

BOOK REVIEWS

Darius Baronas, S.C. Rowell, *The Conversion of Lithuania. From Pagan Barbarians to the Late Medieval Christians*, Vilnius: Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, 2015. 627 p. ISBN 978-609-425-152-8

The Christianisation of Europe has been such a multi-faceted and complex process that every generation of researchers returns to the origins, development and particular features of the process in different regions in Europe. Each generation of researchers highlights the perspectives that characterise it best, often juxtaposing them with the conclusions reached by earlier researchers, thereby contributing not so much to the *final* picture of what the process could have been, as is sometimes mistakenly imagined, but the picture that develops based on the data being revealed *at that particular time*. So we encounter not just a familiarisation with sources, or the critique and diacritique of sources, but also the socio-cultural environment that surrounded (and continues to surround) researchers. This can have an impact on conclusions or generalisations of one kind or another, and might mark out guidelines for future researchers, i.e., the situation we have, in the words of Michael Brauer, with the dialectics of Christianisation (*Die Dialektik von Christianisierung*),¹ which are created and formed not just by the source, but also by the individual using the source to present a specific perspective on a historic event or process based on fragments of information they found.

Research on the evolution of Christianity has recently received considerable attention in Lithuania. Darius Baronas and S.C. Rowell, the authors of the synthesis presented here, are well-known historians who have been investigating the Christianisation of Lithuania for many years. As such, the publication in English presented here should be seen as a kind of summary of their previous work and its presentation to the international community of historians.

The synthesis consists of a preface, an introduction, 12 chapters, an epilogue (conclusions), a source list and a bibliography, name and place indexes, appendices featuring maps of the dioceses, and illustrations and reproductions of artefacts reflecting the Christianisation of Lithuania.

¹ M. Brauer Michael, *Die Entdeckung des 'Heidentums' in Preußen. Die Preußen in den Reformdiskursen des Spätmittelalters und der Reformation (Europa im Mittelalter, Bd. 17)* (Berlin, 2011), pp. 35–40, 109, 147.

The 12 chapters present in chronological order the process of Lithuania's Christianisation from the beginning of the first Christian missions (Chapter 1), followed by a thorough discussion of the baptism of Mindaugas (Chapter 2), and the attempts of Lithuania's rulers Gediminas, Algirdas and Kęstutis to accept Christianity (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 gives an analysis of Lithuania's choice between the geopolitical preference offered by the Western and the Eastern Church, while Chapter 5 discusses the martyrdoms of Western and Eastern Christians that took place in the 14th century. Chapter 6 initiates an analysis of the history of Lithuania's conversion in 1386–1387, focusing not just on the political circumstances of Lithuania's baptism or the attitudes of the grand dukes towards Christianity, but also discussing information in historical sources about 14th-century paganism. Chapter 7 is dedicated to an examination of the actual baptism event held in Lithuania in 1387, while Chapter 8 looks at the baptisms in Samogitia. From Chapter 9, the authors discuss the condition of Christianity in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), and the attempts to form a union of the churches, as well as the contexts of how Catholics and Orthodox believers lived together in one state. The discussion of these contexts offers a better understanding of what Christian Lithuanian society was like in the 15th and 16th centuries, what forms of Christian piety were expressed in society (Chapter 10), and what legal files, Church-administered punishments, and so on, on miscreants can tell us about Christian society (Chapter 11). The last chapter is devoted to a discussion of the structures of dioceses in the GDL, and the reforms implemented in these dioceses.

Darius Baronas has made a greater contribution to the book (chapters 1–8), the remainder being the work of S.C. Rowell. The authors put forward the main idea of the book in the preface and introduction: to show how proponents of oral history, the barbarian pagan Lithuanians, were transformed into consumers and ultimately disseminators of written, Christian culture, thus, late Medieval Christians at the micro and macro levels of social conversion. Basically, two main lines are pursued in the book: the relationship between pagans and Christianity, and the conversion of new Christians into late Medieval Christians. For this reason, the authors highlight the chronological boundaries for Lithuania's conversion in the 14th and 15th centuries, not forgetting to present an image of the beginning of Christianity in the Baltic lands. The whole of Chapter 1 is devoted to revealing this image, stating that elements of Christianity could have spread gradually into Baltic society even before the official conversion of Lithuania. This idea has been raised before,² we need only consider

² Cf. T. Nyberg, 'Skandinavien und die Christianisierung des südöstlichen Baltikums', in: *La cristianizzazione della Lituania (Pontificio Comitato di Scienze Storiche. Atti e documenti, 2)*, ed. P. Rabikauskas (Città del Vaticano, 1989), pp. 235–261; E. Anderson, 'Early Danish missionaries in the Baltic countries', in: *Gli inizi del Cristianesimo in Livonia-Lettonia (Pontificio Comitato di Scienze Storiche. Atti e documenti, 1)*, ed. M. Maccarrone (Città del Vaticano, 1989), pp. 245–275;

the changes to burial customs occurring at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, or even earlier, where, besides the universally prevailing custom of cremation, a return to inhumation was observed, its emergence being associated specifically with the influence of Christianity. It is no accident that the Polish medievalist Henryk Łowmiański spoke about the influence of Christianity on Medieval Slavic pagan customs and beliefs,³ through which society could learn more about Christianity itself, thus paving the way for the Christianisation of society as a whole. I will add that the results of the important changes that took place in Baltic society could be seen in the act of surrender of Prussian nobles to the Teutonic Order, signed at Christburg Castle in 1249. Besides other pagan customs, there was mention of a Prussian pagan burial, where the bodies of the deceased were not only cremated, but also buried in the earth uncremated.⁴ Even though the act mentions the burial customs of the Prussian tribes, archaeologists have recorded traces of inhumation which became widespread among the Lithuanians in the 12th and 13th centuries, meaning that it was a process which affected all societies in the Baltic, not just the Prussians. Even though the authors of the book do not mention the spread of inhumation in Baltic society, it is obvious that the emergence of this process should be evaluated against the backdrop of the spread of Christianity.

It is generally said that the first few chapters of this book devote more attention to an account of the preferences of the political elite (rulers and dynasties) in terms of Christianity, including the unsuccessful baptism of certain rulers (Gediminas, Algirdas, Kęstutis) than to the process of the Christianisation of society prior to the 'official' conversion of Lithuania in 1386–1387. This treatment of the process of Christianisation was entrenched in the synthesis *Lietuvos istorija* (The History of Lithuania) edited by Adolfas Šapoka in 1936, highlighting the periodisation of the factographical history of the process of Christianisation in Lithuania.⁵ Even the discussion of the martyrdom of Franciscans and Orthodox believers (Chapter 5) reveals the relationship between the ruler and his subjects, or those who obeyed him (Franciscans and Orthodox believers), rather than the 'depth' or prospects of the process of society's Christianisation. This would appear to confirm the authors' chosen scheme for laying out Lithuania's 'greater approach

V. Žulkus, 'Heidentum und Christentum in Litauen im 10.–16. Jahrhundert', in: *Rom und Byzanz im Norden. Mission und Glaubenswechsel im Ostseeraum während des 8.–14. Jahrhunderts*, ed. M. Müller-Wille (Stuttgart, 1998), pp. 143–161.

³ H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian i jej upadek (VI–XII w.)* (Warszawa, 1979), pp. 190–195, 239–263.

⁴ *Preußisches Urkundenbuch. Politische Abteilung*, ed. A. Seraphim, (Königsberg, 1901), t. I, Bd. 1, Nr. 218: *quod ipsi vel heredes eorum in mortuis comburendis vel subterrands cum equis sive hominibus vel cum armis seu vestibus vel quibuscunque allis preciosis.*

⁵ *Lietuvos istorija*, ed. A. Šapoka (Kaunas, 1936), pp. 39–41, 53–55, 68–70, 90–91, 110–113, 136–137.

towards' the 'official' conversion in chapters 2 to 6: the periodisation of Lithuania's Christianisation and its internal 'turning points' are in effect defined in terms of the political and/or social preferences of Lithuania's leaders for Christianity, and not through the prism of change that took place in society (even though certain aspects of these changes, especially regarding society in the second half of the 14th century, are discussed in the synthesis). We presume that the authors could have asked whether the changes under way in Lithuanian society in the 13th and 14th centuries (the establishment and entrenchment of a government administration, the formation of a new political elite, the transformation of the grand duke's army into a regular army, trade with Hanseatic League trading posts, the establishment of the first cities and their communities in Lithuania, etc) contributed, and if so, to what degree they contributed, to creating conditions for the spread of Christianity in Lithuanian society not in a 'top-down' way, but in the opposite 'bottom-up' direction. That is not to say the authors completely overlook these questions, but they are left relatively indistinct in this book, and attract little thorough discussion.

For example, in order to answer the question why Gediminas refused to accept baptism, despite requesting to be baptised in his letters to the Pope, it is not enough to discuss the ruler's relations with his subjects, the pagan Samogitians or the Orthodox Ruthenians, who might have opposed the baptism project. We should first of all discuss the matter of how developed Lithuanian society actually was in the first half of the 14th century, without being afraid to admit that while society could have been sufficiently 'mature' to accept Christianity, Gediminas' decision to refuse baptism was not based on the 'immaturity' of society, but on the political circumstances that had developed (the desire to end the political and military pressure exerted by the Teutonic Order in Livonia, involvement in the conflict between the Archbishop of Riga and the Teutonic Order, etc). On the other hand, what we are dealing with here is not society, which had '(not) matured' enough for baptism, but its military structure groups that pulled all of Lithuania's military weight in the battles against the Teutonic Order.

We cannot agree with the opinion of the authors (specifically Baronas) that a tribal or egalitarian society still existed in Samogitia in the 13th and 14th centuries. The fact that certain attributes of a military democracy (meetings of warriors and the social elite [nobility], but not of all the free members of the community) could have existed does not prove anything, as at that time society was still tribal or egalitarian. Quite the opposite: we believe that it is unlikely that tribal society still existed at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, as the formation of a Baltic *odal* (*allod*), the increase in political power, and its imposition on the free members of society eliminated the former tribal society composition. As tribal society started to disappear, the opportunity arose for the formation of the early Lithuanian state, in which, incidentally, the Samogitian nobility became

involved (cf. close relations between the Samogitian nobility in the first half of the 13th century and the most important Lithuanian dukes). There is no doubt that the case of Samogitia in the context of the political system of the GDL is rather specific, but the point here is more about the Samogitian sub-ethnos,⁶ and about the formation of a Samogitian ‘political nation’, than about the tribal society that Baronas discusses.

To return to the question why, for example, Gediminas refused baptism, let us not forget that he proposed his first baptism plan (for some reason, the authors do not mention the second attempt at baptism at all) mainly as a political project, and not as a possibility for freedom of conscience. Thus, in this case (as in the case of the political baptism plans of Algirdas and Kęstutis), we notice a certain inconsistency between the rulers’ individual acceptance of baptism firstly as a political act that formed in the early Middle Ages, and the voluntary baptism, primarily a profession of faith, that was highlighted in the late Middle Ages, not associating baptism with any political aims. After all, the Grand Duke of Lithuania blamed the Teutonic Order for relating baptism to political aims, which is why he and others in his circle had not yet accepted baptism, even though Gediminas himself also considered the idea of baptism as a means of pursuing political, albeit different, aims. The same idea was raised at the Council of Constance, where the delegation sent by Jogaila reprimanded the Teutonic Order because the Samogitians, who were under the Order’s rule, had not yet been baptised.

In other words, the matter of society’s ‘maturity’ to accept baptism did not depend on the ‘matured’ society itself, or on the aspirations of its separate groups towards Christianity, but on the ruling elite’s preferences for Christianity. Had Gediminas accepted baptism, and had his baptism acquired continuity (something that is missing in Mindaugas’ case), historians would be talking about a society that was sufficiently ‘mature’ for baptism. In this sense, Jogaila’s baptism can be viewed as the official ‘formalisation’ of the Christianisation process that was already under way, or as the ruler’s sanctioning of Christianity as the state religion, but not as a symbolic date for the ‘official’ conversion, which is what the authors claim. Let us not forget that pagan Lithuanian society was surrounded exclusively by Christian lands, while the GDL itself was multi-confessional. Even though the event of the baptism of the ruler and society in 1386–1387 took place on a ‘top-down’ principle (as in other lands in the Baltic region), what then can we say about the latent Christianisation of society that began before the ‘official’ conversion, which, it appears, is what the authors try to point out. There is no doubt that Christianity could have infiltrated pagan society, not just through the ‘official’ mission policy, by sending missionaries, but also by other channels (trade, war, social example, etc).

⁶ A. Nikžentaitis, ‘Žemaitija XIII–XV a. pirmoje pusėje’, in: *Žemaitijos istorija*, ed. A. Butrimas (Vilnius, 1997), pp. 78–80.

We could (even though the authors do not) look at society's 'maturity' for Christianity through the prism of the impact of Christianity on paganism, agreeing that the emergence of aspects of henotheism among pagans regarding one God should be viewed as being a step closer to the recognition of one Christian God (the second step could be the acceptance of *prima signatio*).⁷ Here, on one hand, much is to be gained from the early chronicles (for example, by Henry of Livonia (*Henricus de Lettis*)), which document how pagans who settled near the River Daugava perceived Christianity, and how it spread. This spread of Christianity undoubtedly depended on the possibilities and methods arising from the activities of missionaries.⁸ On the other hand, paganism itself, to which the authors justifiably devote a certain amount of attention, under the effects of Christianity, could have 'simplified' how Christianity entered Lithuanian society. Of course, this would depend on the type of paganism and Christianity we have in mind. Certain echoes of Christianity could have reached the pagans in the 12th and 13th centuries, while by the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, these expressions of Christianity would have been different, for in the first case we have the Cistercian *spirituales novi* concept of Christianity,⁹ while chronologically later, we see forms of Christian piety dictated by the *devotio moderna* movement. The latter, as we learn from chapters 10 to 12 that were written by S.C. Rowell, integrated naturally into Lithuanian society in the 15th and the first half of the 16th century.

Undoubtedly, paganism (what it was like, how influential it was, and how all rituals related to paganism took place) should be discussed

⁷ See: F. Uspenskij, 'The baptism of bones and *prima signatio* in Medieval Scandinavia and Rus', in: *Between Paganism and Christianity in the North*, ed. L. P. Šlupecki, J. Morawiec (Rzeszów, 2009), pp. 165–175; M. Ščavinskas, 'Pirmųjų baltų krikščionių sociopsichologinis paveikslas: problemos ir modeliavimo galimybės', in: *Krikščionių visuomenės raidos atodangos LDK vakarinėje dalyje ir Prūsijoje: nuo užuomazgos iki brandos. Skiriama prof. Stephen C. Rowell 50-mečiui*, ed. M. Ščavinskas (Klaipėda, 2015), pp. 44–49. For more on henotheism, see: L.M. West, 'Towards Monotheism', in: *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Athanassiadi, M. Frede (Oxford, 1999), pp. 21–40. Cf. P. Nufflen, 'Pagan monotheism as a religious phenomenon', in: *One God. Pagan monotheism in the Roman Empire*, ed. S. Mitchell, P. Nufflen (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 18–33; J. North, 'Pagan ritual and monotheism', *ibid.*, pp. 34–52.

⁸ For more details about this, see M. Ščavinskas, *Kryžius ir kalavijas. Krikščioniškųjų misijų sklaida Baltijos jūros regione X – XIII amžiais* (Vilnius, 2012), pp. 129–177.

⁹ For more on its impact on the Christianisation of Baltic society at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, and in the 13th century, see: M. Ščavinskas, 'Christianisation and *cura animarum* in the First Christian Communities in Livonia and Prussia during the Period of the Crusades', in: *Verbum movet, exemplum trahit. The Emerging Christian Community in the Eastern Baltic = Krikščioniškosios bendruomenės tapšmas Rytų Baltijos regione (Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis, XXXIII)*, ed. M. Ščavinskas (Klaipėda, 2016), pp. 49–54, 57–58, 62–64.

separately, and the few pages in the book (see Chapter 6) devoted to it are far from enough to arrive at a definition of it. The conclusions about society's 'maturity' for Christianity depend on the treatment of paganism. We can only agree with the authors (specifically Baronas) that very few sources about Lithuanian paganism exist, being mostly rather clichéd in nature (based on *interpretatio christiana/romana* principles), and far from informative when describing what Lithuanian paganism 'really' was like (researchers of other sources have reached the same conclusion).¹⁰ And this means that when analysing this question, we should refer to a broad range of comparative material, perhaps even analogies, which in effect would mean writing a separate study. On the other hand, the issue of paganism, which the authors discuss, is much broader in the context of the Christianisation of Lithuanian society than just the destruction of pagan artefacts or a change in burial and other customs. In my view, adopting a new religion or choosing to stay with an older faith is a fundamental problem formulating even questions of Christian identity. If, let us say, the rejection of paganism destroys the prior perception of identity, we should without doubt know what constituted the pagan identity itself, and on the other hand, what the new (Christian) identity provided in place of the old one. A deliberation of these questions would have vastly enriched the image of the adoption of Christianity in Lithuania hitherto prevailing in historiography.

The question of syncretisation (or more precisely, acculturation, and not syncretisation) can be raised in the context of these discussions. The essence of this question is not whether historically recognisable forms of everyday life and/or piety intertwined with the old (pagan) customs (about which we know practically nothing), but what content lies behind these easily recognisable forms. So I think it is too bold, and not even quite accurate, to call the Christianity of the new Lithuanian converts syncretistic (as is claimed in the book's epilogue), for with Christianity, only norms of everyday life and coexistence remained that did not oppose the Christian line, and which could be attributed to the common perception of Christianity, or those which were treated as *superstitio*, but not as *ritus paganorum*. The latter are eliminated altogether with de-paganisation (*abrenuntiatio diaboli*) and the entrenchment of truths of faith (*confessio fidei*), while also carrying out pastoralism (*cura animarum*), so that syncretism is also deemed impossible. During the process of Christianisation, the acculturation of only certain customs into Christian culture was possible (although not any pagan beliefs or pagan behavioural norms). As a result

¹⁰ Cf. S. Rosik, *Interpretacja chrześcijańska religii pogańskich Słowian w świetle kronik niemieckich XI–XII wieku* (Thietmar, Adam z Bremy, Helmold) (Wrocław, 2000); H. Goetz, *Die Wahrnehmung anderer Religionen und christlich-abendländisches Selbstverständnis im frühen und hohen Mittelalter (5.– 12. Jahrhundert)* (Berlin, 2013).

of this, the late Medieval Lithuanian Christian world-view, mentality and religious piety were able to form.

To conclude, the relationship between the concepts *Christianisation* and *conversion* should be discussed. The authors of this book usually use the word ‘conversion’, that is, the adoption of a new religion, instead of Christianisation. Indeed, besides Christianisation, the term *conversion* is quite popular in historiography.¹¹ This concept is often understood as an alternative to the concept of Christianisation, or a synonym for Christianisation. Without entering into long discussions, let us note that an individual person’s conversion was gradually transposed on to society: being a part of individual actions, conversion symbolises the relationship between a specific person, and not society at large, and Christianity as the newly adopted religion,¹² that is, conversion was crowned by baptism, as once someone converted they rarely reverted to their previous faith,¹³ while missionaries continued to engage in pastoral activities (*cura animarum*) among the converts. At this time, the Christianisation process can also encompass the so-called pagan reaction periods and repeated returns to Christianity, as well as the continued assimilation of the Christian truths following baptism and conversion.

The large number of concepts describing the process of accepting Christianity determined the political rather than the cultural treatment of Christianisation,¹⁴ which became dominant in historiography even before the institutionalisation of history in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the Western tradition, the baptism of a ruler was considered to be an internal turning point in Christianisation, followed by irreversible changes in society. When research into the Christianisation of lower social groups (or layers) in society began in historiography, the *conversion* concept was also applied to describe how society accepted Christianity. In this way, the ruler’s baptism (or a ruler’s individual conversion) was compared to

¹¹ N. Berend, ‘Introduction’, in: *Christianization and the rise of Christian monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’ c. 900–1200*, ed. N. Berend (Cambridge, 2007), p. 3; I. Wood, *The Missionary Life. Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400–1050* (Harlow, 2001), p. 3. Cf. J. Van Engen, ‘The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem’, in: *American Historical Review*, no. 3 (1986), pp. 522–544.

¹² For more: R. MacMullen, *Christianizing of the Roman Empire AD 100–400* (London, 1984), pp. 2–23.

¹³ A. Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia. Vikings, Merchants and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (London, 2012), p. 122. Incidentally, the author is still inconsistent, as when he speaks about the nature of individual conversion; in another section, he distinguishes three phases in the conversion of society that span the period from the ninth to the 11th centuries inclusively (*ibid.*, p. 104).

¹⁴ J. Van Engen, ‘The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem’, pp. 541–542.

the process of how Christianity was accepted in society, claiming that the ruler's baptism was akin to the whole state's baptism, and thus the baptism of the society that lived in that state.¹⁵ As such, the *conversion* concept (alongside the *baptism* concept) started being applied to societies as well, foreseeing that there was a certain shift from paganism to Christianity, or a period of transition which was framed between specific dates that usually took on a symbolic meaning (such as the chronological boundaries of the baptism of the first ruler of Poland Mieszko I, the Swedish King Olof Skötkonung, or the Frankish King Clovis, and the establishment of the network of churches). More specifically, what could be considered an individual act in the acceptance of Christianity was applied to society as a whole, giving the concept of conversion the characteristics of a long drawn-out process,¹⁶ which the concept of Christianisation implies in itself.

If we agree that there are other aspects to the question of the relationship between the concepts of Christianisation and conversion, and that this question is worthy of discussion, it should be said that the authors nevertheless consistently maintain their chosen concepts, despite not discussing them in detail. Whatever the case may be, in the book under review, it should be stated clearly that its publication does not signal the end of research into the process of Lithuania's Christianisation; many questions remain open, and demand the separate attention of scholars. In the light of this fact, the appearance of this kind of book is undoubtedly important, as it shows what has already been done in this field, and what aims can still be explored. On the other hand, the authors present their treatment of the Christianisation process in Lithuania, which contributes to our general understanding of how to see the European Christianisation process. And this aspect should also be appreciated.

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¹⁵ Cf. J.W. Sedlar, *East Central Europe in the Middle Ages, 1000–1500* (Seattle, London 1994), p. 143: 'The actual conversion of the Hungarians to Christianity dates only from the reign of his son Stephen I [...] who proved a loyal friend to the pope and granted the Church extraordinary privileges'; A.P. Vlasto, *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An introduction to the medieval history of the Slavs* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 117; the conversion of Poland is conventionally dated to 966, see: G. Labuda, *Mieszko I* (Wrocław, 2009), pp. 97–114; P. Urbańczyk, S. Rosik, *Poland, Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy*, pp. 274–276.

¹⁶ J. Kłoczowski, 'U podstaw chrześcijańskiej kultury: chrześcijaństwo zachodnie wczesnego średniowiecza', in: *Narodziny średniowiecznej Europy*, ed. H. Samsonowicz, Warszawa, 1999, s. 111–113.