, Circipanians and Kessinians, and mainly Stormarns and Holsteins, non-Slavic Nordalbingian tribes. The Drevani tribe, of which the affiliation is not clear from the beginning of the tenth century, can also be added to this group.

The biggest ambiguities by far surround the third big group of Polabian Slavs, which researchers call the Sorabian Union. Once again, a large part of the tribes supposedly belonging to this union are known only from sources of Western provenance, which provide very brief records, and the names of the alleged tribes were used as administrative choronyms to mark a certain area (*pagus*). From the seventh century, the name Surbi or Sorabi supposedly did not denote one tribe or union, but was used as a general name for the neighbours of the Franks further divided into smaller subjects.²⁸ The report by the Bavarian geographer would support this as-

²⁵ According to: MODZELEWSKI, K. Op. cit., p. 278.

²⁶ *Widudind*, Lib. I, cap. 36, p. 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, cap. 25, p. 49–50.

²⁸ RICHTHOFEN, Jasper, von. Besunzane – Milzener – Sorben. Die slawische Besiedlung in der Deutschen und polnischen beiderseits der Neisse. In *Siedlung, Kommunikation und Wirtschaft im westslawischen Raum. Beiträge der Sektion zur slawischen Frühgeschichte des 5. Deutschen Archäologenkongresses in Frankfurt an*

sumption. He noted that the land (*regio*) of the Sorbs had more regions (*regione plures*), with more than 50 castles (*ciuitates*). In his list, he also mentioned other tribes connected with the Sorabian Union (Luzici, Milceni, Besunzane, Daleminci).²⁹ The claim that they were some sort of sub-tribe of the Sorabian Union is not supported by written sources, which list these tribes separately. The campaign by Louis the German in 858 against the Sorbs, Daleminci and Obodrites can be used as an example.³⁰ The *Annales Fuldenses* mention the year 869, and report that '*Sorabi et Siusli* [another alleged Sorabian tribe] *iunctis sibi Behemis et ceteris circumcirca vicinis*' invaded Thuringia and pillaged it.³¹ Another case from 880 can be found in the same source. In this year, '*Sclavi, qui vocantur Dalmatii, et Behemi autque Sorabi caeterique circumcirca vicini*' were presumed to have invaded Thuringia once again, and pillaged a few Slavic settlements along the River Saale.³² Other alleged Sorabian tribes are known mainly from records where the tribal name marks a certain area (*pagus*). In this way, Thietmar of Merseburg mentions the Chutici region (*pago Chutici*),³³ and the Neletici region (*regio Neletici, pago Nudzici*), in two charters from Otto I from 961,³⁴ as well as the Seromunti region (*pago Seromunti*)³⁵ and the Nizici region (*pago Nikiki*) in a charter from Otto II.³⁶ It is true that similar difficulties can also be found in the case of the Obodrite Union. For example, the affiliation of the Linaa and Smeldingon tribes in the ninth century is unclear.³⁷ The aforementioned Drevani tribe is only known thanks to the charter from Henry II of 1004 mentioning the castle '*Claniki in Drevani*'.³⁸ However, in comparison with the southern Sorabian area, we have far more information about individual tribes. According to Gertraud Schrage, the further development of Sorabian social organisation was denied by the location of

der Oder, 4. bis 7. April 2005. Hrsg. von Felix BIERMANN, Thomas, KERSTING. Langenweißbach, 2007, S. 229.

²⁹ BRACHMANN, Hansjürgen. *Slawische Stämme an Elbe und Saale: Zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur im 6. bis 10. Jahrhundert auf Grund archäologischer Quellen*. Berlin, 1978, S. 162–167.

³⁰ *Annales Fuldenses*..., p. 49.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 94–95.

³³ Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon. In *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova Series*. T. IX. Ed. Robert HOLTZMANN. Berolini, 1935, Lib. II, cap. 37, p. 86.

³⁴ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Diplomata regum et imperatorum Germaniae* (hereafter, *MGH DD*). T. 1: *Conradi I., Heinrici I. et Ottonis I. diplomata*. Ed. Theodor SICKEL. Hannoverae, 1879–1884, p. 316–319, No. 231–232.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 145, No. 145.

³⁶ *MGH DD*. T. II: *Ottonis II. et III. diplomata*. Ed. Theodor SICKEL. Hannoverae, 1888, p. 222, No. 195.

³⁷ BIERMANN, Felix; GOSSLER, Norbert. *Zwischen Freund und Feind – Die Linonen und ihre Nachbarn im frühen und hohen Mittelalter. In Siedlungsstrukturen und Burgen im westslawischen Raum. Beiträge der Sektion zur slawischen Frühgeschichte der 17. Jahrestagung des Mittelund Ostdeutschen Verbandes für Altertumsforschung in Halle an der Saale, 19. bis 21 März 2007*. Hrsg. von Felix BIERMANN. Langenweißbach, 2009, S. 137–154.

³⁸ *MGH DD*. T. III: *Heinrici II. et Ardvini diplomata*. Ed. Harry BRESSLAU, Hermann BLOCH, Robert HOLTZMANN. Hannoverae, 1900–1903, p. 109–110, No. 87.

their land on the Tripoint between Bohemia, Poland and the Empire.³⁹ However, the increased interest mainly from the Empire did not bring any detailed reports of alleged tribes, princes or elites. Therefore, it is debatable to what extent the Sorabian Union is an artificial construct based on the assumption of similar existing structures within the entirety of the Polabian Slavs.

To sum up, the tribal federations or tribal unions represented a short-term or long-term truce of smaller social units (tribes/*gentes*), which could be motivated by a common interest, such as enhancing the defensive capacity (the long-term alliance of tribes identified as Sorbs), overcoming a temporary weakening (the association of the Circipanians and Kessinians with the Obodrite Union after losing a war with the Redarians Tollensians), long-term cooperation in order to eliminate a certain threat (brief cooperation by Sorbs and Bohemians against the Toringi between 869 and 880), etc. The reasons for dissolving these alliances include mostly the elimination of the cause for their existence, or the internal conflicts connected with administration. If a leading individual or group reached a certain degree of hegemony within the whole union, that could lead to its break-up, or contrarily, to strengthening the unity of the union. The dominance of the Obodrite princes from the Nakonids family proved to be beneficial for the unity of the union in the long term, even though their status was not unchallenged. On the other hand, the dominance of the Redarians led to the civil war in 1057, resulting in the overall weakening of the former Lutici Union. However, the break-up of the tribal union was not followed by the break-up of smaller tribal units, of which institutions were maintained even during the existence of the union.

In the case of all three unions, it is difficult to determine how much the recorded names of the tribes suggest a shared tribal identity among the union's members. To simplify the question, does the existence of an independent tribal name automatically mean the existence of a tribal identity and a sense of belonging on the tribal or union level? This brings us to the third and last part of the aforementioned question regarding the internal structure and nature of the tribe itself as a lesser unit of social organisation.

In his remarkable but slightly outdated work, Joachim Hermann pointed out that the tribe itself is a social unit based on the principle of segmental structure. According to Hermann, the basic administrative unit was the *župa* (county), inhabited by 300 to 1,200 people divided into extended families (*Großfamilien*) led by an elder, who was succeeded by his oldest son. More extended families founded larger settlements in areas with a certain fortified point. In these settlements, Hermann suggested a cer-

³⁹ SCHRAGE, Gertraud E. Bautzen und das Land Milsza in der Zeit um 1000. In *Besunzane, Milzener, Sorben. Die slawische Oberlausitz zwischen Polen, Deutschen und Tschechen*. Hrsg. von Gunter OETTEL. Görlitz-Zittau, 2004, S. 33.

tain degree of relation among their members, but its importance did not necessarily have to be principal. Several such areas with a castle as their centre formed a tribe led by a king or a prince. Individual tribes then formed a tribal union.⁴⁰ At the end of the 1950s, the Czech historian Hynek Bulín considered these unions as unions of tribes related ethnically and linguistically, which were forced by economic conditions, and mainly by the military necessity, to unite under the reign of a main prince, to whom Western sources refer as *dux*, *princeps*, *regulus* or *subregulus*.⁴¹ These older conclusions were based on three basic assumptions. Too much emphasis is put on the excessive structuring of the administrative functioning of the tribal institutions, the existence of the tribal prince is automatically assumed, it stresses the role of the elites as bearers of a tribal identity and in the spirit of Marxist philosophy, it stresses the effects of socio-political factors during the social development.⁴²

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Contemporary Medieval studies do not disagree with the segmental structure of a tribe, they merely try to avoid certain generalisations. It was this segmental structure of lesser tribes that enabled them to survive even the break-up of the tribe, or leaving it, because the tribes had the same institutions necessary for political survival, which were also active on the union level. Every small tribe had its own parliamentary system, organisation of tribal cult, clergy, elites, and even prince. The segmental group suggested by Hermann can also be considered, if we accept the fact that the organisation was similarly carried out by those smaller segments, which Karol Modzelewski called neighbours, because their insufficient strength in numbers did not allow them to make decisions fully and independently.⁴³ Therefore, the current discourse accepted the importance of military reasons (mainly self-defence) in the process of creating tribal and union structures.⁴⁴ On the other hand, it does not consider the existence of tribal princes to be a necessary rule. The Lutician acephalous system formed at the beginning of the 11th century, after the break-up of the original Veleti Union, and is considered to be an exception that proves the rule, or an exceptional unit created during an unusual concourse of historical circumstances. Christian Lübke noted that the Lutici created a society without rulers, where all the important decisions were not made by a prince, but by a gathering of regional elites

⁴⁰ HERRMANN, Joachim. *Die Slawen in Deutschland*. Berlin, 1985, S. 252–257.

⁴¹ BULÍN, Hynek. Počátky státu obodritského. *Právněhistorické studie*, 1958, t. IV, s. 8.

⁴² PROCHÁZKA, Vladimír. Sněmovnictví a soudnictví Polabsko-Pobaltských Slovanů. In *Vznik a počátky Slovanů II*. Hl. red. Jan EISNER. Praha, 1958, p. 89–120. Similarly: FRITZE, Wolfgang. Probleme der abodritischen Stammes- und Reichsverfassung und ihrer Entwicklung vom Stammesstaat zum Herrschaftsstaat. In *Siedlung und Verfassung der Slawen zwischen Elbe, Saale und Oder*. Hrsg. von Herbert LUDAT. Gießen, 1960, S. 145. Fritze also noted that princes were not the only bearers of the political power and identity (S. 180), but there was a large group of elites described as *primores* or *meiores ac praestantiores*, whose role could be compared to the leaders of smaller settlements in Kyivan Rus' (Ibid., S. 182).

⁴³ MODZELEWSKI, K. Op. cit., p. 278.

⁴⁴ HEATHER, Peter. Frankish Imperialism and Slavic Society. In *Origins of Central Europe...*, p. 175.

(probably clerical) at the temple in Rethra.⁴⁵ Karol Modzelewski did not agree with this, and pointed out the necessity to overcome ethnic boundaries in order to find that the rule of a prince or a king was not always a general rule. He also disproved the Lutician unique combination of cult and power. He also denied the differentiation of the sacred and military character of tribal institutions (basically, the separation of sacral and secular power as described by Western authors). On the other hand, he claimed that they were sacral and military aspects of the same institution, while the circumstances under which Latin authors were writing their works caused the emphasis to constantly shift from the sacral aspects of the tribal institutions to their military aspects, and vice versa.⁴⁶

In brief, the tribe was a community considering their mutual social ties in sacral categories. The cult was present in all aspects of its existence: in its parliamentary system, courts, warfare, treaties, etc. According to this theory, the gods were part of all activities of the tribal institutions, including the prince, if it existed in that tribe. For example, a similar state also existed among the Saxons before they were subjugated by the Franks, the Lutici, and partly by the Sorabian tribes. Of course, military commanders existed, but a crucial role was played by the tribal institutions connected with worshipping the cult. Individual princes had to respect the authority of the tribal institutions in order to stay in power. The rulers from the Nakonids family managed to keep the imaginary balance, which apparently was not even disturbed by the personal conversion to Christianity. Adam of Bremen mentioned three Obodrite princes, whereby Gneus and Anadrog were pagans, while Udo was a bad Christian.⁴⁷ Besides the Danish Christian King Harald, the Slavic rebellion against the Empire in 983 was also supported by the baptised Obodrite Prince Mstivoj.⁴⁸ Obodrite princes from the Nakonids family were not rulers in the Western sense, because they led the tribal federation rather than ruled it. They were a link, and according to Modzelewsky, they bore the traits of a big relative, fighter or neighbour.⁴⁹ These traits could become the basis for changes in organisation, which enabled the tribal leader to become the ruler, or to be eliminated. An example of the elimination of ambitious

⁴⁵ LÜBKE, Ch. Christianity..., pp. 200–201.

⁴⁶ MODZELEWSKI, K. Op. cit., pp. 312–314. Reports provided by Western chronicles regarding the political and religious structure of the Slavic tribes may not be always accurate. As Christian scholars, they interpreted many unknown aspects by relating them to Christian or Classical concepts known by themselves and by their readers. ROSIK, Stanisław. *Interpretacja chrześcijańska religii pogańskich Słowian w świetle kronik niemieckich XI–XII wieku (Thietmar, Adam of Bremen, Helmold)*. Wrocław, 2000.

⁴⁷ Magistri Adami Bremensis Gesta Hammaburgensis..., Lib. II, cap. 66, p. 126.

⁴⁸ LÜBKE, Christian. Die Beziehungen zwischen Elb- und Ostseeslawen und Dänen vom 9. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert: Eine andere Option elbslawischer Geschichte? In *Zwischen Reric und Bornhöved. Die Beziehungen zwischen den Dänen und ihren slawischen Nachbarn vom 9. bis ins 13. Jahrhundert. Beiträge einer internationalen Konferenz Leipzig 4.–6. Dezember 1997*. Hrsg. von Christian LÜBKE, Ole HARCK. Stuttgart, 2001, S. 27.

⁴⁹ For a detailed analysis of the role of tribal leaders based on ancient germanic codes of law, see: MODZELEWSKI, K. Op. cit., p. 332–336.

prince elites can be found in the neighbouring Veleti, who disappeared from written sources after 838, until the aforementioned Widukind's report of the campaign by Henry the Fowler in 927/8. This 'Dark Age' in Veletian history was probably filled with a harsh conflict between the princes and the traditional tribal power. During this conflict, the clergy, as well as other tribal institutions, probably regained their importance. Former Veletian princes were not necessarily eliminated, but their power was returned to its original role, i.e. being subjected to tribal institutions and the authority of the gathering connected with the cult. No further Veletian prince is mentioned by name in written sources.

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Respect for tribal institutions was a necessity for the princes. The balance within the tribe was dependent on ethnic, neighbourly or relational ties, a common cult, tradition, and the power of collective enforcement (social in the meaning of collective hostility, but not administrative).⁵⁰ This concerned not only the princes, but also the group of elites representing a certain segment of the tribe if there was no power of the prince in that particular tribe. It is difficult to reconstruct the structure without a knowledge of contemporary Slavic terminology, using often misinterpreted descriptions by Latin authors. If we go back to the Bavarian geographer once more, we can form a partial picture of the internal tribal structure using his Latin terminology.

The author of this record used mostly the terms *civitas*, *urbs* and *regio* to describe the areas and fortified settlements. For the Slavic area, the term *civitas* did not necessarily denote only a castle or a fortified settlement, but also a tribal unit. The foundation of every tribe was formed by people inhabiting a certain area and divided into extended families (*Großfamilien*). Several of these formed a lesser tribal unit (*civitas*), with a centre that could have been a fortified object guarded by a small garrison, or used as a refuge in times of danger. Several of these lesser tribal units formed the next level of tribal structures, for which, in five cases, the Bavarian geographer used the term *regio*. The term *regio* was used in the case of the Obodrites, Veleti, Sorbs, Bulgarians, and the vaguely known Sittici.⁵¹ In particular, there were four direct neighbours of the Empire and one land which did not share a border with the Empire.

The higher tribal unit called *regio* could have been represented by a prince, individual *civitates* governed by selected representatives, which were collectively called *primores*, *seniores*, *meliores ac praestantiores* or *nobiles* by written sources. These groups acted as representatives of their *civitates*, and were equal to the princes representing the *regio*. Lesser tribal units merged mainly for military and economic reasons.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 284–285.

⁵¹ *Magnae Moraviae Fontes Historici*. T. III. Ed. Dagmar BARTOŇKOVÁ, Luboš HAVLÍK, Ivan HRBEK, Jaroslav LUDVÍKOVSKÝ, Radoslav VEČERKA. Brno, 1967, p. 285–288.

We should also not forget the possibility of an internal conflict between individual *civitates*, which could only support the creation of *regiones*.⁵²

We know about these non-prince elites mainly thanks to their contact with the Empire, i.e. envoys or couriers to the emperor. In May 826, '*Abodritorum primores*' appeared at the imperial gathering in Ingelheim, and complained about Prince Ceadrag. Louis kept Ceadrag at his court, and sent the other *primores* home.⁵³ Before he made his final decision, the emperor sent couriers to the Obodrites (*populus Abodritorum*), in order to find out if the people (*vulgus*) desired Ceadrag. The couriers came back and reported that the tribe (*gens*) was divided, but the more powerful or better (*meliores ac praestantiores*) agreed with his acceptance. The question remains how much the author adjusted the relationship between Ceadrag and the *primores*. Their inferiority and the emperor's voice of conciliation are apparent from the report. The author saw the Obodrites as a unified tribe, which is not out of the question, as well as the possibility for the author's adjustment. In 844, the land was divided '*per duces*' after the successful campaign of Louis, and it is not clear whom the Annals of Fulda are mentioning, and if they did not address the non-prince elites as princes, who were 'promoted' by the emperor this way.⁵⁴ The Empire always had problems identifying the leader or the centre. Therefore, written sources often increased the importance of individuals who were negotiating with it. The Empire could hardly end the war if there was nobody to surrender and accept the conditions in the name of the whole group of tribes.

The chronicler Helmond of Bosau provides a much more recent report. Count Adolf II of Holstein sent couriers to the Obodrite Prince Niklot, in order to win over not only the prince but also '*omnes nobiliores*'.⁵⁵ Niklot resided together with his brother Wertislaw in the castle at Vurle, where besides the general, i.e. free, people (*vulgus*), '*multi nobilium*' also resided. With '*multi nobilium*', Wertislaw later surrendered to Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony.

Using this information, we can try to present the tribal structure (see Chart 1). The whole structure is built on the division of free people (*vulgus, populus*) into extended families (*Großfamilie*), based on the relationship and neighbourly ties. It is obvious that the lesser tribal units (*civitas*), represented mostly by the regional elites, elders or clergy, could, but did not have to, come together and form a higher unit (*regio*), led by someone to whom Latin authors attribute the title of prince (*dux, princeps*). Lesser and higher units sent representatives to tribal gatherings. Can we call this

⁵² Similarly: URBAŃCZYK, P. Changes..., p. 40.

⁵³ Annales Regni Francorum, a. 826. In *MGH SS. T. VI: Annales Regni Francorum et Annales Q.D. Einhardi*. Ed. Friedrich KURZE. Hannoverae, 1895, p. 169.

⁵⁴ Annales Fuldenses..., p. 85.

⁵⁵ Helmoldi presbyteri Bozoviensis Cronica Slavorum..., Lib. I, cap. 57, p. 112.

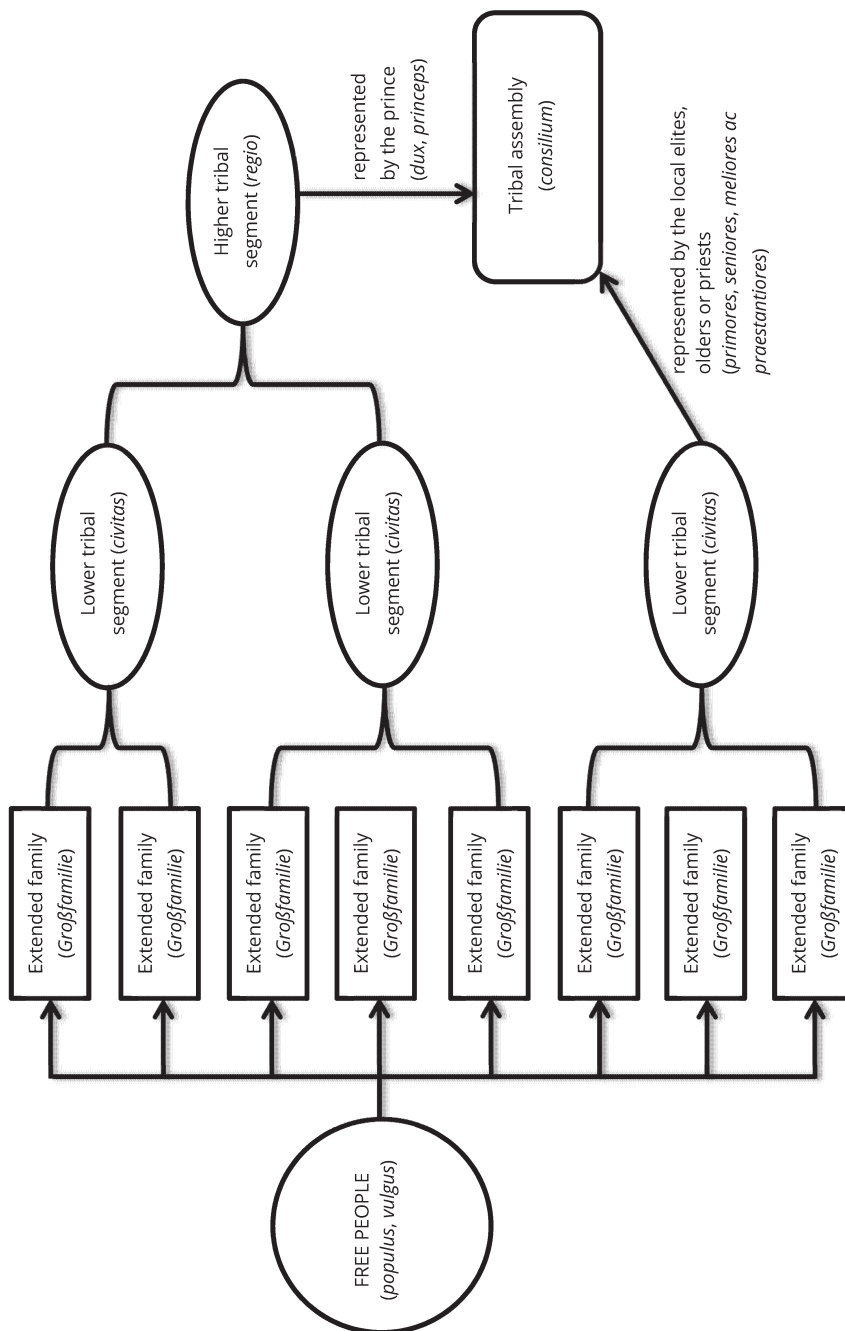


Chart 1. Tribal organisation of the Slavic society in the Polabian area

system democratic, or characterise it as a military democracy, as it was described in the early days by Procopius of Caesarea, or by Thietmar of Merseburg at the end of the tenth century? Procopius mentioned that the Slavs and the Antes were not ruled by one man, but a long time ago they always negotiated favourable and unfavourable matters together.⁵⁶ He further pointed out the importance of the Slavic cult in the form of divinatory rituals or sacrifices to the gods. Procopius was active during the reign of the Emperor Justinian, and he considered democracy according to the Roman model as expressing the will of the people. Thietmar wrote similarly about the Lutici, when he mentioned the absence of a ruler, the importance of the tribal gathering, and also religious rites such as divination or taking an oath.⁵⁷ Unlike other authors, Thietmar also mentioned how the way of the tribe (*gentis voluntas*) was expressed, not the will of the people (*voluntas populi*). In Thietmar's same report, we can read: '*Sie quis vero ex comprovincialibus in placio hiis contradicit, fustibus verberatur et, si forinsecus palam resistit, aut omnia incendio et continua depredatione perdit aut in eorum presentia pro qualitate sua pecuniae persolvit quantitatem debitae. Infideles ipsi et mutabiles ipsi inmutabilitatem ac magnam exigunt ab allis fidem.*' General agreement was crucial for the effectiveness of the decision, because, unlike the Medieval state, the tribal organisation did not possess the means for administrative enforcement. However, the tribe as a community exercised social enforcement in the form of corporal punishment or collective hostility (i.e. rejection). It was a sort of acclamation expressed by the whole, not an individual. Karol Modzelewski proved this with a testament by Otto of Bamberg, who visited a similar gathering in Szczecin, and with various punishments for opposing the will of the gathering set by the old Germanic codes of law.⁵⁸ With this goes hand in hand the permeation of cult rituals through all activities of the gathering, and therefore, the combination of the sacral and military character of this institution.

Concluding remarks

This paper set the goal of summarising and expanding some of the crucial points in the historical research into the development of Slavic society in the Polabian area. Individual ethnic groups inhabiting the region cannot be considered a monolithic entity. They were similar to systems of which the flexibility enabled the creation of various models, depending on internal and external influences. The reflection of these models in written Latin sources (i.e. of foreign origin) often shows misunder-

⁵⁶ De bello Gothico. In *Slovanské pohanství ve středověkých latinských pramenech*. Vybral, přeložil, úvodem a poznámkami opatřil Jiří DYNDA. Praha, 2017, Lib. III, cap. 14, p. 25

⁵⁷ Thietmari Merseburgensis episcopi Chronicon..., Lib. VI, cap. 25, p. 304.

⁵⁸ MODZELEWSKI, K. Op. cit., p. 287–302.

standings by the authors, or their own interpretation according to criteria known to them, which were based on the intellectual heritage of their surroundings (i.e. the Classical or Christian tradition). Therefore, the three tribal unions of the Polabian Slavs can look like a compact pre-state tribal society, or like three alternative directions in social development. If we leave out the thoughts on the original Obodrite federation, the Obodrite Union evolved as a system of central and marginal tribes with the influential position of a prince, whose position depended on the balance between individual princes and tribal institutions. Their rivals, the Lutici, are seen as a unique social system without the power of a prince (the latest at the beginning of the 11th century), even though the modern discourse has proven that the existence of a tribal system without the power of a prince gradually growing stronger and led by a tribal gathering closely connected to the cult or cult centres was not an exception in the context of all barbarian Europe, which can be observed by a comparison of the text by Tacitus and the later text by Thietmar. The model of the third federation is artificial to a certain degree, and is called the Sorabian Union. According to sources, it apparently had similar systems as the Obodrites and the Lutici, but the lack of written sources prevents any further analysis. Therefore, the tribal organisation was a flexible system to a certain degree, and its basic units (*gentes*) survived even after the break-up of the federation. The segmental structure showed some signs of a tribal democracy, and, given the military character of individual federations, the whole system could be called a military democracy; but because of the strong ties with the cult and religious rites, the current discourse rejects the strict division of the military and sacral character of tribal institutions. Therefore, it is not possible to determine whether the tribal organisation of the Polabian Slavs was an equal alternative to the Medieval states, as we know from Bohemia, Poland and Hungary, even though more than three centuries of the known history of the Polabian Slavs underlines the effectiveness of this social organisation.

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SCLAVOS, QUI DICUNTUR ABODRITI, WILZI ET SURBI. PASTABOS DĖL PAELBIO SLAVŲ GENTINĖS ORGANIZACIJOS

Jan Tomášek

Santrauka

Senesnioji istoriografija Paelbio slavų gentines sąjungas, žinomas iš IX–X a. rašytinių šaltinių, laikė socialinėmis-politinėmis struktūromis, kurios pagal savo esmę neprilygo viduramžių Vidurio Europos valstybių, tokių kaip Čekija (Bohemija), Lenkija ar Vengrija, struktūroms. Toks perdėm evoliucinis socialinių struktūrų raidos požiūris implikavo mintį, kad gentinės sąjungos būtinai turėjo virsti ankstyvosiomis viduramžių valstybėmis, o tam reikėjo ilgalaikio socialinės sistemos stabilumo. Todėl istoriografijoje formuota nuomonė, kad dėl savo socialinio (iš dalies ir kalbinio) išskirtinumo Paelbio slavų sąjungos nelaikytinos ankstyvosiomis viduramžių valstybėmis. Koją tyrimams kišo ir tai, kad Paelbio slavų gentinės sąrangos tyrimuose naudota ta pati sociologinių tyrimų prietis, kurią tyrinėtojai naudojo XIX–XX a. kolonijinės Afrikos genčių tyrimams.

Tokie svarstymai apskritai leido atsirasti *visuomenės be valstybės* sampratai. Baigiantis XX a., tyrimuose vis dažniau buvo išsakoma mintis, kad gentinė organizacija nėra primityvesnė ar kažkuo prastesnė už *ankstyvosios valstybės* sampratą, nes gentinė organizacija buvo ne mažiau efektyvi, leidžianti visuomenei spręsti gynybos, konsolidacijos ir kitus reikalus. Dėl šios priežasties Paelbio slavų gentinė organizacija buvo įtraukta į barbariškosios Europos kontekstą, gentinės organizacijos laikus chronologiškai apribojant nuo vėlyvosios antikos epochos iki krikščionybės įsitvirtinimo kulminacijos Šiaurės rytų Europoje, suvokiant, kad germanų ir keltų kultūrų maišymasis minėtu laikotarpiu labai apsunkina bendrų kriterijų, apibrėžiančių gentinę organizaciją ir galinčių tapti gentinės ar etninės tapatybės indikatoriumi, suradimą ir nustatymą. Pabrėžtina ir tai, kad Paelbio slavų gentinė organizacija nebuvo tiesiogiai paveikta romėniškosios kultūros ir jos palikimo, kurio tęstinumą viduramžių šaltiniuose akcentavo krikščionių kronikininkai.

Atsižvelgiant į šiuos svarbius, istoriografijoje nusistovėjusius vertinimus, keltinas klausimas, kaip reikėtų suprasti Paelbio slavų gentinę organizaciją, klausimą skaidant į tris dalis: pačios Paelbio slavų visuomenės sąrangos, gentinės organizacijos ir atskirų genčių vidinės struktūros. Suvoktina, kad Paelbio slavų gyvenamosios žemės ribojosi su keliais Otonų-Salijų imperijos pasieniais, kur radosi tarp akultūracijos procesams. Tokių akultūracijos zonų Europoje galime rasti ir daugiau (pvz., Iberijos pusiasalyje, Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje ir kt.). Iš viduramžių šaltinių aiškėja, kad Paelbio slavai buvo neatskiriama šiaurės rytų barbariškosios Europos dalis su jiems būdingu išskirtinumu ir gyvenimu konkrečiose etnokultūrinėse ribose. Tik iš krikščioniškų viduramžių analų, kronikų ir kitų šaltinių galime spręsti apie Paelbio slavų visuomenės sąrangą, nes jie patys savo rašytinių šaltinių nepalikė. Rašytiniuose šaltiniuose galima aptikti kelių lygių gentinei organizacijai nusakyti vartotus terminus, tokius kaip (lot.) *gens*, *natio*, *populus*, pvz.: (lot.) *omnibus barbaris Danorum, Sueonum itamque Sclavorum aliis in circuitu coniacentibus populis* (Adomas Brėmenietis, XI a. antroji pusė), *Slavic um aliis gentibus* (Helmoldas iš Bosau, XII a. vid.). Lotyniškuose šaltiniuose aptinkami ir gentinių sąjungų įvardijimai, nuro-

dant jų etninę kilmę: (lot.) *Abodriti, Wilzi sive Lutici, Surbi, Sorabi*. Šie etnonimai absorbavo kitas, mažesnes, etnines grupes. Antai kronikininkas Vidukindas (X a.) vakarų slavų etninės grupės *Wilti* (veletų, t. y. liutičių) sudėtyje minėjo buvus redarus ir hevelus, nors etnokultūriniu požiūriu pastarosios gentys nebuvo tapačios veletams. Po šimtmečio, t. y. XI a., redarai tapo naujosios liutičių sąjungos pagrindu, aplink save suvienydami kitas gentis. Dar didesnė painiava šaltiniuose matoma dėl Sorbų genčių sąjungos. Nuo VII a. frankų kronikininkai tokiu etnonimu vadino apskritai visas pagoniškas gentis, gyvenusias į rytus nuo Frankų karalystės. Iš daugelio paminėjimų lotyniškuose šaltiniuose galima daryti išvadą, kad genčių sąjungos (federacijos) sudarydavo trumpalaikio bendradarbiavimo socialinius vienetus (genčių) bendriems tikslams pasiekti. Kai kada šis bendradarbiavimas peraugdavo etnokultūrinės ribas, kaip atsitiko sorbams susivienijus su bohemiais prieš germanų gentis IX a. antroje pusėje.

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Pabrėžtina tai, kad, remiantis visais straipsnyje aptartų sąjungų paminėjimais lotyniškuose šaltiniuose, sunku pasakyti, kiek gentys iš tiesų bendradarbiavo etnokultūriniu, o kiek politiniu pagrindu. Šiai problemai spręsti reikėtų grįžti prie trečiosios klausimo apie Paelbio slavus dalies, t. y. nagrinėti, kiek leidžia rašytinių šaltinių bazė, kiekvienos genties socialinę sanklodą atskirai. Šiuolaikiniai tyrimai rodo, jog kiekviena gentis turėjo tam tikras savo struktūras: bendruomenės narių susirinkimą, kulto tarnus, vadus. Pastarieji kai kada suvokti kur kas plačiau nei paprasti vadai. Tačiau vadų / kunigaikščių buvimo klausimas neturi virsti taisykle, padedančia nusakyti gentinės organizacijos politinį pobūdį. Taigi galima kalbėti apie visuomenę, kurios viršūnėje buvo ne kunigaikščiai, o bendruomenės susirinkimuose lemiamą balsą turėjusios regioninės elito grupės, kaip faktiškai iki XI a. buvo liutičių sąjungoje. Tik nuo XI a. liutičių sąjungoje išsiskiria ryškesni lyderiai – kunigaikščiai. Tačiau kiti tyrinėtojai (pvz., Karolis Modzelewskis) su tokia pozicija nelinkę sutikti, teigdami, jog kunigaikščių valdžia leido peržengti etniškumo slenkstį, t. y. gentis vienyti ne tik etniniu pagrindu, kaip atsitiko su obodritų genčių sąjunga.

Atlikta ligšiolinių darbų apžvalga rodo, kad Paelbio slavų gentinės organizacijos negalime suvokti kaip monolitinės struktūros. Reikėtų kalbėti apie lanksčius sąjungų ir vidinės organizacijos modelius, atsižvelgiant į to meto vidaus ir išorės veiksnius. Pabrėžtina, kad dėl gentinės organizacijos lankstumo, net ir žlugus genčių sąjungoms, išliko gentinės visuomenės institutai, kuriuos galime laikyti karinės demokratijos požymiais, egzistavusiai iki krikščionybės įsitvirtinimo.