How Saxon was the Saxon March in the Tenth Century?

Christopher Stauter Halsted
Chicago, Illinois

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On June 29, 983, an army of Slavs marched on Havelberg, slaughtered the Saxon garrison, and burned its cathedral to the ground. Three days later, on July 2, they attacked Brandenburg. Soon thirty armed bands had crossed to the west bank of the Elbe, ravaging as far as the river Tanger before being met by a hastily pulled-together response force of Saxon prelates. At around the same time, a hundred miles to the northwest, the Abodrite leader Mstiwoj laid waste to Hamburg, while in the fortified center at Starigard the Slavic population set fire to the local church and slaughtered its priests.[1] This series of violent altercations has become known as the *Slawenaufstand* or *Lutizenaufstand*, a "great Slav uprising" which "shocked the eastern borderlands of Germany" "resulted in the loss of the northern half of Sclavinia" and plunged the Slavs back into "*archaische, heidnische Freiheit*."[2] The modern consensus is that this moment matters, that 983 represents the end of one period and the beginning of another. But what, exactly, were the Slavs revolting against?

Implicit in this discussion of 983, and made more explicit elsewhere, is the understanding that the Saxons under the Ottonian dynasty had undertaken some sort of expansionist project on their eastern border. In this narrative, the Saxons swept across the Elbe-Saale during the reigns of Henry the Fowler (919-936) and Otto the Great (936-973), establishing administrative and ecclesiastical control over the entirety of the territory bounded by the Elbe-Saale, the Oder-

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[1] Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon sive Gesta Saxonum,* III 17-19, ed. Friedrich Kurze (Hannover, 1889), MGH SSRG 54:58-60; Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum,* II 43, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler (Hannover, 1917), MGH SSRG 2:103-4. The fire is attested by a layer of destruction in the archaeological record: see Ingo Gabriel, "Starigard/Oldenburg," in Alfred Wieczorek and Hans-Martin Hinz, *Europe's Centre Around AD 1000* (Stuttgart: Konrad Theiss Verlag GmbH, 2000), 431-2.

[2] In order: Timothy Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages c. 800-1056* (London: Longman, 1991), 178; Christian Lübke, "Christianity and Paganism as Elements of Gentile Identities to the East of the Elbe and Saale Rivers," in Ildar Garipzanov, Patrick Geary, and Przemysław Urbańczyk, Franks, Northmen, and Slavs: Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe (Brepols, 2008), 189-204, more specifically 199; Benjamin Arnold, *Medieval Germany, 500-1300: A Political Interpretation* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1997), 46; Johannes Fried, *Der Weg in die Geschichte: die Ursprünge Deutschlands bis 1024* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1994), 559.

Neisse, the Ore Mountains, and the Baltic shore before their ouster in 983.[3] In the grand narrative of German history, this forms a sort of prelude to the later expansions of the twelfth century, itself then set into the imperial narrative of the *Drang noch Osten* in the nineteenth century. Recently, however, some cracks have begun to show in the subjugation-and-revolt model of tenth-century Saxon expansion. Gerd Althoff has investigated whether the Ottonians actually intended an annexation of the region, noting that Henry and Otto never brought the full military might of East Francia against the Slavs, leading only Saxon contingents across the Elbe.[4] This has been echoed by Laurence Leleu, who in the tradition of frontier studies identified the march as a "quasi permanent conflict zone."[5] From an archaeological perspective, Felix Biermann has recently proposed a coexistence of marcher administration with local Slavic structures of rule.[6] Indeed, many recent archaeological investigations have highlighted the wealth of Baltic trade, the vitality of the Slavic-Baltic economy, and the degree of connectivity between the Slavic Baltic and the greater Viking-Islamic world linked through the spread of

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[3] See Karl Leyser, *Communications and Power in Medieval Europe: The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994, 160-61; Reuter, *Germany*, 166; Lübke, "Before Colonization: Christendom at the Slav Frontier and Pagan Resistance," in Charles W. Ingrao and Franz A.J. Szabo, eds., *The Germans and the East* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2008), 20; Matthias Becher, *Otto der Große, Kaiser und Reich: Eine Biographie* (C.H. Beck Verlag, 2012), 203; Wolfgang Brüske, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Lutizenbundes* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1983), 28-29; Gerald Stone, *Slav Outposts in Central European History: The Wends, Sorbs, and Kashubs* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 16-17.

[4] Gerd Althoff, "Saxony and the Elbe Slavs in the Tenth Century," in Timothy Reuter, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History III: c. 900-c. 1024* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 267-292.

[5] Laurence Leleu, "*Nobiles utrique ripae Albiae.* On both sides of the Elbe: Saxon élites facing Slavs in the Ottonian age," in Alexander Paroń et al., eds., *Potestas et Communitas: interdisziplinäre Beiträge zu Wesen und Darstellung von Herrschaftsverhältnissen im Mittelalter östlich der Elbe* (Warsaw: Wyd. Instytutu Archaeologii i Etnologii, 2010), 305-338, more specifically 321-324.

[6] Felix Biermann, "North-Western Slavic Strongholds of the 8th-10th Centuries AD," in Neil Christie and Hajnalka Herold, eds., *Fortified Settlements in Early Medieval Europe: Defended Communities of the 8th-10th Centuries* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), 85-94, more specifically 91-92.

Arabic silver dirhams. But these few examples have not penetrated the historical mainstream, and the marcher narrative in most treatments is still one of conquest and integration.

In taking a maximalist view of Saxon power across the Elbe-Saale, modern historians have borrowed the narrative framework of tenth- and eleventh- century Saxon partisans. Highly-placed ecclesiastical writers such as Widukind of Corvey, Thietmar of Merseburg, and Adam of Bremen articulated triumphalist narratives of Saxon victory over the Slavs, complete with notions of incorporation into Saxon hierarchy and conversion to Christianity. In this model 983 marked not only a political but a religious setback of the highest order. These writers had good reasons to depict a Slavic east subject to either Saxon military or religious power. For Widukind, a partisan of the Ottonian dynasty, depicting a conquered east allowed him to support Otto's claim to *imperium* based upon his military victories against the enemies of Christendom. For Thietmar, writing in light of Henry II's expanded claims to the universality of his imperial rule, a refutation of Saxon prestige could only be seen as rebellion. Finally, for Adam, writing long after the violence of 983, the creation of an idealized past in which the Slavs had been widely Christianized supported the jurisdictional claims of the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen to the territories across the Elbe. The depiction of expansive Saxon power in the mid-tenth century can therefore be seen as the product of the political and theological frameworks of Saxon sources.

This essay puts the tenth- and eleventh-century narratives, along with the modern historical narratives that have followed in their footsteps, in conversation with the last half-century of blossoming archaeological investigations into the tenth-century Baltic economy and the evidence of Ottonian *diplomata*. While narrative sources seem to present an image of expansive Saxon power across the Elbe, in fact the historical use of these narratives is fraught with complication, as I demonstrate in the first section of the essay. The addition of material and

charter evidence, covered in sections two and three respectively, further underscores the misleading nature of depictions of complete Saxon dominance. Apparent instead in both the archaeological and charter sources is a stark geographical division between the area of the Baltic watershed, with its access to long-distance maritime trade, and the area further inland without access to this wealth. While Saxon encroachment in the inland zone led to conquest, the construction of new fortresses called Burgwards, and economic exploitation, these results were not replicated within the Baltic watershed, where instead the Saxons projected a rough hierarchy bound together by a series of ad hoc political relationships. This dichotomy is confirmed by recourse in the fourth section of the essay to the story of the Saxon rebel Wichmann, a narrative included in Widukind's *Rerum gestarum Saxonicarum* due to Wichmann's superlative demonstration of Saxon heroism. Wichmann's career of rebellion and the safe haven he finds beyond the Elbe-Saale when he is at odds with Saxon power illustrate with aplomb the fissures between literary depictions of Saxon dominance and actual Saxon control on the ground. This essay therefore proposes a tentative reconsideration of Saxon power across the Elbe. The "Saxon march," I argue, should not be understood as a single region at all. Within the Baltic watershed this region was neither fundamentally Saxon nor fundamentally a march in the way we commonly understand these terms, but a territory defined by and dominated by Slavic power and the flow of Slavic-Scandinavian wealth — even in the period presumed to be one of Ottonian incorporation.

The Rhetoric of Expansion

The history of tenth-century Saxon expansion across the Elbe, like many other histories, is one pieced together through the accounts of disparate narrative sources. In our case, the result

has been a totalizing depiction of Saxon conquests and Slavic subjugation. In this depiction, the Saxon project was "conquest, occupation, and mission reaching well beyond Brandenburg," an "intensive style of lordship," and that the "native nobility" be either "absorbed into the nobility of the Saxon empire… or deposed and eliminated."[7] One historian went so far as to claim that Otto "aimed at immediate lordship over land and men, accompanied by renders and services from the rural population and ultimately the formation of manorially organised estates."[8] By the succession of Otto II, then, "the entire region up to the Oder was already integrated ecclesiastically into the German Church and administratively into the organization of the marches."[9] But this depiction rests on a synthesis of evidence from disparate accounts that each display their own preoccupations and resist combination into a coherent whole. This section will investigate the three tenth- and eleventh-century authors upon whose narratives the above claims rest. Modern historians have seen in Widukind of Corvey evidence of Saxon intent to expand, in Thietmar of Merseburg evidence for the intensity of Saxon rule across the Elbe-Saale, and in Adam of Bremen evidence for the extent of Christianization among the Slavic populace. It will be seen that none of these authors are actually making the claims ascribed to them in a straightforward and unproblematic manner; indeed, Widukind and Thietmar are not making those claims at all.

We begin with Widukind, the historian most closely associated with Saxon expansion due to the intimate interest he shows Saxon-Slavic relations in his *Rerum gestarum Saxonicarum libri tres*. Writing in the 960s and thus contemporaneously with the political system he was

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[7] Leyser, *Communications,* 160; Reuter, *Germany*, 166, 162;

[8] Eckhard Müller-Mertens, "The Ottonians as Kings and Emperors," in Reuter*, The New Cambridge Medieval History III*, 233-266, esp. 248.

[9] Lübke, "Before Colonization," 20.

describing, Widukind has been quoted extensively in the construction of a tenth-century "conquest narrative" across the Elbe. Indeed, his claims are at times grandiose. Over the course of the second half of his first book he records Henry the Fowler forcing tribute from every neighboring people from the Hungarians to the Danes; similarly, he writes that circa 940 "all the barbarian peoples up to the Oder subjugated themselves to royal tribute."[10] The passage which has born the most interpretive weight, however, has undoubtedly been III 53, in which a *legatio barborum* attempts to make peace with Otto before the Battle on the Raxa (955), offering "customary tribute" in exchange for "dominance of the region" — that is, independent rule with the blessing of the Saxons.[11] The conventional interpretation has been that the Slavs somehow sensed an upcoming turning point between traditional tributary "overlordship" and new, managerially intensive "lordship."[12] This is refuted by Otto's reply, that he was perfectly happy to have peace so long as the Slavs made amends for their unjust acts (the slaughter of the Cocarescemi).[13] For Widukind, this was a conflict of honor, not governmental policy. Indeed, it seems that after the Raxa, with the Slavs appropriately punished for their sins, the leading Abodrite group got exactly what their *legatio* had asked for: Widukind later records the Saxon *marcio* Hermann Billung assisting the Abodrite ruler Mstivoj in a military conflict.[14]

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[10] Widukind of Corvey, *Rerum gestarum Saxonicarum libri tres,* I 35-41, II 21, ed. George Waitz (Hannover: 1882), MGH SSRG 60:28-34, 48.

[11] *'tributa socios ex more velle persolvere nuntians, caeterum dominationem regionis velle tenere.'* Widukind III 53, MGH SSRG 60:76-77.

[12] For this interpretation, see Reuter, *Germany,* 162; Karl Leyser, "The Battle at the Lech, 955," in *Medieval Germany and its Neighbors, 900-1250* (London: The Hambeldon Press, 1982), 43-68, esp. 43; Becher, 204-5; Müller-Mertens, 248.

[13] *'iniuriam perpetram digno honore ac emendatione purgarent,'* Widukind III 53, MGH SSRG 60:76-77. For the slaughter of the Cocarescemi (a people of unclear identification) see III 52, MGH SSRG 60:76.

[14] The Slavs' 'punishment' was the beheading of their leader and the execution of 700 of their number. Widukind III 55, 68, MGH SSRG 60:78, 81-2.

Widukind's conquest accounts should not be taken as an in-depth analysis of the structures of Saxon rulership. The Saxon chronicler's idea of kingship is famously state-light; Henry and Otto rule not by virtue of Franco-Roman institutions but as an extension of their role as Saxon war-leaders.[15] It is this feature of Widukind's worldview that should be read against his lionization of Henry and Otto's victories. Forcing tribute from the Slavs "up to the Oder" is Widukind's justification of Otto's *imperium*, his exercise of rulership, not a description of Otto's political program. Accordingly, Widukind shows almost no interest in the mundane exercise of expansion, ignoring the Burgwards and the foundation of bishoprics east of the Elbe.[16] The importance of victory over the Slavs for Widukind's conception of Saxon kingship can be seen by comparison to his contemporaries: Adalbert of Magdeburg, for whom Otto's *imperium* derives from his 962 coronation, mentions Slavic conflict only in passing, and Liudprand, whose *Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitana* explicitly contrasts Otto with the Byzantine emperor Nicephoras Phocas, depicts the Slavs as analogous to the Byzantine's Bulgarian allies.[17]

Many of the sources used for the history of the tenth-century march are not, like Widukind, contemporary, but rather look back with rose-tinted glasses on a time of perceived Saxon dominance. Thietmar of Merseburg, writing in the late 1010s, gives the fullest narrative account of the events of 983, recording an emotional depiction of the Slavic attacks. "The

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[15] Sverre Bagge, *Kings, Politics, and the Right Order of the World in German Historiography c. 950-1150* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 38-42; Helmut Beumann, *Widukind von Korvei: Untersuchungen zur Geschichtsschreibung und Ideengeschichte des 10. Jahrhunderts* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1950), 232-3.

[16] The exception to this is of course his description of Henry I's first round of building during the years of peace with the Hungarians (I 35). In this case, it seems Widukind considered fortifying directly relevant to military victory.

[17] Adalbert's most common refrain is a laconic *Rex iterum Sclavos invasit.* Adalbert of Magdeburg, *Continuatio*, 957, 959, 960, ed. Friedrich Kurze (Hannover: 1890), MGH SSRG 50:169-170; Liudprand of Cremona, *Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitana* 16, ed. Ernst Dümmler (Hannover 1877), MGH SSRG 41:143-44.

peoples," writes Thietmar, "who having accepted Christianity subjected themselves to our kings and emperors as tributaries… took up arms as one."[18] He continues to describe the course of the conflict and its spread northwest into the region of the Abodrites.[19] Thietmar's remark that the Slavs had become tribute-payers deserves further comment. Timothy Reuter, citing this passage, argued that the intensification of Saxon rule and more specifically the dual burden of secular tributes and church tithes had prompted the 983 conflict, a position which has largely been accepted in the field.[20] But for Thietmar, the events of 983 were not the culmination of Saxon mismanagement but the wrath of an angry God after the partition of the Bishopric of Merseburg among its neighbors.[21] At the end of III 16, the chapter describing the partition, he cautions his reader to note the consequences of this deed before plunging into the narrative of the Slavic attack.[22] Thietmar's view of the causation of these attacks is further exemplified in his description of the Saxons, whose fear in battle he attributes to their misdeeds.[23]

Together with Widukind's Raxa *legatio,* Thietmar's *christianitate… tributarie* has been used to depict Saxon rule in the march as intrusive and exploitative before its abrupt cessation in

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[18] *'Gentes, quae suscepta christianitate regibus et inperatoribus tributarie serviebant… unanimi arma commoverant.'* Thietmar III 17, MGH SSRG 54:58.

[19] Thietmar III 18-19, MGH SSRG 54:59-60.

[20] Reuter, *Germany,* 166, 178. Benjamin Arnold blames the revolt on "the ruthlessness of Saxon rule," while David Warner cites the Slavs' "dual subjection to the *Reich* and the church." Arnold, 46; David Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The* Chronicon *of Thietmar of Merseburg* (Manchester University Press, 2001), 141, note 57.

[21] For a fuller account of this, see Bagge, 100-102.

[22] Thietmar III 16, MGH SSRG 54:57-58.

[23] *'nostra etenim facinora nobis formidinem et his suggerebant validam mentem',* Thietmar III 18, MGH SSRG 54:59.

983.[24] To be sure, Thietmar seems to depict the events of III 17-19 as a sharp break in the narrative of the east. But Thietmar's outrage should not be taken as an indicator that the Slavs had somehow been incorporated into the empire. Thietmar's concern, rather, is for the preservation of the correct universal hierarchy, what one historian has called the "imperial suzerainty" held by the Ottonians over the peoples on their eastern border.[25] For Thietmar, the qualification for "rebellion" is merely the cessation of tribute-paying or the refusal to acknowledge Saxon superiority. Thus the various peoples who become *tributarias* in I 10 turn *rebelles* the next line (echoing Widukind's *tributariae… rebellare sunt* for the same event), and thus the Danes who had been made *obtemperantes* ('obeying') in I 17 become *rebelles* in III 6 despite the fact that Otto II, not the Danes, seems to have been the aggressor.[26] So too do the Slavs who act in 983 go from *tributarios* (III 14, III 17) to *rebelles* (V 31).[27] Thietmar's hierarchy is similarly clear in his lament about Henry II's early lenience towards Bolesław of Poland: "may God forgive the emperor for making a tributary into a lord!"[28]

There is an obvious pitfall for the modern historian here. The *tributariae/rebelles* dichotomy can be too easily misunderstood to imply deep and intrusive structures of rule east of the Elbe. But to both Widukind and Thietmar, the only thing that mattered was the injury to Ottonian prestige done by groups that once acknowledged Saxon suzerainty but did so no longer.

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[24] Reuter, *Germany*, 162-66, 178; Müller-Mertens, 248. The two passages are explicitly connected by Fritze, who gives the 955 reasoning for the 983 revolt: Wolfgang Fritze, "Der slawische Aufstand von 983 — eine Schicksalswende in der Geschichte Mitteleuropas," in Eckart Henning and Werner Vogel, eds., *Festschrift der landesgeschichtlichen Vereinigung für die Mark Brandenburg zu ihrem hundertjährigen Bestehen 1884-1984* (Berlin, 1984), 9-55, esp. 31.

[25] Bagge, 134, 187.

[26] Thietmar I 17, III 6, MGH SSRG 54:28-29, 51; Widukind I 36, MGH SSRG 60:29-31.

[27] Thietmar III 14, 17, V 31, MGH SSRG 54:56, 58, 124.

[28] *'Deus indulgeat imperatori, quod tributarium faciens dominum.'* Thietmar V 10, MGH SSRG 54:113.

That Thietmar perceived *tributariae rebelles* as external to the empire is confirmed by his claim that Otto II "ruled in such a way that he retained every possession that had previously belonged to his father" at the beginning of the chapter immediately following his "revolt" narrative.[29] Empty panegyric though this may be, Thietmar surely could not have been so oblivious as to position such a claim immediately after a narrative directly refuting it. For Thietmar, the Slavic lands were *not* part of Otto's possessions, but rather something else — hierarchically subordinate to the empire rather than included within it.

Unlike Widukind and Thietmar, Adam of Bremen, writing at the dawn of the investiture controversy (c. 1076), held no particular loyalty to the emperor or the idea of the imperial house. Where Adam's loyalties did lie were with the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, caught at the time of his writing in a struggle to maintain its jurisdiction not only over Scandinavia, threatened by the possibility of a Danish Archbishopric, but also over the Slavic mission and the potential suffragans to be established north of the Peene.[30] This political context forms the background for much of Adam's narrative. Adam's grandiose claims that under Otto "the whole of the pagan people were baptized" are usually accepted as evidence of the extent of "Christianization" before 983.[31] But the political background for Adam's take should be readily apparent. The more Christian the Slavs had been before 983, the firmer the claim of Hamburg-Bremen to jurisdiction over the Slavic mission. Adam's preoccupation with the subject is clear in the sheer repetition of his conversion refrain: the Slavs are baptized and churches built at II 5, Otto has

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[29] Thietmar III 20, MGH SSRG 54:60-61.

[30] The quickest introduction to this political context is still Edgar Johnson, "Adalbert of Hamburg-Bremen: A Politician of the Eleventh Century," *Speculum* 9:2 (Apr., 1934), 147-179. The sees of Oldenburg, Ratzeburg, and Mecklenburg, all within Slavic territory, seem to have actually had bishops appointed in the 1050s but were cut off from the church after a violent attack in 1066.

[31] Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum,* II:5, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler (Hannover, 1917), MGH SSRG 2:65.

them "bound to the Christian faith" at II 15, the claim is repeated at II 20 to open an ethnographic passage and then again at II 23 to close it, in II 26 the Slavs remain Christian, churches are built (again!), and Adam's source King Svein of Denmark assures him that at the time "all but three Slavic districts were converted to the Christian faith," until finally in II 44 the Slavs rebel despite having "practiced Christianity for seventy years and more, for all the time of the Ottos."[32] Indeed, the connection is made explicit in the beginning of the book, when the success of Slavic conversion is immediately juxtaposed with a proclamation from the Archbishop Brun that Hamburg-Bremen "was worthy of being celebrated everywhere, by all the churches."[33] Similar concerns surely underlie his claim that Slavia "abounded in priests and churches" before the 1066 murder of the Christian Abodrite Gottschalk.[34] Adam's history is a partisan one, and exaggerating the extent of Christian mission suits his purposes.

Modern historians have synthesized these disparate claims, smoothing out their rough edges to create a coherent whole. By combining Otto's aspirations for conquest and integration (Widukind), the intrusive weight of the tributary burden on the Slavs before 983 (Thietmar), and the great extent of Christianization (Adam), historians have created an image of the Saxon march as a planned structure intended for the systematic exploitation and conversion of the Slavs between the Elbe and the Oder. But each of these evidentiary pillars relies on misunderstanding the literary-political intent of the works from which they were taken. Widukind's Raxa *legatio* is meant to display a military and charismatic Otto demanding justice from rapacious barbarians, not the economic basis for Otto's eastern political program. Similarly, though the connection

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[32] Adam II 5, 15, 20, 23, 26, 44, MGH SSRG 2:65, 71, 75, 81, 84-86, 105.

[33] Adam II 5-6, MGH SSRG 2:65-66. In the Weiland-Waitz edition of the text (1876), the two passages are numbered as being part of the same chapter.

[34] Adam III 19-20, MGH SSRG 2:162-163. For the death of Gottschalk, see III 50, MGH SSRG 2:193.

between 'tribute' and 'rebellion' is Thietmar's, the understanding of that relationship as a causal one is a modern creation. For Thietmar, tribute was not the cause of revolt but part of its definition: those who ceased to pay tribute became *rebelles*. Finally, Adam's claims regarding the extent of Christianization can be seen in the light of Hamburg-Bremen's threatened jurisdiction over the Slavic mission. Historians have thus determined an intent to conquer and the results of the conquest. Absent from our evidence, however, is a moment of completion for the conquest itself. When did the Saxons accomplish what it seems they so fervently desired? The confusion surrounding this question is emblematic of the larger problem with the marcher narrative: scholars have argued for 955, 957-9, 963, and 973![35]

None of this is to say, of course, that historians cannot draw evidence from literary sources with an identified agenda. Such a rule would preclude the use of any narrative information and render the pursuit of historical study entirely futile. For our purposes, however, it should be noted that all three medieval authors either possess agendas that hinge on specific presentations of the march, worldviews that explain terminology used in a different way than modern historians have used it, or both. Modern historians have built a picture of expansive and intrusive Saxon power across the Elbe on sources that are actually making different claims, and indeed claims different from one another. This does not mean the picture is wrong, but it should at least be interrogated. For the purposes of this essay, it will be seen that neither the material nor the charter evidence recapitulate the sweeping image created from the narrative sources, but

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[35] For 955, see Reuter, *Germany,* 162; Becher, 203-5; Leleu, 309; for 957-9 see Brüske, 29; for 963 see Henry Mayr-Harting, "The church of Magdeburg: its trade and its town in the tenth and eleventh centuries," in David Abulafia, et al., eds., *Church and City 1000-1500: Essays in Honour of Christopher Brooke* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 129-150, more specifically 132-3; for 973 see Lübke, "Before Colonization," 20.

instead that both seem to indicate a geographical division in which Saxon power triumphed in one area but fell flat in another.

The Baltic Network

An archaeological survey of Saxon expansion across the Elbe must by necessity begin with the Burgwards, the system of fortifications established there by the Saxons.[36] Gerhard Billig, whose *Die Burgwardorganisation im obersächsischen-meissnischen Raum* remains the most up-to-date overview of the subject, pinpoints the phenomenon's region-of-origin as the diocese of Magdeburg, from which it spread east into the Havelland and upriver into Sorbia.[37] Indeed, the (excellent) maps included in the back of the volume demonstrate the absence of any Burgwards north of the Havel in the tenth century. We are immediately struck by a contradiction: the narrative of Saxon dominance across the entire region is undercut by the geographic limits of that dominance's archaeological remains. Of course, a lack of Burgwards does not alone prove a lack of intrusive Saxon rule; absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. A comparison is in order: if Burgwards dominated the landscape south of the Havel, what did things look like north of the Havel?

Immediately apparent in a survey of the archaeological record is the importance of long-distance trade and seaborne wealth. North of the Havel, the Slavic east played host to a network of fortified centers and proto-urban settlements tied not to the trade currents of post-Carolingian Germany but to the extensive Viking-age silver network that linked places as far-distant as

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[36] This phenomenon has been the subject of much research interest up to the present day: for the most recent interpretation, see e.g. Christian Frey, "The Burgward Organisation in the Eastern Marches of the German Realm: Frontier Mentality and Inculcation," *Château Gaillard* 26 (2014), 193-198.

[37] Gerhard Billig, *Die Burgwardorganisation im obersächsischen-meissnischen Raum: Archäologish-archivalisch vergleichende Untersuchungen* (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1989), 14-15.

Ireland and Bukhara. This political landscape was a Baltic-facing one, clustered around the islands and shores of that sea and dotting the rivers of its drainage basin. As Felix Biermann has pointed out, this easy access to trade networks and Arabic dirhams, which had triggered rapid economic development in the eighth and early ninth centuries, continued to motivate more complex forms of political organization and structures of authority into the tenth century.[38] Further inland, away from the Baltic watershed, different economic conditions had produced a markedly different topography of power, characterized by the domination of small ringforts instead of large centers. This section will argue that the wealth of the Baltic is related to the phenomenon of the Burgwards and Saxon expansion in general. The "Saxon march" should be considered not one region but two, divided by the line of the Baltic watershed. Areas with access to Baltic wealth saw strong political organization and the ability to resist Saxon expansion; further inland more fragmented polities were unable to resist Saxon incorporation.

The communication networks of the early Viking Age have been extensively modeled by Søren Sindbaek, a leading proponent of applying network theory to histories of exchange.[39] Sindbaek's model of the early ninth century demonstrates an interlinked world dominated by the hubs Hedeby, Ribe, Åhus, and Gross Strömkendorf/Reric.[40] By the time of the Saxon victory on the Raxa in 955, however, the town of Wolin at the mouth of the Oder had become the dominant

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[38] Biermann, 89-90.

[39] Søren Sindbaek, "Networks and nodal points: the emergence of towns in early Viking Age Scandinavia," *Antiquity* 81 (March 2007), 119-132; Søren Sindbaek, "The Small World of the Vikings: Networks in Early Medieval Communication and Exchange," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 40:1 (2007), 59-74.

[40] Sindbaek, "Small World," 67. For the identification between the site at Groß Strömkendorf and the 'Reric' attested in the *Annales Regni Francorum*, see Michael Müller-Wille, "Two early medieval sites near Wismar and Rostock at the southern Baltic coast," in Olaf Olsen, Jan Skamby Madsen and Flemming Rieck, eds., *Shipshape: Essays for Ole Crumlin-Pedersen* (Roskilde: The Viking Ship Museum, 1995), 89-96.

Baltic hub.[41] Though this multiethnic emporium declined after the turn of the millennium, it was remembered in the literature of the later middle ages as the legendary Viking stronghold of Jumne or Vineta. Adam of Bremen, writing in the 1070s, called it "the largest of all the cities in Europe."[42] While this may seem fantastic claim, archaeological digs under Władysław Filipowiak have largely substantiated it, cementing Wolin as the largest Baltic proto-urban center yet discovered from this period.[43] At 40 hectares, Wolin was larger than Hedeby in its prime and almost four times the size of Ribe, a Baltic lynchpin through which traveled goods and silver from Northern Britain, post-Carolingian Europe, Scandinavia, Novgorod, Kiev, Egypt, Syria, and Arabia.[44] This wealthy center formed the core of a small polity, a "town-state" in the words of Filipowiak and Konopka.[45]

Wolin sat astride a Baltic network of trade and communication, of which the northern reaches of the Slavic world were a thriving part (see fig. 1). In the tenth century, newly-established proto-urban centers like Wolin and nearby Szczecin joined an older set of Viking-age trading posts such as Menzlin, Demmin, and Ralswiek.[46] In other locations, fortified centers attest the ability of local elites to control craftsmen and markets. A vital element for the success of these centers was access to Baltic waterways: the Peene (Menzlin, Demmin, Teterow, and Kastorf-Mölln), the Ucker (Drense), and the Oder itself (Szczecin) drain into the Oder lagoon;

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[41] Filipowiak and Konopka, 251.

[42] Adam II:22, MGH SSRG 2:79.

[43] Filipowiak and Konopka, 249.

[44] Ibid., 257-8.

[45] Ibid., 275-281.

[46] Władysław Duczko, "Viking-Age Wolin (Wollin) in the Norse Context of the Southern Coast of the Baltic Sea," *Scripta Islandica* 65 (2014), 143-151, more specifically 147; Władysław Łosiński, "Szczecin," in Wieczorek and Hinz, 105-6.

the Warnow (Rostock-Dierkow, Gross Raden) drains directly into the Baltic; similarly, Arkona and Ralswiek on Rügen and Starigard/Oldenburg opposite Fehmarn controlled the coastal routes linking Wolin and Hedeby.[47]

Baltic trade was economic lifeblood for these centers and the polities that grew up around them. Indeed, the importance of Baltic connections can be seen from onomastic evidence. Many Slavic groups were identified by the Baltic-draining rivers beside which they lived (the Zirzipani, the Tolensane, the Warnowi, and the Ukrani). There is no evidence that these terms were autonymic, but nevertheless someone considered the Baltic rivers important enough to demarcate the peoples who lived on them. Similarly, some groups took the names of particularly important central places which were also nodes on the Baltic network. Wolin gave its name to the Wuloini, Rethra to the Redarii.[48] The identification of the Rugiani with their center at Arkona is harder to see: Jerzy Nalepa has provided a convincing argument for the mutual derivation of Arkona and Rügen from the root **arg-*, the latter postdating the former after a process of liquid metathesis.[49]

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[47] See U. Schoknecht, *Menzlin: Ein frühgeschichtlicher Handelsplatz an der Peene* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1977); Joachim Hermann, "Die Schanze von Vorwerk bei Demmin — die Civitas des wilzischen Oberkönigs Dragowit?," *Ausgrabungen und Funde* 14 (1969), 191-197; Wilhelm Unverzagt and Ewald Schuldt, *Teterow: ein slawischer Burgwall in Mecklenburg* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1963); Volker Schmidt, "Slav Fortifications on the Kastorf-Mölln Chain of Lakes," in Wieczorek and Hinz, 182-3; Volker Schmidt, *Drense: Eine Hauptburg der Ukrane* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1989); Anna Kowalska and Władysław Łosiński, "Szczecin: Origins and History of the Early Medieval Town," in Przemysław Urbańcyzk, ed., *Polish Lands at the Turn of the First and the Second Millennium* (Warsaw: 2004), 75-88; Michael Müller-Wille, "Two early medieval sites near Wismar and Rostock at the southern Baltic coast," in Olaf Olsen, Jan Skamby Madsen and Flemming Rieck, eds., *Shipshape: Essays for Ole Crumlin-Pedersen* (Roskilde: The Viking Ship Museum, 1995), 89-96; Rolf Voss, "The Ancient Slav Site with Temple at Gross Raden," in Wieczorek and Hinz, 166-7; Joachim Hermann, "Arkona auf Rügen: Tempelburg und Politisches Zentrum der Ranen vom 9. bis 12. Jh. Ergebnisse der Archäologischen Ausgrabungen 1969-1971," *Zeitschrift für Archäologie* 8:2 (1974), 177-207; Joachim Hermann, *Ralswiek auf Rügen: die slawisch-wikingischen Siedlungen und deren Hinterland* (Archäologisches Landesmuseum für Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 1997); Ingo Gabriel, "Starigard/Oldenburg," in Wieczorek and Hinz, 431-2.

[48] Theodolius Witkowski, "Der Name der Redarier und ihres zentralen Heiligtums," Symbolae Philologicae in honorem Vitoldi Taszycki (1968), 405-415.

[49] Jerzy Nalepa, "Arkona and Rügen: A linguistic contribution to our knowledge of Nordic and West Slav contacts in the early Middle Ages," *Medieval Scandinavia* 10 (1977), 96-121, more specifically 99-100.

The famous temple-fortress thus gave its name to both people and island rather than the other way around.

Further inland the material evidence presents a different landscape. South of the Havel, large centers were few and far-between. The excavations at Hof/Stauchitz have been identified with the *"urbs quae dicitur Gana"* destroyed by Henry the Fowler in 929, while Brandenburg and Berlin-Spandau are both Slavic fortresses that attest Saxon building projects in the decades after 940.[50] Aside from these large structures, however, the Havelland and the territory to its south were dominated by small ring-forts. Felix Biermann argues that these smaller fortifications implied "small-scale and compartmentalised ruling structures" which were "politically split into the districts of small rulers fighting each other."[51] In this landscape the Saxons dominated through the construction of large-scale fortresses, the so-called Burgwards. The most important of these were eventually designated bishoprics, Havelberg in 948, Merseburg, Meissen, and Zeitz in 968 (see fig. 2). But these were only successful due to the relatively unfortified world in which they were placed: a shock offensive like Henry's 929 campaign could knock out the few major fortified centers and open the landscape for the introduction of a monumental Saxon topography.

What, then, was the differentiating factor that separated these regions during this time? The answer lies in the Baltic itself. Marek Jankowiak has posited a two-system model for the Slavic slave trade during the Viking Age based on the distribution of dirham hoards: a

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[50] Judith Oexle and Michael Strobel, "Auf den Spuren der "urbs, quae dicitur Gana", der Hauptburg der Daleminizier: Erste archäologische Untersuchungen in der slawischen Befestigung von Hof/Stauchitz," *Arbeits- und Forschungsberichte zur Sächsischen Bodendenkmalpflege* 46 (2004), 263. For the *'urbs, quae dicitur Gana'* itself, see Widukind I 35, MGH SSRG 60:28-29. For the Saxon building projects at Brandenburg and Berlin-Spandau, see Klaus Grebe, "Brandenburg (Havel)," in Wieczorek and Hinz, 178-9; Adriaan von Müller, "The Fortified Site of Berlin-Spandau," in Wieczorek and Hinz, 180-1

[51] Biermann, 91.

northeastern system which operated via river through the Baltic and the Volga trade route, and a southwestern system operating through overland caravans to Umayyad Spain.[52] While the slave trade is attested archaeologically in finds such as the keys and shackles from Kastorf-Mölln, it is hard to tell how important it was economically due to the notorious difficulty of finding evidence for slavery in the material record; work continues at the Oxford "Dirhams for Slaves" project.[53] Nevertheless, Jankowiak's model can be useful for our purposes. The two-system model relies on the distribution range of Arabic silver dirhams, which were plentiful within reach of the Baltic river system. Stanisław Suchodolski has estimated that around 7,000 dirhams have been found in the area west of the Oder, more than Denmark (4,000) and Norway (400) combined.[54] The Saxons knew of this wealth, demanding a *tributum argenti* from the Slavic groups they managed to subdue.[55] But dirham finds do not exist in a vacuum. Arabic silver implies a whole host of economic connections, reaching from England to the Middle East. These connections spurred new and complex economic developments. Facilities discovered at Baltic Slavic sites specialized in the production and processing of metalwork, jewelry, glass, antler, amber, wood, bone, and leather.[56] It was this economic complexity, directly attributable to Baltic connections, that stimulated the growth of large polities capable of constructing and maintaining monumental

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[52] Marek Jankowiak, "Dirhams for Slaves: Investigating the Slavic Slave Trade in the Tenth Century," Medieval Seminar, All Souls, 27 Feb. 2012; "Two systems of trade in the Western Slavic lands in the 10th century," in Mateusz Bogucki and Marian Rębkowski, *Economies, Monetisation and Society in the West Slavic Lands 800-1200 AD* (Szczecin: 2013), 137-148.

[53] Schmidt, "Kastorf-Mölln," 182-3.

[54] Stanisław Suchodolski, "Change of transcontinental contacts as indicated by coins in the Baltic zone around 1000," in Przemysław Urbańczyk, ed., *Europe around the year 1000* (Warsaw: Wydawn, 2001), 85-100, more specifically 86.

[55] See, for example, DD O I 295, 406, in Theodor Sickel, *Die Urkunden Konrad I., Heinrich I., und Otto I.* (Hannover, 1879-1884).

[56] Władysław Filipowiak, "Wolin: an Early Medieval Trading Emporium on the Baltic," in Wieczorek and Hinz, 102-4; Łosiński, 106; Arthur MacGregor, "Bone, Antler, and Horn: An Archaeological Perspective," *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 2 (1991), 29-38, more specifically 32; Schmidt, 182-3.

fortifications.[57] Indeed, superimposing the Baltic drainage basin on the map of major Saxon fortifications makes the relationship between Baltic access and Saxon expansion abundantly clear (fig. 3). Within the Baltic watershed, wealthy and powerful elites constructed large fortresses and were able to resist Saxon incursions. Further inland, however, fragmented polities gave way to Saxon armies and Saxon architecture.

Tribute and Power

How did the Saxons navigate the different political landscapes north and south of the Havel? Though more than sixty charters recording Ottonian grants of lands or income across the Elbe-Saale survive from the tenth century, the vast majority record grants in the inland zone, away from the Baltic watershed. Only four charters recording grants from the Baltic zone are extant. Needless to say, this is not the most forthcoming of source-bases; nevertheless, some attempts will be made in this section to outline the different ways the Saxons interacted with the different regions.

In most instances, grants in the southern inland zone resembled Ottonian practices elsewhere. Grant recipients received individual named properties, most often *villae, municipia, castella, civitates,* or *urbes*, specified by location within a *pagus* and a *comitatus*.[58] DO I 69, for example, records the granting of the *villae* Vuizekani, Bodblozi, Zachliandorp, and Pohchutikie, located *in pago Serimuntilante nuncupato in comitatu Cristiani comitis*.[59] The four "Baltic zone" charters, on the other hand, grant not properties but incomes. All four (two, DO II 31 and

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[57] Biermann, 89-90.

[58] Susan Reynolds postulates some sort of record-keeping system for royal land: Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford University Press: 1994), 409.

[59] DD O I 69

118, are reconfirmations of DO I 295) record the grant of a tenth part *(decima)* of Slavic *tributum* or *census,* terms that appear to have been used synonymously in this case. That these are "secular tenths" rather than an ecclesiastical tithe is indicated by the source of the income: DO I 76 grants a *decima* "of the tribute which has been paid to us from the Redarii," while DO I 295 grants a *decima* "of the whole *census* paid to the public treasury by the Slavic peoples subjected by us."[60] The division between ecclesiastical tithe and secular tenth is further clarified by a charter from the inland zone, DO I 231, which grants both an ecclesiastical tithe "in the regions and cities so named" and, in a separate clause, a *decimam de omni censu et adquisitione vel nostra vel comitum vel cuiscumque ex nostra regia potestate adquisitum fiat*.[61] A similar construction can be found in DO I 446, which grants a *decima* "from the whole *census* of honey owed to us in servitude" from a series of *urbes* along the upper Elbe.[62] The tangled and inconsistent Latin of these *decima* clauses suggests perhaps scribal unfamiliarity with the form of income being granted. These are, it would seem, tributes from Slavic peoples, experiencing various levels of Saxon domination, to Otto himself or to his magnates, portions of which were then reassigned to the upkeep of royal monasteries or bishoprics.

It must be noted, however, that the relationship of an overlord to a subjugated but external tributary is exceedingly ephemeral. Removing oneself from a tributary relationship with an overlord is both desirable and simple; one merely ceases to pay tribute. While military campaigns could compel further payment, these must not have occurred in every case, though

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[60] *'decimam tributi quae nobis solvitur de Radewer,'* DD O I 76; *'a subditis nobis Slavorum nationibus… ad publicum… fiscum persolvitur… decimam tocius census,'* DD O I 295.

[61] DO I 231. For the division here between *Kirchenzehnt* and *Fiskalzehnt*, see Dietrich Claude, *Geschichte des Erzbistums Magdeburg bis in das 12. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1972), 52; Karl Leyser, "Ottonian Government," in *Medieval Germany and its Neighbors, 900-1250* (Cornwall: Hambledon Press, 1982), 88-89.

[62] DO I 446.

our sources prefer to focus on such victorious campaigns. We can identify a few prominent instances in which Slavic groups attempted to remove the Saxon yoke. In the 930s the Redarii agreed to pay tribute no fewer than three separate times, each time reneging on their agreement at the first possible opportunity.[63] The Ukrani, subjected to tribute in 934, had to be defeated again in 954.[64] The Lusici, who are attested paying tribute in 961 in the aforementioned DO I 231, were campaigned against by Gero in 963.[65] Note that in all cases these are attestations of successful Saxon campaigns after a reneged tribute agreement. Did the Saxons ever fail to reassert tributary status? Or rather, do the Saxon written sources record such a failure?

One vital attestation comes from a letter sent by Otto to his Saxon magnates in 968 instructing them to attack the Redarii, preserved in Widukind along with the note that the war was not embarked upon due to the threat of an attack from the Danes.[66] This is a unique resource: it is unusual to possess a record of an early medieval polity considering going to war but deciding against it. Otto's letter commends caution when analyzing charter evidence for the long-term trends of tributary relationships. A tenth of the Redarii's tribute in silver had only recently, in 965, been donated to the church of St. Maurice at Magdeburg.[67] Nevertheless, they appear to have quickly detached themselves from this arrangement, evident in Otto's mention that the Redarii "had suffered very heavy losses" as a reason for his instruction to go to war.[68]

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[63] See Widukind I 36, MGH SSRG 60: 29-31, for the first instance of tribute-and-repudiation, followed by a renewed campaign by Henry. Shortly later a charter of Otto's records his victorious return from the *provintia Sclavorum qui vocantur Riaderi*: the Redarii, like many other groups, chose the 936 transition of power as a moment to renege on previous agreements. DD O I 2.

[64] Adalbert, 934, MGH SSRG 50:196; Widukind III 42, MGH SSRG 60:71.

[65] DD O I 231.

[66] Widukind III 70, MGH SSRG 60:84. Published separately as DD O I 355.

[67] DD O I 295.

[68] Widukind III 70, MGH SSRG 60:84; DD O I 355.

Without this letter, preserved by chance in Widukind, we would have no evidence of this disruption — or indeed of the otherwise unattested conflicts which inflicted such great losses on the Redarii.

Otto's proposed war against the Redarii appears never to have been consummated, at least not to the extent of their "final destruction," the goal he raises in the letter. This makes it all the stranger that incomes from their tribute are donated not once but twice during the reign of Otto II, in 973 and 975.[69] These charters are both confirmations of the earlier 965 charter that donated a tenth of the silver tribute coming in from the Ukrani, Riezani, Redarii, Tollensani, and Zirzipani. These confirmations by Otto II have been interpreted as evidence of the importance of the gift.[70] What if instead they signified the anxiety of the church, after 968 an archbishopric, to maintain its incomes during a caesura in their payment? We have no evidence that the Redarii were restored as tribute payers after Otto's letter. Furthermore, it is unclear how the Saxons could have managed to extract tribute from the Ukrani, Tollensani, and Zirzipani while unfriendly with the Redarii. The lands of the Redarii separated the Saxon Havelland from the other three groups (fig. 4). If the tributes were meant to travel that way, the quickest route for them to reach Magdeburg, they too would have been disrupted by tensions with the Redarii. The 973 and 975 confirmations should probably be seen as expressions of a church eager to maintain its grip on potential incomes. Should these peoples be resubdued, as surely Saxon clergymen believed they would be, Magdeburg did not want to lose out on a substantial source of wealth.

Our admittedly sparse charter evidence for "Baltic zone" Saxon-Slavic relationshipss therefore seems to suggest intermittent and insecure tributary relationships mostly declining in

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[69] DD O II 31, 118.

[70] Leyser, "Ottonian Government," 89, note 3.

the late 960s, at least in the east. In the west, we are hamstrung by the total vacuum of charter evidence, but we can nevertheless make some few comments about the relationship of Saxon power to Slavic polity there. Of foremost interest is the position of one Nako, brother of the leader of the Abodrite contingent at the Raxa, who had by 965 established himself enough to be counted among the four "kings of the Slavs" by the Hispano-Arabic traveler Ibrahīm ibn Ya'qūb.[71] Further north, a bishopric was established at Wagrian Starigard c. 970, but it remains unclear who maintained political control: we have no evidence of a Saxon lord of Starigard, and Helmold of Bosau's later stories seem to imply a coexistence of Slavic secular and Saxon ecclesiastic power.[72] The archaeological attestation of a church in Starigard from the decade of the 950s likely confirms some Christian sentiment among the ruling house, making the possibility of a bishopric accepted without the presence of Saxon secular power more likely.[73] More will be said about the relationship of the Abodrites and the Wagrians, and their respective relationships to the Saxons, in the next section, where Widukind's Wichmann narrative proves most illustrative.

In total, it seems that Saxon-Slavic relationships in the Baltic watershed was defined by diversity and complexity rather than homogeneity. Though tributary relationships were established from early on, these never seem to have evolved into more intrusive forms of rule,

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[71] Ibrahīm ibn Ya'qūb, trans. Dmitrij Mishin, "Ibrahim ibn-Ya'qub at-Turtushi's Account of the Slavs from the Middle of the Tenth Century," in Mary Beth Davis and Marcell Sebők, *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 1994/5 (Budapest), 184-199. This dating is controversial; 973 is also possible. While Nako's fortress has commonly been pinpointed as Dorf Mecklenburg south of Wismar, Schwerin has also been mooted.

[72] Helmold of Bosau, *Chronica Slavorum,* I 12-14, ed. by Bernhard Schmeidler (Hannover, 1937), MGH SSRG 32:23-30. Helmold's usefulness suffers from his chronological distance from his subjects, but not overly much: it seems apparent that a stock of folk stories surrounding the brief moment of Saxon-Slavic interaction had evolved in the centuries after 983. Helmold drew on several disparate traditions, as can be seen in his reproduction of two stories about the separate characters "Billug" and "Mistiwoi" — in fact based on the same Abodrite prince, Mstivoj.

[73] Gabriel, 432.

and indeed began to evaporate starting in the late 960s. Attestations of independent Slavic rule seems to indicate that much of the region escaped Saxon predation entirely. The evidence is enigmatic, to be sure, and easily readable in different ways than I have read it here; however, it can surely be said that there is no support for the idea that the Saxons introduced manorial organization and fiscal schemes of the kind they introduced in the south. Both material and charter evidence support a geographical distinction, then, between the Baltic watershed and the inland zone. The question remains to be asked whether this distinction can be made apparent in any of the narrative sources. For the purposes of answering that question, I now turn to the narrative of the Saxon rebel Wichmann, a unique piece of evidence from the tenth-century literary canon.

Widukind's Saxon Ideal

Wichmann the Younger, a Saxon rebel who constituted the last opposition to Otto the Great's rule in Saxony after 955, features prominently in the last book of Widukind's *Rerum gestarum Saxonicarum libri tres*, in some places even acting as the protagonist during Otto's absences in Italy. According to Widukind, Wichmann began a feud with Otto in 953 and engaged in intermittent warfare against Otto and the Saxons until his death in 967.[74] During the course of these conflicts, Wichmann moved freely throughout the "Saxon march," allying with a series of Slavic groups hostile to the Saxons and working against the interests of his uncle Hermann Billung and cousin Otto the Great without effective countermeasure from either man. In the last decade of his life, moreover, Wichmann seems to have been left largely to his own devices by Otto, who apparently tolerated without concern active and threatening opposition in

[74] Widukind III 55, 59-69, MGH SSRG 60:78-83.

the Slavic Baltic. The Wichmann narrative can be used to illustrate many of the themes discussed above, foremost the geographical division of the Slavic east, the dominance of wealthy centers and the weakness of Saxon coercive power in the Baltic watershed, and the complicated Saxon-Slavic relationships that existed there instead.

As noted above, Widukind is also the foundation of most argumentation for a strong Saxon presence in the east, recording as he does a series of overwhelming Ottonian victories against the Slavs. Yet the record of Wichmann's rebellion undercuts that message of Ottonian strength, putting Otto's inability to keep his fractious kinsman under control at center stage. Can Widukind be called to testify against himself? Widukind scholars going back to Helmut Beumann have noted that the *Rerum gestarum* pursues twin goals throughout its length, acting both as panegyric for the Ottonian dynasty and as celebratory text lionizing the Saxon people more generally.[75] More recently, Sverre Bagge has pointed out that Widukind's early passages, constituting an *origo gentis* for the Saxon people, blend seamlessly into his account of Henry the Fowler's reign, depicting his panegyric as an outgrowth of his description of Saxon greatness.[76] From Widukind's perspective, the Wichmann narrative is not then a contradiction at all: Otto's rule and Wichmann's rebellion together constitute an ode to Saxon heroism and the spirit of the Saxon people. It follows that using the Wichmann narrative against perceptions of intrusive Saxon rule in the Baltic zone is not historical malpractice; as argued above, these perceptions are a modern creation and not native to Widukind's worldview.

According to Widukind, Wichmann's enmity toward Otto began with his father, Wichmann the Elder. Soon after Otto's accession in 936, the Saxon king appointed one of his

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[75] Bagge, 30; Beumann, 21-23.

[76] Bagge, 32.

most powerful followers, Wichmann the Elder's younger brother Hermann Billung, *princeps militiae* along the northern section of the Elbe.[77] This desirable position came with the prerogative to lead other nobles in battle and the opportunity for great wealth from plunder and the acquisition of slaves.[78] Hermann's prestigious new office understandably angered his elder brother, passed over for a position he thought he deserved not only for his seniority but also because he was married to the sister of the queen dowager Mathilda, Otto's mother.[79] A close connection to Otto's kin-group, along with services rendered, gave Wichmann the Elder the reasonable expectation that Otto would reward him with office and honor.[80] By disappointing these expectations, Otto turned the elder Billung against him. Wichmann the Elder joined the wider revolt of 938, allying with Eberhard *dux* of Franconia and Otto's older half-brother Thankmar.[81]

Though Wichmann the Elder quickly made peace with Otto, his feud found new life in his sons Wichmann the Younger and Eckbert the One-Eyed.[82] Wichmann broke with Otto during the revolt of 953, enraged by the same slight that had driven his father to rebellion, the prestigious and lucrative position accorded to Hermann, though Widukind adds the additional motivation that Hermann had apparently plundered the brothers' inheritance.[83] After the revolt's collapse in 954 and Wichmann's defeat and imprisonment, he managed to escape with his

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[77] Widukind II 4, MGH SSRG 60:39-40.

[78] Karl Leyser, *Rule and Conflict,* 11; Peter Heather, "Frankish Imperialism and Slavic Society," in Przemysław Urbańczyk, ed., *Origins of Central Europe* (Warsaw, 1997), 173.

[79] Ibid., 12.

[80] Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends, and Followers: Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 41.

[81] Reuter, 152.

[82] Widukind III 23-25, MGH SSRG 60:66-67.

[83] Widukind III 24, MGH SSRG 60:67. See also Althoff, *Family, Friends, and Followers,* 44.

brother and seize several fortresses in Saxony before crossing the Elbe to join with the Slavic princes Nako and Stoigniew "who had been troubling the Saxons for a long time."[84] It is here, in Wichmann's first crossing of the Elbe to agitate against his uncle and cousin, that we first see the ways the Wichmann narrative works against maximalist interpretations of Saxon power in the Baltic watershed. Wichmann crosses the Elbe to join ready-made enemies of the Saxon people, *Saxonibus iam olim infestos*. Nako and his brother are not described as rebels, merely as enemies. To Widukind, crossing the Elbe in this case meant crossing into foreign territory.

It was the alliance between Widukind and the two Slavic princes, along with a coalition of other Slavic groups, that was defeated on the Raxa.[85] But while Stoigniew was killed and Nako apparently made peace, as indicated by his presence in Ibn Ya'qūb, Wichmann and Eckbert evaded capture and fled to the court of Hugh the Great.[86] Though Eckbert quickly came to terms with Hermann and Otto, dropping out of Widukind's narrative, Wichmann rejoined his allies across the Elbe and soon found himself again in battle against Otto.[87] This conflict was part of a series of renewed campaigns across the Elbe undertaken by Otto in the years 957-960. Widukind's two recorded episodes of conflict are confirmed by Adalbert's laconic '*rex iterum Sclavos invasit*,' repeated three times with minor variation, and a mention in Flodoard's

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[84] Widukind III 29, 50; MGH SSRG 60:68, 75.

[85] This battle is one episode of the Wichmann narrative that can be confirmed in sources other than Widukind, though Adalbert's terse mention emblematizes the disinterest with which other contemporary chroniclers regarded Wichmann: *Wigmannus expellitur.* Widukind III 53-55, MGH SSRG 60:76-78; Adalbert 955, MGH SSRG 50:168; Flodoard of Reims, *Annales*, 955, ed. by Ph. Lauer (Paris, 1905), Coll. textes hist 39:142; *Annales Sangallenses Maiores* 955, MGH SS 1:79; *Annales Hildesheimenses,* 955*,* ed. by Georg Waitz (Hannover, 1878), MGH SSRG 8:21.

[86] Ibn Ya'qūb, 184. Widukind III 55, MGH SSRG 60:78.

[87] Widukind III 59-60, MGH SSRG 60:79. Like the Raxa, this episode appears in other texts, though without mention of Wichmann: Adalbert 957, MGH SSRG 50:169; Flodoard 958, Coll. textes hist 39:146.

Annales.[88] The Raxa had not, it seemed, set matters to rest across the Elbe. Following his defeat, Wichmann the Younger persuaded Otto's frontier commander Gero (to whom Wichmann was related by marriage), to intercede for him with Otto.[89] The intercession worked, and Wichmann gave a "terrible oath," promising he would never again act against Otto.

Indeed, Widukind records that Otto left for Italy in 961 "having put affairs in proper order" among not only the Franks and Saxons but also their "neighboring peoples," a statement surely meant to convey a dominant Ottonian position.[90] This does not seem to have been the case. In the following chapter, III 64, Wichmann travels north to join with Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, aiming to instigate war.[91] Though his machinations are discovered by a traveling merchant, Wichmann evades capture. The next time he appears, in III 66, it is in Gero's custody, having been handed over by an unnamed group of *barbari*.[92] This lacuna (III 65 covers the conversion of Harald Bluetooth and the Danes) should draw the eye: there is no description of where Wichmann flees from Denmark. Crucially, it should be noted that Gero's sphere of influence was south of the upper Elbe, essentially coterminous with the "inland zone" discussed above. To reach Gero's march from Denmark one would have had to travel either through Saxony or the Slavic Baltic. Furthermore, Widukind's choppy narrative papers over significant gaps in his timeline: III 64 is conventionally dated to 962, while III 66 can be dated with somewhat more certainty to 963. Where did Wichmann spend the year between chapters? It cannot have been Saxony: he had just violated an oath to the emperor and had never been

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[88] Widukind III 58-60, MGH SSRG 60:79; Adalbert 957, 959, 960, MGH SSRG 50:169-70; Flodoard, *Annales*, 958, Coll. textes hist 39:145-6.

[89] Widukind III 60, MGH SSRG 60:79. Wichmann's sister Hathui was married to Gero's son Siegfried.

[90] Widukind III 63, MGH SSRG 60:79-80.

[91] Widukind III 64, MGH SSRG 60:80.

[92] Widukind III 66, MGH SSRG 60:81.

welcome in his uncle Hermann's territories in the best of times. Wichmann must have spent this time among his Slavic contacts in the Baltic. But not all Slavs are the same, and it appears that sometime in early 963, the Saxon rebel made the mistake of entering the territory of a group for whom Gero's power held considerable sway — that is, he moved from the Baltic watershed to the inland zone and back into the realm of coercive Saxon power.

Gero's decision regarding Wichmann has been the occasion of some controversy. Widukind merely states that Gero, *non inmemor iuramenti*, "not unmindful of (Wichmann's) oath," upon recognizing that Wichmann was guilty returned him to the barbarians from which he received him.[93] Wichmann then, together with the barbarians, made war against Mieszko of Poland. I follow Gerd Althoff's interpretation, that this constituted Gero washing his hands of the matter: caught between his kinsman and his lord, Gero chose to remain neutral.[94] Another school of thought sees Gero's decision as an acceptance of Wichmann back into the Saxon fold, giving Wichmann's campaign against Mieszko the force of an imperial expedition.[95] This interpretation does not seem reconcilable with Gero's recognition of Wichmann's guilt. It matters a great deal whether Wichmann was reconciled with Saxon power after III 66 or not, for as best we can tell, a three year lacuna divides III 66 from the next episode of the Wichmann saga in III 68. If, as it seems, Gero wanted nothing more to do with him, the Saxon rebel had burnt his last Saxon bridge. Again, it seems that Wichmann must have found refuge in the Slavic Baltic for the time he disappears from the historian's page.

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[93] *'Gero igitur comes, non inmemor iuramenti, cum Wichmannum accusari vidisset reumque cognovisset, barbaris, a quibus eum assumpsit, restituit.'* Widukind III 66, MGH SSRG 60:81.

[94] Althoff, "Saxony and the Elbe Slavs," 284.

[95] David Bachrach, *Warfare in Tenth-Century Germany* (Boydell Press, 2012), 60; Mayr-Harting, 132-3.

When Widukind resumes the story, it is to highlight Wichmann's intervention in a conflict between two rival Slavic *subreguli*, Selibur of the Wagrians and Mstivoj of the Abodrites.[96] Here again Wichmann positioned himself against Saxon power, aligning with Selibur against his uncle Hermann Billung, who had come in on the side of Mstivoj. This chapter provides perhaps the greatest insights of the entire narrative into the relationship between Saxons and Slavs in the Baltic watershed. The Abodrites, who as discussed above requested a Saxon alliance in 955, appear to have received exactly that. The Wagrian case is also illuminating. Though Hermann Billung appropriated Selibur's lands after the latter's defeat, those same lands were then handed to Selibur's unnamed son rather than any Saxon magnate. It is in the wake of this episode, and presumably an according realignment of Saxon-Wagrian relations, that the bishopric at Starigard was constructed.

Having come out on the losing side of this conflict, Wichmann fled east to the town of Wolin, attested archaeologically as the greatest metropolis of the Baltic.[97] There Widukind depicts his death as a heroic last stand fighting beside the Wolinians against Mieszko of Poland, striking down many an enemy before asking that his sword be returned to Otto and turning to pray to the east. In Wichmann's dying speech, he beseeches Otto to "laugh at the death of an enemy but weep at the death of a kinsman." This, then, is the fundamental contradiction of Wichmann's life: he stands at once as a shining example of the Saxon nobility and as the greatest opponent of Saxon power.

Widukind's Wichmann narrative serves to illustrate a great many of our suspicions about the contours of Saxon power across the Elbe-Saale. First and foremost, Wichmann's travels

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[96] Widukind III 68, MGH SSRG 60:81-82.

[97] Widukind III 69, MGH SSRG 60:82-83.

evince the fundamental geographical dichotomy put forward above. While Wichmann is among the Slavs of the Baltic watershed he appears completely untouchable by Ottonian power; at his weakest, when he is at Gero's mercy, it is because he has made the mistake of crossing into the inland zone. Wichmann's alliances, and his bringing of Slavic armies against Otto or his allies in 955, 958, 966, and 967, highlight the continued failure of Saxon "conquest" or integration" in the Baltic. Where Wichmann's destinations are named, as with Starigard or Wolin, they are rich production sites which have furnished brilliant archaeological finds: material wealth and political relevance do indeed seem to be related. Finally, Wichmann's story demonstrates the diversity of Slavic relationships to Ottonian power, whether it is the Abodrites' careful bargain-making, the Wagrian acceptance of Christianity, the staunch opposition of the eastern Slavic groups, or the Wolinians who appear to have had no interactions with the Saxons at all. In total, Wichmann's story drives home the importance of a careful and analytical approach to Saxon-Slavic relationships in the Baltic watershed and the flaws in an assumption of monolithic Saxon expansion.

Conclusion: Reconsidering the Saxons

The region conventionally known as the "Saxon march" should instead be divided into two zones of analysis, roughly corresponding with the Baltic watershed and the inland area properly part of the North Sea drainage basin. The watershed zone is typified archaeologically by finds of dirham hoards, evidence of production facilities pointing to advanced economic structures, large-scale Slavic fortresses, and a lack of Saxon Burgwards. The second, lying outside the Baltic watershed, is typified by small Slavic ringforts, less developed economic structures, Saxon Burgwards, and a lack of dirham finds. These differences in material culture

were recapitulated in different political structures. In the Baltic zone large-scale polities were able to resist Saxon incursion, resulting in a patchwork quilt of relationships across the watershed, while further inland small-scale and localized polities were completely dominated by the Saxons.

How does the story of Saxon expansion eastward change when we consider that they never dominated the north to the extent that they did the south? For one, we can finally access a moment of "completion" for this southern conquest, the 940 submission of Brandenburg after which "all the barbarian peoples up to the Oder subjugated themselves to royal tribute." After this moment, the inland Slavic groups are quiescent; it is only in 983 that the Saxons are pushed back to the upper Elbe, and then it is by Redarii from the Baltic watershed. Perhaps more importantly, this reorientation changes the way that the wars of the next half-century can be considered. Traditionally, every conflict from 955 up until the 983 conflagration has been read in the key of "rebellion," seen as Slavic protest against impinging Ottonian domination. But if we consider that that impinging Ottonian domination is largely a figment of overzealous textual sources, the picture changes. None of the groups with which the Saxons warred throughout the second half of the tenth century, all resident in the Baltic watershed, had ever come permanently under Saxon domination. This can be seen most elegantly in 983 itself. This was a conflict led by the Redarii, with whom the Saxons had fought intermittently, and later joined by the Abodrites, their erstwhile allies, and the Wagrians, until that moment their brothers in the faith. That this should be seen as a repudiation of Saxon power and prestige in the wake of Otto II's crushing defeat in Calabria the previous year is certain. However, the events of 983 should not be considered to constitute a rebellion, but rather a border conflict of the exact same sort that had defined the previous decades of Saxon presence east of the Elbe-Saale. Framing these events in

the language of revolt does an injustice to that violence and turmoil and to the continued independence of the silver-rich Baltic watershed.

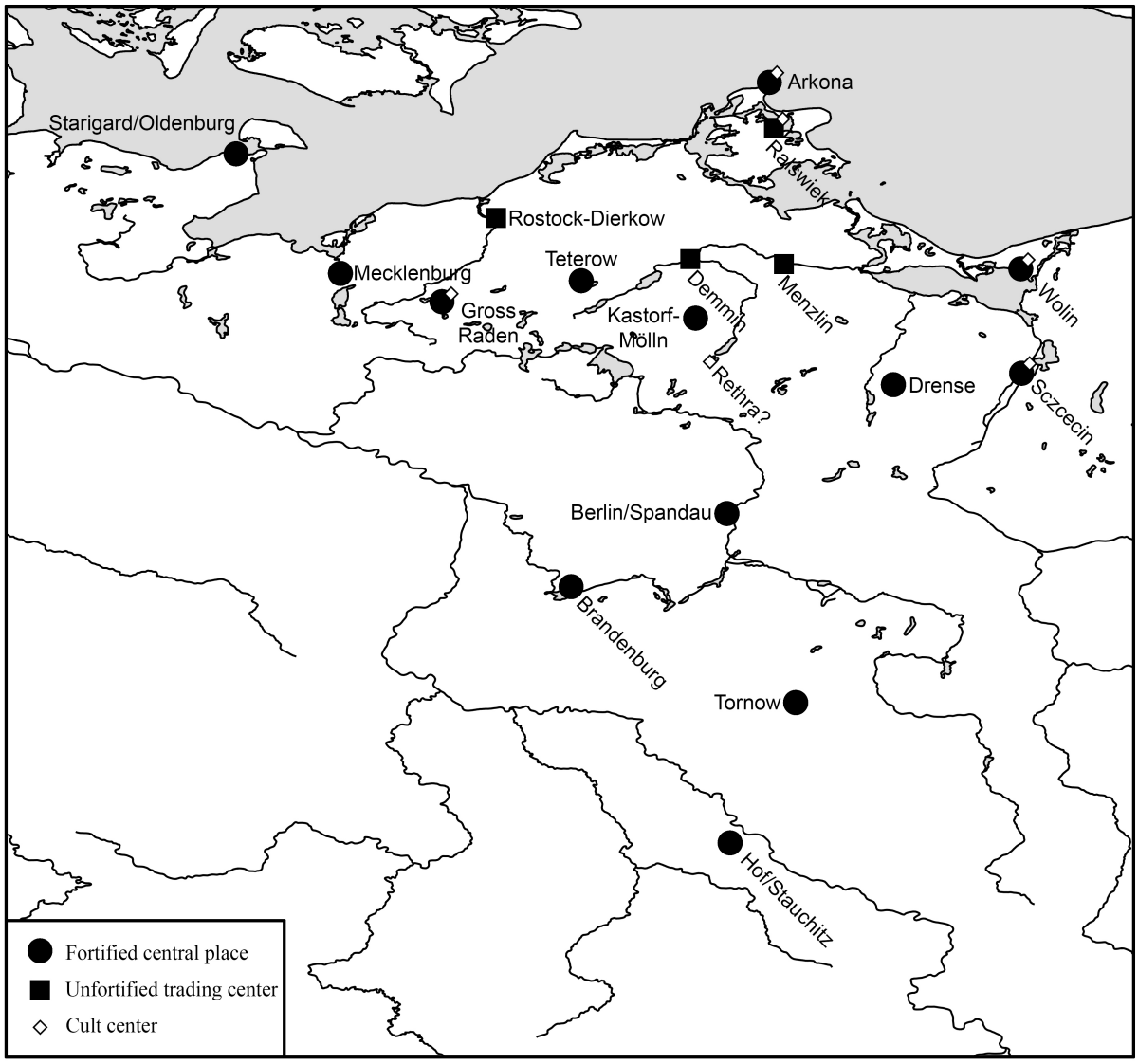

Figure 1: Baltic Slavic central places and emporia

Location of Rethra estimated based on literary evidence.

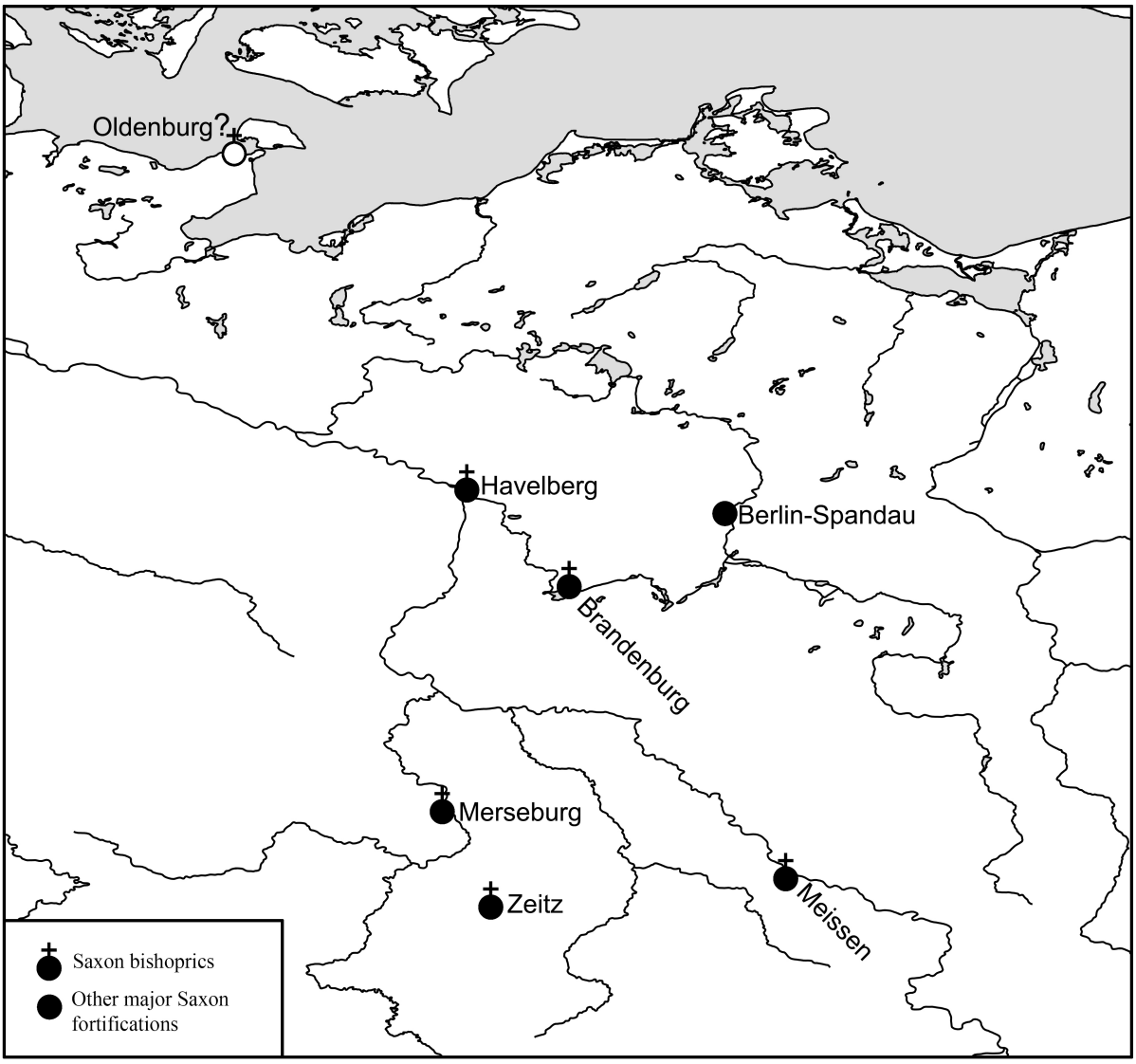

Figure 2: Prominent Saxon Fortifications
across the Elbe-Saale

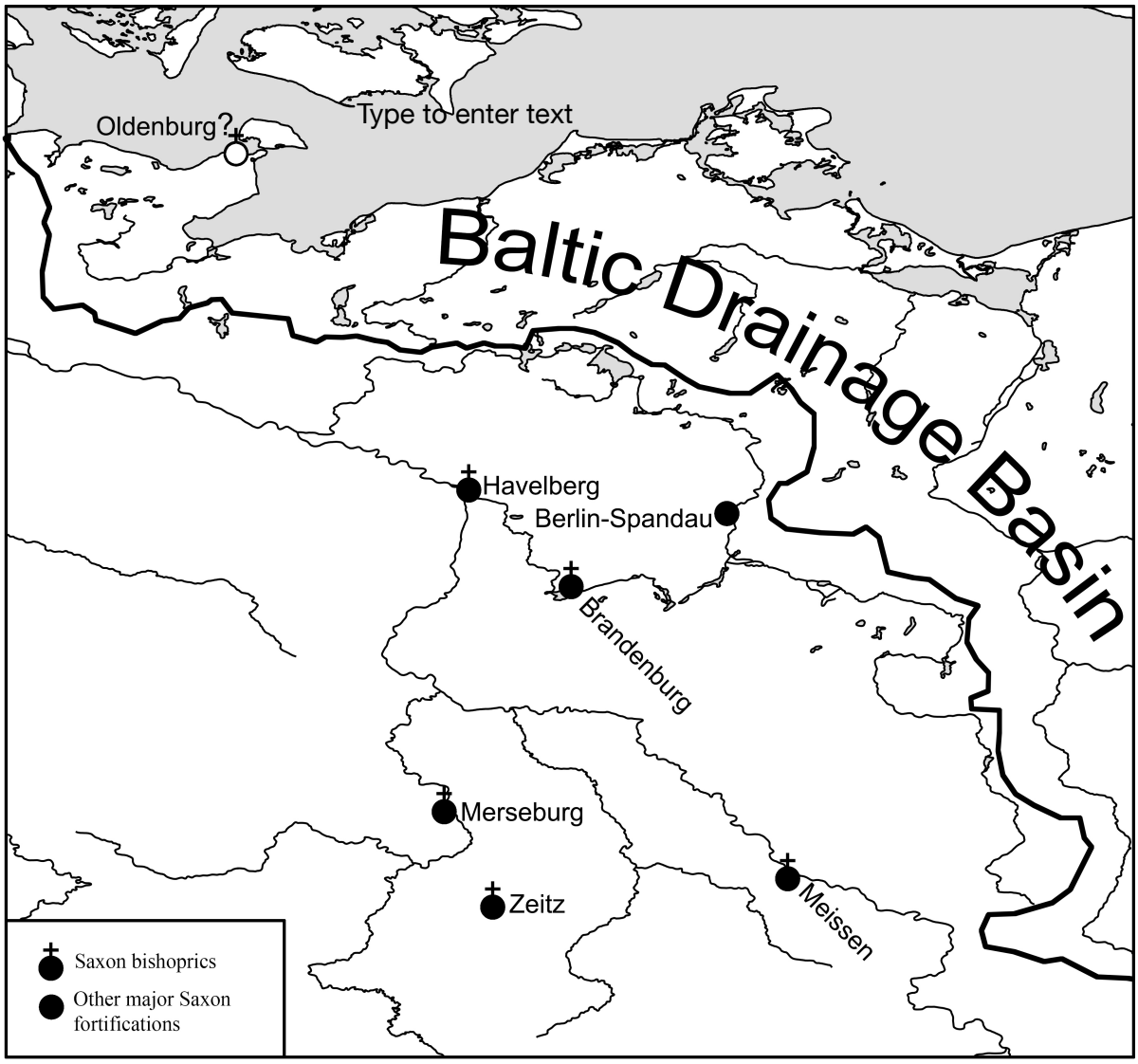

Figure 3: Relationship between Baltic Drainage Basin and Saxon Expansion

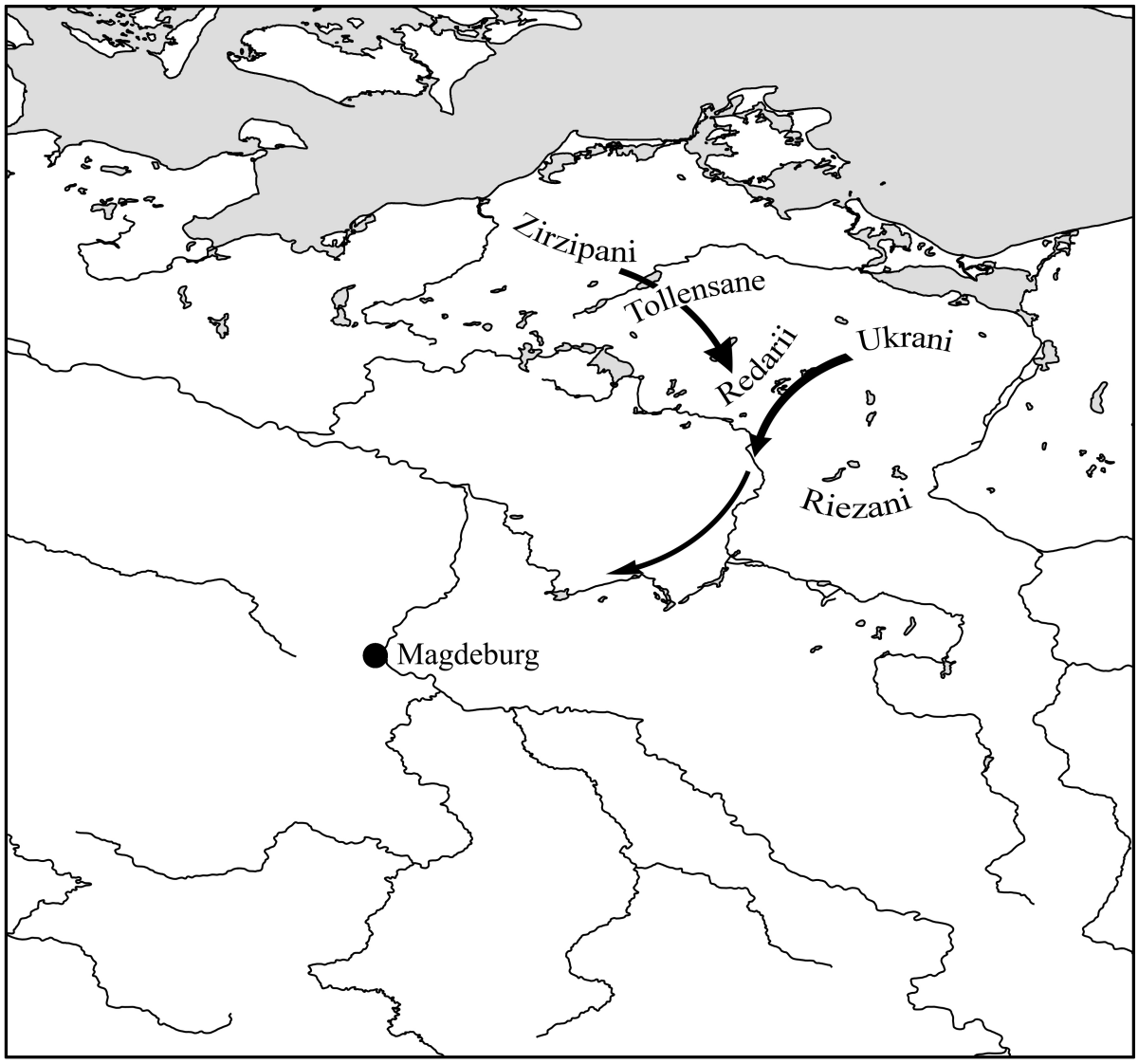

Figure 4: Slavic Groups and Tribute
Routes to Magdeburg