

INSPIRATIONS OF ADAM OF BREMEN. COMPARATIVE SOURCE CRITICISM

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Abstract: *Adam of Bremen was one of the most important chronicles of the eleventh century. He wrote a chronicle *Gesta Hamburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*. This work is full of information. Many of them are about northern Europe, Iceland, Greenland and the mysterious Vinland. However, the question is what is true, what has been taken from other sources, what content has survived to our time. This paper presents criticism of the source in the context of Vinland. On individual examples, we explain what elements of the chronicler's description were taken, and what might be original. In addition, we try to answer a question about the multiple processing and borrowings of one source content by other documents. Finally, we hypothesize that the work of Adam of Bremen contributed to the creation of Vinland's vision in the written sagas.*

Keywords: *Adam of Bremen, Vinland, Vikings, Gesta Hammaburgensis, America*

1. Introduction

Adam of Bremen (*Adam Bremensis*) in one of the most important annalist of the 11th century. The most of his works present the economic analyses and descriptions of the Northern Germany (Holy Roman Empire), especially the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen. The most important and timeless of his masterpiece is the chronicle: *Gesta Hamburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* [1]. In that piece of work, we can find a lot of content about Hamburg-Bremen neighbourhood, economy, society etc. Nonetheless, the most interesting and unique is a description of the Eastern and Northern Europe. Moreover, there we can come across a mysterious information about *Vinland* – the place that could be related with North America [2], [3].

Until the end of 20th century, many researchers have thought that Adam of Bremen had fully independent, first-hand access to most of the facts mentioned in his works. Certainly, descriptions of the Northern Germany could be made by himself based on his own experience. However, this conclusion related to the Northern Europe and this *Vinland* cannot be relevant. Currently the majority of historians think that the majority of information included in that chronicle is a chicanery or nothing less than borrowings from other authors. Nevertheless, among these elements we are able to find a unique and new information, especially about Nordic area. This part of his work is the most valuable for readers. Concurrently, the biggest challenge for historians is to recognize what is truth, fraud, borrowing or semi-genuine *litentia poetica* [4].

We cannot read Adam's papers without any reflection. In this short discussion, we would like to present how the 11th century chronicler builds his narration. What kind of borrowings and real description he was making. What kind of reality was invented based on a genuine and seeming facts. Moreover, we have to define what kind of imports the author made and what was the reason to do that. Certainly, this content we will understand on the background of his life, work, possibilities and experience. Finally, we present examples of his creativity, highlighting impact of his frauds. Here we will not depict his whole life

and works. We will focus on his opinion about the Northern Europe and this eerie *Vinland*.

2. Personal background

Adam Bremensis is one of the best example of the middle medieval chronicler and author. We have not detailed information when and where he was born. However, we expect that it was shortly before 1050. Based on his style, language and information included in his works, we assume that he spent earliest years in the East of the Kingdom of Germany, probably in Meissen (Misena) and Lusatia. There have not been any "strong" proofs when exactly he died. Notwithstanding, one of the chronicle co-author or the continuator mentioned that Adam died on 12th October. Unfortunately, he forgot to underline a year. We can expect that it happened between 1081 and 1085 [1], [4].

It is extremely difficult to follow Adam's *curriculum vitae*. We do not know his family status. Probably they were noble from the middle class. He could not be the oldest son in the family who traditionally succeed the status. Accordingly he was sent to the basic and then cathedral school in the closest diocese. This one was in Magdeburg. In 11th century, that bishopric was deeply involved in the Christianisation and aggrandising of the German influence in the Eastern Europe (Poland, Polabian Slavs, and Czechia). Probably there he had a brush with the acting Christianization, missions and people from external territories. The most popular theory of the Adam's biography presents that he met there missionaries or knights from the Northern Europe. In addition, he could not find a permanent job in Magdeburg.

Simultaneously in Bremen on the archbishopric throne sat Adalbert – famous and one of the most important promoters of the Christian church in the Nordic countries. The theory predicates that Adalbert invited Adam to Bremen. The proposition was to become the chronicler of Bremen-Hamburg archdiocese and the missions in the North. Adalbert needed more educated man to rule and register his great activity in Christianization of the northern

Europe. Therefore, Adam's relocation about 200 km away from Magdeburg was quite natural [1], [5].

Adam arrived to Bremen and Hamburg before 1069. On the basis of his chronicle we can suspect that he was in that time ca. 20 years old man. When he arrived there, he went to the dead centre of the multicultural, dynamic society. In that time Bremen-Hamburg archdiocese was a main point on the map of North-South relationships and Christianisation. Bishop Adalbert created very powerful and important diocese opened to the Northern affairs. Adam had a great possibility to learn there exotic languages and meet people from all over Europe, particularly Scandinavia. In the sequel, Adam could stimulate and describe these relations and stories of people he met. Additionally, he had to work in the bishop's administration to note the story of Adalbert and his province. In this way, some registers and the Chronicle were created as the greatest advertisement of the bishop's work [4].

3. Adam's chronicle

The most important work of Adam is his chronicle – *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*. This *opus magnum* was written as the gift for archbishop Adalbert. The purpose of this piece of work was to make a description of the archbishopric's power, real estates and influence. Moreover, this paper was made to spread a glory of Adalbert on the field of Christianisation of the Northern Europe. *Gesta ...* has a form of the encomium of the bishop's achievements. Probably it should be also perceived as the Adalbert's hagiography. Therefore, we have to be very careful about facts, opinions and attitude included there. Advertisements always lie too much.

Adam's chronicle is segmented into five books. First three parts are devoted to the description of the dioceses' assets (real estates, funds, and library). In the second and third book, we find very interesting and informative facts about Germany and local politics with very broad description of the natural environment of Bremen-Hamburg state. There we are also informed about the bishop's life. The addendum to those volumes are great information about German-Danish political affairs. The most mysterious book of this chronicle is the fourth part. The title *Descriptio insularum aquilonis* does not explain anything. However, there we can find the most revolutionary information. We can observe images of the Slavs states and Danish borderland. Moreover, Adam described this kind of lands as Norway and Sweden. It is not everything. Exactly there we discover the first written information about Island and the unknown place called *Vinland* (probably the North America) [6], [7]. This part is written based on the witnesses' reports and opinions. In the penultimate part, we encounter thousands of borrowings from multiple works. The end of chronicle, written by the glory poem, is replete by the fantasies and cock and bull stories [1], [4].

Adam informs the reader that the Chronicle was created between 1066 and 1069. However, the narration tells us the story from 845 to 1069. Dating is not clear. Therefore, some researchers suggest that the story finishes in 1072. We do not know why the end of that masterpiece was in that year. Probably we can explain that by the death

of Adam's patron – bishop Adalbert. After that, there was no reason to continue the panegyric [5].

In this work, especially in the fourth and fifth part we can find thousands of information. Some of it is a truth based on the relations of witnesses who had visited Nordic lands and mysterious Island and *Vinland*. Many facts are vicarious. However, the most of figures are author's fantasies and very smart combinations of the ancient author's ideas, truth and inventions. Without deep knowledge and analysis, we can make plenty of mistakes in the book's interpretation. We can confound reality with fiction, facts from the 11th century and ancient mysteries. Extremely important is to define and explain what kind of Adam's descriptions are just borrowings and which are real stories from the North of the World.

3.1. Borrowings - examples

The reason of this short thesis is to demonstrate how Master Adam constructed and presented narration of his Chronicle. However, the most important is to define how he created facts based on the earlier, ancient works of other authors. Non-expert of his work could expect that content created by Adam is his own authorial job. Certainly in many points it is like this. Therefore, we can use this information to describe Scandinavia, Island or Vinland (probably America) [8]. Unfortunately, the most of creatures, lands and behaviours mentioned in his work, is a fake. There are many examples imported from other works of random authors from the ancient times. Especially in the fourth – *Vinland* chapter we find plenty of these kind of borrowings. Probably the *terra incognita* was replaced by content from other works or fantasies [1]. Look at the Adam's style.

[...] and when these women come to give birth, if the offspring were of the male sex, most beautiful women. Living by himself, the latter spurn consort with man and, if men do come near, even drive them resolutely away. The Cynocephali are men who have their heads on their breasts. That are often seen in Russia as captives and they voice their words in barks. In that region, too, are those who are called Alani or Albani, in their language named Wizzi; very hard-hearted gluttons, born with grey hair. (Adam of Bremen, *Gesta...*, 4th chapter, XIX) [1]

Children could think that it was a part of the fairy-tale. Historians-amateurs could look for the sense, creatures and places (without effect). The professional researchers will find here some minimal facts, which reflect the reality. However, it is extremely difficult to unpick the truth. For us this passage is the best example of the technique of construction of the narration – mixing the reality with a tale, author's ideas and experience with works of other writers, testifies of witnesses and borrowings from the ancient times. Above all this kind of story is a wonderful proof of erudition and mastery of well-educated man.

When we compare this part to works of Solinus (*De Mirabilibus Mundi*, XXX) [11], Jordanes (*Getica*, VII, 44) [10] and Martianus Capella (*De Nuptis*, 665) [9] we can observe that Bremen's master made very elegant compilation. Moreover, he added also a bit from Orosius'

interpretation of Alfred the Great [12], Vergilius (*Eneida*) [13] and Pliny the Elder [14]. It is quite easy to find accurate sentences from each opus. Consequently, there is extremely difficult to find what is his own relation. We know that Adam has never left northern Germany. He could not know the geography and society of other lands from other sources than newcomers' relations and other books. We are sure that 90% of his chronicle must be the import because also he could not experience so much. Unfortunately, in this spate of borrowed, fake information it is very difficult to find figures from the real 11th century reality.

3.2. *Vinland*

The legend of *Vinland* is the most interesting in Adam's chronicle. Outside the sagas area (Scandinavia, Island) the fourth book of *Gesta ...* was the only one where this term and place appears. Therefore, it is very important to differentiate what is just a fake or borrowing and what is a part of the real relations of witnesses of those lands (vide *Gesta ...*, 4th, 38) [1].

We can think that the chronicler describes new land in any unknown area. We can find here references to kings and nobles who lived Adam's times. In addition, we observe information about the environment, weather and phenomena which could present in 11th century. However, we have real problems with location of this area. Therefore, we begin to expect that this part of Adam's work can be also a kind of borrowing or fiction. There are no witnesses testified about these times and places both for Adam or other authors. Accordingly, we find similarities in Master's favourites authors e.g. in *De Nuptis* (VI, 666) [9]

The majority of researchers had thought that Adam collected relations about Scandinavia, Baltic Sea region and these mysterious *Vinland*, *Ultimo Thule* and *Island* from witnesses who were taking part in the missionary actions in the North or missionaries who spoke with indigenes. We thought that Adam or some missionaries spoke with Svein Estridsson – the Danish king deeply involved in wars and Christianisation in Norway. He had to transfer this information about *Island* and *Vinland* to Bremen [2], [7], [8]. Unfortunately, when we compare Martianus' relation to Adam's Chronicle we can see that both contents about *Vinland* are very similar and sounds like this:

Winland, eo quod ibi vites sponte nascantur, vinum optimum ferentes (Gesta ...4th chapter, XXXVI) [9]

Is it indicative of the Adam's borrowings from Martianus? Probably it is right. We know that the king of Denmark has never been further in the area of *Oslofjorden*. Therefore, he could not have information about the Northern Norway affairs from his own experience. We expect also that Estridsson has never met Adam. Simultaneously we see that Adam made many imports from other ancient fabulists. It is not right to believe that one incredible man knew much about Norway, *Island* and *America* [15]. Therefore, we have to deny this part of Adam's relation as his own *litentia poetica*, merged from hundreds of books, reports, ideas etc. Probably among this content we have also examples of ancient authors, northern

sagas, coetaneous works and relations of witnesses. Some of them could be in the northern Norway, maybe on *Island* and somewhere further. However, these statements are vicarious and not reliable. We are not able to prove direction of the communication and unpick truth [6], [7], [16].

3.3. *Vinland – other sources*

Adam was not the only one who mentioned *Vinland*, *Island* and northern Europe. Besides our chronicle, the most important and plausible works about that area are sagas. Stories about the life and journeys of the Nordic people (also Vikings) from 10th until 12th centuries collected and listed in 13th, 14th and 15th centuries in Scandinavia and *Island*. All of these histories are written based on tradition and other smaller sources, which have not survived to our times. The content of those sagas in some parts is so similar to Adam's relations about these mysterious lands. Especially in two sagas (*Erik the Red Saga* and *Greenlining's Saga*) [17], we can expect a few information about the Far North area. Hitherto the most of researchers have thought that Adam built his chronicle on the testimonies and these sagas. His original masterpiece had to be the compilation also with sagas. Nowadays we know that it was impossible because in 11th century sagas were not collected and written. They circled in the North in the oral tradition. Certainly, in this form, Bremen's master could hear something but it could be only rumours.

Today we can think that in 11th century Adam knew nothing about the North. Perhaps he had no relations from Svein Estridsson or he transferred only the tradition of *Vinland*, *Island* and *America* (oral rumours) [18]. Maybe around few words Adam created his own story about mysterious creature on the grounds of ancient authors. Another theory springs to mind. Adam's chronicle was very popular in Europe. However, we have only one copy from 13th century at our command (only passages). Probably volumes of this masterpiece were held also in Denmark and southern Sweden. There in Lund from 1105 existed the diocese created as the Hamburg-Bremen archbishopric affiliate for the Nordic area. In the wonderful library of Lund had to be hold the Adam's chronicle. Also in similar time (from 13th century), oral tradition of sagas was noted. It was in progress in both Lund, Denmark and *Island* (*Flateyjarbók*, *Hauksbók* and *Skálholtsbók*) [19]. We can expect that for scribes the oral tradition was not enough to create the "real" image of Viking's life. Therefore, they had to use other sources to complete these stories. Certainly, they used ancient authors. However, their main source was the Adam's Chronicle. In this way, his book became the first source for the next story. Some of his fantasies were changed in the truth mixed with other stories from the oral saga's tradition. In this way, we received the mixture of 99% of imaginations and 1% of truth. However, this situation did not happen during Adam's work but later. Not in Bremen but in Scandinavia and maybe on *Island*.

We see that in some sagas we also meet the same stories, written so similar to Adam's style. Earlier we have expected that sagas influenced Adam's Chronicle. Maybe it is the other way round. Adam created his own reality (middle of 11th century). Then his Chronicle was read by

thousands of educated man who created new vision of the world (12th -13th centuries). Finally, these academics received some data from sagas, merged with information and they created entirely new vision of the North (13th – 15th centuries). In this way in these sagas' content, we do not have the real vision of the oral stories but we have the compilation also with Adam's fantasies. For example, we know that in Icelandic saga Hauksbók there are included other sources, for example *Algorismus Vulgaris* by Johannes de Sacrobosco from the middle of 13th century [20]. When we trail this example, we should look at Erik the Red Saga, chapter V [6].

We see that information mentioned in both texts are the same. This content is too similar to derive from one 11th century. Probably it is a proof that also in Erik Rauda's saga we can find Adam's imaginations. Here we have a brush with one source just processed thousand times by tradition, scribes, languages, culture. This masterpiece is an Adam's Chronicle.

4. Conclusions

Adam of Bremen was one of the most important chroniclers of 11th century. He created wonderful chronicle - *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*. This masterpiece deeply describes situation in the northern part of Germany and it is a panegyric about the life of bishop Adalbert. However, in addition this work shows us new undiscovered lands as Scandinavia, Baltic Sea region, Island and mysterious *Vinland*.

When we read these kind of stories, we have to be very careful about ideas, places, creatures and people, which are not mentioned in other sources. Very often it happened that the author created his own reality based on other, earlier and popular sources, oral tradition and unknown literature. It looks that in this situation it happened. We proved that the most of Adam's chronicle is a borrowing from other authors. We presented also that Bremen's chronicler created new lands and new characters on the basis of older sources and uncertain oral tradition. Moreover, we have to be aware that sources interfere with other sources also years after the first recording. Probably in this situation, Adam's masterpiece in the 11th century based on the remains of oral tradition about Vikings and *Vinland*. However in 13th and 14th centuries it affected this tradition called sagas to create new, written "saga reality". Additionally across next centuries, sagas and Adam's *Gesta* were evolving and then were rewritten in thousands of versions and copies. These copies, which we obtained in 18th and 19th century, were just one version of those works. Famous historians who worked with these sources like Weitz, Mommsen or Magnusson tried to find the rule what was a truth or fake [5], [17]. Unfortunately, they did not think that Adam's chronicle could be both the vicarious and primary sources for sagas and could affected them so many times.

In this short study, we presented examples of this theory based on older research. This paper should be the beginning for the new open discussion of these kind of sources. However, the most important thing is to try to think about sources from different points of view. The easiest way of interpretation could not always be the only one.

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