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# THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE TERRITORY OF CZECH AND SLOVAK REPUBLICS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF WRITTEN SOURCES

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(Received 8 July 2016, revised 3 August 2016)

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## **Abstract**

The territory of present Czech and Slovak Republics got into contact with Christianity as early as at the end of antiquity period. Mass Christianization of this geographical territory began to take place since the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of Christians in the observed territory during the period of Early Middle Ages is evident only from a limited number of written sources preserved up to date. These sources prove the subsequent spread of Christianity among Slavs living in this region, mainly in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, they indicate the fact that the Christianization process exhibits influences from a variety of cultures.

*Keywords:* Christianity, Christianization, Great Moravia

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## **1. Introduction**

Christianization, together with power consolidation and forming of early Christian polities, had great impact on formation of Europe during the Middle Ages [1]. Even though intensive Christianization began in the Early Middle Ages, the territory of contemporary Czech and Slovak Republics got into contact with Christianity as early as at the end of antiquity period. The evidence of presence of Christianity in the region north from Danube can be dated to the period of Roman Empire and Migration period. Roman Empire gained control of the regions of Raetia, Pannonia and Noricum in the first century CE. Origins of Christianity in this region are usually associated with the presence of Roman legionnaires, who were serving here in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE [2]. Besides legionnaires, the Christian ideas could have been spread in the observed area by people, mainly traders, who travelled by Amber Road from Aquileia, where one of the first Christian communities of northern Italy existed. Its individual routes passed through the territories of Slovakia and Moravia (eastern part of contemporary Czech Republic). The spread of Christianity in the Noricum and

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Pannonia regions became more prominent in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century [3]. Edict of Milan led to amelioration of positions of Christians in the Danubian Lowland provinces as well. Christianity was developing in this territory until the arrival of the Huns (433). It was preserved to a little extent in the later period, too, when the Germanic tribes inhabited this region. However, after the arrival of Slavs and Avars in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Christianization of the Central Europe had to start over again. The stronger Christianization of this geographical territory began to take place at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

## **2. Christianization of the Central Europe during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century**

The Christian missionaries' work in the Central Europe during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries is evident only from a limited number of preserved written and archaeological sources. The written sources refer to missions of Saint Martin of Tours and Saint Amandus spreading the Christianity among Slavs [4]. However, significant missionary activity took place only after the successful war campaign of Frankish Kingdom against the Avars at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. A synod was held on the banks of Danube in 796. It was organized by Pepin, the son of Frankish King Charlemagne (742/747 to 814; king since 768; emperor since 800). The synod was attended by the Bavarian bishops, as well as the Patriarch of Aquileia, Paulinus II, and it dealt with the necessity of Christianization of the conquered Avar regions. Records from the synod prove that an intense spread of Christianity took place in the regions controlled by Avars even before this date. However, it was not organized [5]. The synod dealt with the issue of sacraments, as well as the problems related to ecclesiastical organization and structures. Pepin probably assigned the part of Pannonia Lowland to ecclesiastical administration of Bishop of Salzburg Arno in order to spread Christianity among the Avars and Slavs inhabiting the region. This was confirmed in writing by Charlemagne in the year 803 [6]. According to the information regarding the synod held in 796, the renowned Czech church historian Josef Cibulka assumed that, in the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, possibly earlier, a part of the population under Avar rule was converted to Christianity [7].

Other important synods with great impact on the Christianization of the Central Europe were held in Frankfurt (794) and Mainz (813) [5, p. 2-3, 15-17]. Another key event with significant influence on the Christianization of Slavs was the elevation of Salzburg diocese to archdiocese. This was done by Charlemagne with the permission of the Pope in 798. The first archbishop, Arno, was given a task to establish the spiritual management of the regions populated by Slavs [7, p. 176]. In the context of the missionary work, it is necessary to mention one of many measures made by the Emperor Charlemagne – a decision made in the dispute between Arno and Patriarch of Aquileia, Maxentius, about the borders of their ecclesiastical provinces in 811. Frankish sovereign determined that the river Drava will serve as the border between the provinces. [6, p. 5] According to influential Czech expert on Byzantine history and culture Vladimír Vavřínek, this led to confining of Aquileia province expansion to the

north of Drava. He adds, however, that Aquileian clergy worked in Pannonia nevertheless. As an example of this, he points out the discovery of the church of Saint John the Baptist in the locality of Récéskút near Zalavár which, according to architectural layout, was influenced by Dalmatian architecture [8].

Christianity in the territory of contemporary Slovakia and Moravia was sustained by means of various missions and on-going infiltration. The Slovak medievalist Richard Marsina assumes that Christianity began to spread sporadically already before the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In his opinion, the Christian missionaries might have visited our region irregularly and dwelt here for shorter periods of time as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, however, it is certain that they did so in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The situation changed after Charlemagne defeated Avar Khaganate several times and at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries more intensive Christianization can be observed [9]. In his research, Jozef Cibulka focuses on the presence of Hiberno-Scottish missionaries in the territory of late Great Moravia, based on the discovery of foundations of the church in Modré in Moravia, origin of which dates to the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century [7, p. 199-233]. Among Slovak researchers, the issue of Hiberno-Scottish missions is discussed in detail predominantly by Rastislav Kožiak, who is skeptical about such mission in the Central and Eastern Europe on the basis of sources known so far. He relates the origin of Christianity in this territory with the Frankish hegemonic policy [10].

In *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum*, Salzburg chronicles from 871, there is a reference to construction of Pribina's fortress at river Zala and consecration of the church of Saint Mary Mother of God in Blatnohrad. It also mentions that former Archbishop of Salzburg Adalram (821–836) consecrated a church on the estate of king Pribina north of Danube in the region called Nitrava [6, p. 273]. Since it is not stated when this event had occurred, literature provides several opinions on the date of this consecration. At present, most researchers incline to believe that it happened in year 828 [11]. Richard Marsina deduces that this sacral building is to be credited to Christianization mission, which was active at the main seat of Principality of Nitra. It was also the main seat of archpriest – archpresbyter, who led the Christianization process in Pribina's principality. In his opinion, similar archpresbyterate was supposed to exist in Moravian principality, too. In the light of later developments, after the Moravian prince Mojmir I conquered the Nitra principality, both archpresbyterates continued to pursue their goals and both were supervised by Diocese of Passau [9]. Well-known Moravian archaeologist Luděk Galuška assumes that the organized Church originated in the third decade of the 9<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest and the archpresbyterate originated after the year 829 [12].

There is a reference in the Records of Bishops of Passau that he (818–838) baptized all the Moravians in 831 [13]. However, this event is interpreted variously. According to Vladimír Vavřínek, it might be a proof that in this period the Bishop of Passau undertook the management of the ecclesiastical administration of Great Moravia and he began to carry out the more intense and more organized evangelization [8, p. 44]. On the other hand, Czech historian

Dušan Třeštík considers this information relatively plausible, because the baptism of the Moravian prince and his retinue fits well into that overall situation in Moravia [14]. Moravian archaeologist Luděk Galuška is of the opinion that if the first sovereign of the Moravian Slavs Mojmir I was baptized in 831, then this event concluded disorganized Christianization in Moravia and the new phase, coupled with establishing the initial ecclesiastical organization, began [15].

Originally, the Slavs living in the territory of the medieval Bohemia did not profess the Christian confession. Part of the local upper class converted to Christianity in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Famous written source *Annales Fuldenses* informs us that in 845, East Frankish king Louis II The German (805/806 – 876, East Frankish king since 840/843) accepted and welcomed 14 Czech princes and had all of them, together with their escorts, baptized [13, p. 90]. According to Dušan Třeštík, this event did happen in Regensburg [14, p. 149-150]. In the following four decades, Bohemia is mentioned in relation to a number of armed conflicts between Franks and their eastern neighbours; however, there is no reference to spreading of the new confession.

The tensions between Moravian and Nitra Principalities escalated around the year 830. Moravian prince Mojmir I banished Pribina from Nitra probably in 833. Annexation of Nitra region resulted in formation of so-called Great Moravia [16]. We learn about the situation of Christian faith in this territory in 852, when another synod in Mainz was held. Specifically, we are informed about *rudis adhuc christianitas gentis Maraensium* [5, p. 21]. On the basis of this sentence, the scientific community concludes that the Moravian Christianity was still of “imperfect character” [7, p. 283]. Eventually, some researchers speculate that the common people living outside of central or princely hill-forts still worshiped pagan deities [17].

The information about the existence of Christianity in Great Moravia is provided by biographical works dealing with the lives of Byzantine missionaries Constantine and Methodius. In *The Life of Constantine*, prince Rastislav’s delegation presented the people of Great Moravia as rejecting the paganism and keeping the Christian law to Byzantine emperor [4, p. 78]. *The Life of Methodius* informs us about the arrival of many Christian teachers from Vlachia, Greece and Germany, who presented differing teachings [4, p. 124]. The missionaries from Germany were the clergy from Frankish kingdom. The term Vlachs is to be understood as inhabitants from Istria, Dalmatia and northern Italy. The missionaries from Greece are considered to come from the region of Dalmatian and Istrian coast where the Latin was widely used even though this region was managed by Byzantine Empire [18].

In the Christianization of Great Moravia, the key role was played by Byzantine missionaries Saints Constantine-Cyril and Methodius who came to this territory probably in 863, or in the spring of the following year at the latest. Their arrival was a result of Great Moravian sovereign Rastislav’s request sent to Byzantine Emperor Michael III (842–867). Rastislav desired to establish autonomous ecclesiastical organization independent from the Frankish clergy.

Before the departure from Constantinople, Constantine-Cyril invented the Slavic script – Glagolitic alphabet. The liturgical texts could have been translated into Slavic language (Old Church Slavonic) by means of this alphabet. The Old Church Slavonic was considered the first literary language of Slavs and it became the educational foundation for all Slavic nations. The missionaries spent approximately 40 months in Great Moravia, during which both brothers continuously translated texts and educated students assigned to them by Rastislav. Such occurrence was unprecedented in Europe of that time. Constantine and Methodius could not consecrate their disciples to priests because they lacked the necessary ordination. They departed from the territory of Great Moravia in 867. Pope Adrian II (867–872) approbated the translations of liturgical texts in Slavonic, sanctified them and let the Slavic disciples of Constantine and Methodius to be consecrated to priests in the following year. In Rome, Constantine was highly respected; however, he soon fell ill and deceased on the 14<sup>th</sup> February 869. The written sources provide information that Methodius continued the evangelization activities after his brother's death. Methodius became the papal legate for Slavic nations in 869 and in the same year he was consecrated to (arch)bishop of Pannonia and Great Moravia regions. Year later, however, as he was returning to Great Moravia, East Frankish bishops imprisoned him. Regarding the topic of Church in Great Moravia during the reign of Svatopluk (871–894), written sources provide us with information that pope John VIII (872–882) ordered the Bavarian bishops to free Methodius from prison in 873. Methodius' release from prison is credited to papal legate Paul of Ancona. Svatopluk committed the management of all the temples and clergy to Archbishop Methodius after his return to Great Moravia [19-25]. In his new office and newly accepted mission, Methodius focused on converting the pagans to the Christian faith in the Svatopluk's kingdom at first, and later beyond it as well. The factual knowledge of the Methodius' mission outside the territory of Great Moravia is obtained from preserved hagiographical work *The Life of Methodius*. In this work, a mighty pagan prince living near the river Vistula who refused to surrender to Svatopluk and denied the baptism is described. However, Methodius eventually baptized him [4, p. 134]. Due to this, a part of experts assumes that this event resulted in extensive Christianization on the part of Great Moravia in the southern Poland by Methodius' disciples. Today, however, the opinion that the events have happened otherwise is becoming more prominent among the experts [26]. The archbishop also participated in the evangelization of Bohemia. Some time before 885 (presumably in 884), Borivoj, duke of Bohemia, and his wife Ludmila were baptized, probably by Archbishop Methodius in Moravia. According to *Legenda Christiani*, Borivoj returned to Bohemia together with the priest Kaich for whom he had the Church of Saint Clement built in Levý Hradec [4, p. 171]. Among other references, it is stated that the uprising broke out against the mass conversion to Christianity and Borivoj I had to flee to Svatopluk I. The insurgents chose Strojmir as their leader; however, he had to flee abroad soon, too. When Borivoj I returned to Bohemia, he built the church of the Virgin Mary

in today's Prague Castle [4, p. 174]. On the other hand, Methodius led the doctrinal arguments with the Frankish clergy who continued their missionary work in the territory of his archdiocese. It is stated in *Life of Methodius* that Moravians banished the Frankish priests. It is assumed that this event occurred sometime in the period between 871 and 873. The reason was the fact that Frankish priests did not recognize Slavonic as liturgical language. In June 880, pope John VIII issued papal bull called *Industriae tuae*, from which we know that the leader of western Christendom approbated the further use of Slavonic language in liturgy, supported Methodius in his office of archbishop and made him the head of the clergy in all regions of Svatopluk's kingdom, and the Great Moravian sovereign and his people were formally taken under the protection of the Holy See. Pope approved the establishment of a new diocese in Nitra subordinated to Moravian archdiocese. Pope John VIII consecrated the Frankish priest Wiching as the first bishop of Nitra diocese (he was the bishop in Nitra in 880–893; administrator of Moravian church 885/886 – 893; Bishop of Passau 899). Wiching, as a delegate of Frankish clergy with Svatopluk's support, soon led strong opposition against his superior. Methodius' dispute with the head of Nitra diocese escalated in 884, when archbishop excommunicated Wiching. However, new pope, Stephen V (885–891), who banned the use of Slavonic language in liturgy under the penalty of curse in 885, supported Wiching. Methodius died on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 885, still managing to express his wish to be succeeded by one of his disciples – Gorazd [23, 24].

After Methodius' death, his disciples were persecuted and a part of them ended up in exile [27, 28]. Thus the ecclesiastical administration in Great Moravia was disrupted. The highest office in ecclesiastical hierarchy was then held by Wiching, who, however, left for East Frankish kingdom in 893, where he became for a short time the Bishop of Passau. Bavarian bishops petitioned against the restoration of ecclesiastical administration in Great Moravia in 900. This petition provides information that the new sovereign Mojmir II requested the pope John IX (898–900) to restore the ecclesiastical hierarchy on the territory of Great Moravia in 899. Archbishop John and Bishops Benedict and Daniel came to Moravia and consecrated several members of clergy – one archbishop and three bishops. One of the three consecrated bishops might have been bishop for Nitra diocese. The ecclesiastical administration was once again disrupted after the fall of Great Moravia, officially ceasing to exist [4, p. 123-124].

In 895, Spytihněv I (875?– 915?), son of Borivoj, had yielded to East Frankish sovereign Arnulf (850–899) in Resenburg and the control over his territory was overtaken by the local diocese. It is necessary to add, however, that Christianity thrived during this period under the direct rule of Premyslids, that is, in the central part of Bohemia. The intense evangelization of Bohemia and mass construction of churches continued under the rule of successors of Spytihněv I [1, p. 214-262].

### **3. Conclusions**

Beginning of Christianization in the central Danube territory can be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, however, a more prominent Christianization of this geographic region started to occur at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The observed territory was considered an area where the influences of various cultures met. This fact played a significant role in the Christianization process. The evangelization was carried out mostly by missionaries from Frankish kingdom, but Slavs were evangelized by priests from Istria, Dalmatia and northern Italy to a lesser extent as well. In the Christianization process of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia territories, the key role was played by Byzantine missionaries Saints Constantine-Cyril and Methodius. The initial lower ecclesiastical organization can be presumed present already in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Later on, independent archdiocese managed by Methodius was established for a short time period. The relics of ecclesiastical organization withstood the fall of Great Moravia. In conclusion, it can be said that Christianity in the territory of Czech and Slovak republics took deep roots [29-34].

In many countries, Christianity was established as official state religion what paradoxically led to development of Christian formality and deterioration of the Christianity itself. In a very critical manner, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) emphasized the negatives of Christian formality which is in contrast to New Testament [35-37].

### **Acknowledgement**

This article is supported by a scientific grant agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic VEGA 1/0039/14 and VEGA 1/0468/15.

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