



**“Personal Jesus”: Adam of Bremen and ‘Private’ Churches in Scandinavia  
During the Early Conversion Period**

**“Jesus personal”: Adan de Bremen y las Iglesias ‘privadas’ en la  
Escandinávia durante el inicio del period de las conversiones**

**“Jesus pessoal”: Adão de Bremen e as igrejas ‘privadas’ na Escandinávia  
durante o início do período das conversões**

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**Abstract:** In modern research it is customary to describe the 50s and the 60s of eleventh century as a first phase of the struggle for independence by the local churches in Scandinavia. All of them were officially subordinated to the church of Hamburg-Bremen, even if some of them found themselves under the influence of the Anglo-Saxon church. However, careful reading of Adam of Bremen’s *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum* indicates that in fact the period at the end of the first phase of Christianisation, was a period of personal initiatives by local rulers to control the missions and religious establishments in their lands. These religious initiatives by rulers in 1050s and 1060s turned the control over the local churches into a political tool against unwelcome foreign influences. However, it would be a mistake to try and describe this period as an awakening of a national church movement in Scandinavia for ecclesiastical independence. The kings simply wanted to keep the church subjected only to them.

**Resumo:** Em pesquisas modernas é costume descrever as décadas de 50 e 60 do século XI como a primeira fase da luta pela independência de igrejas locais na Escandinávia. Todas elas eram oficialmente subordinadas a igreja de Hamburgo-Bremen, mesmo que algumas delas estivessem sob a influência da igreja anglo-saxônica. Porém, uma leitura cuidadosa da *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum*

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de Adão de Bremen indica, de fato, que o período do final da primeira fase da cristianização era um período de iniciativas pessoais de governantes locais para controlar as missões e os estabelecimentos religiosos de suas terras. Estas iniciativas religiosas de governantes nos anos 1050s e 1060s tornou o controle sobre igrejas locais em uma ferramenta política contra a não desejada influencia externa. Contudo, seria um erro tentar descrever este período como um despertar de um movimento nacionalista da igreja escandinava por independência clerical. Os reis simplesmente queriam manter a igreja sujeita somente a eles.

**Keywords:** Adam of Bremen – Scandinavia – Local Churches – Hamburg-Bremen – Local Kings.

**Palavras-chave:** Adão de Bremen – Escandinávia – Igrejas locais – Hamburgo-Bremen – Reis locais

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In modern research, it is customary to describe the 50s and the 60s of the eleventh century as the first phase of the struggle for independence by the local churches in Scandinavia. All of them were officially subordinated to the church of Hamburg-Bremen, even if some of them found themselves under the influence of the Anglo-Saxon church. In this paper I will argue that this period at the end of the first phase of Christianisation, was in fact a period of personal initiatives by local rulers to control the missions and religious establishments in their lands. The phenomenon became very common and presented Adam of Bremen with a new issue to deal with. In this paper, I would like to show how he managed to do so, by discussing a few examples from that age.

The first story is the case of King Emund of Sweden and the bishop Osmund. Adam tells us that:

Cum haec ibi essent management, christianissimus rex Sueonum Iacobus migravit and saeculo, et frater eius Emund successit ei [Gamul] pessimus. Nam iste natus erat Olaph's concubine, et cum baptizatus esset, non multum of Nostra curavit religione, habuitque secum quendam episcopum nomine Osmund, acephalum who Dudum Sigafriidus, Nortmannorum episcopus scolis, Bremae docendum



commendavit. Verum is postea beneficiorum oblitus, pro ordinatione Romam accessit.<sup>2</sup>

While these events were taking place there, the most Christian king of the Swedes, James [Anund Jacob, c. 1022-1050], departed this world, and his brother, Emund the Bad [Emund Gamular, also known as the Old, reigned between c. 1050-1060], succeeded him. He was born of concubine by Olaf [Skötkonung] and, although he had been baptized, took little heed of our religion. He had with him a certain bishop named Osmund, of irregular status, whom the bishop of the Norwegians, Sigefrid, had once commended to the school at Bremen for instructions. But later he forgot these kindnesses and went to Rome for consecration.<sup>3</sup>

Then Adam tells us that Osmund was rejected by Rome as well and started wandering from one land to another, until he managed to secure consecration from a Polish archbishop. He then went to Sweden and was consecrated archbishop there;

Sed cum noster archiepiscopus legatos suos ad Gamulan regem dirigeret, invenerunt ibi eundem girovagum Osmund archiepiscopali more crucem prae se ferentem. Audierunt etiam, quod barbaros adhuc neophitos non sana fidei nostrae doctrina corruperit.<sup>4</sup>

But when our archbishop [of Hamburg-Bremen] sent his legates to King Gamular, they found this same vagabond Osmund there, having the cross borne before him after the manner of an archbishop. They also heard that he had by his unsound teaching of our faith corrupted the barbarians, who were still neophytes.

Then Adam tells us that Osmund induced the king and the people to drive the legates away, because they:

quasi non habentes sygillum apostolici. Et illi quidem ibant gaudentes a conspectu concilii, quoniam digni habiti sunt pro nomine Iesu contumeliam pati.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum*, SCHMEIDLER, B. (ed.). *MGH SRG 2*, Hanover: Hahn, 1917, III. 15.

<sup>3</sup> The English translations are taken from: ADAM OF BREMEN. *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, REUTER, T. (ed.), TSCHAN, F. J. (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, III. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



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had not been apostolically accredited. And they [the legates] went from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus.

Meanwhile the Swedes were, according to Adam, pursued by divine vengeance for the expulsion of the German bishop.<sup>6</sup>

It is not really clear who this archbishop Osmund was. There are at least four different candidates for the role. The first is Åsmund Kåresson, a runemaster from Uppland. The second is Osmund of Ely, an Anglo-Saxon bishop. The third is Osmund the Orthodox missionary bishop who was consecrated in Kiev. The fourth approach claims that Osmund represented some new teachings of the Catholic Church, possibly of Cluny. This is not the time or the place for a lengthy discussion of that particular matter. I will try to recap the main points here.

The idea that bishop Osmund was the same man as Åsmund Kåresson was very popular until twenty years ago. Despite the relatively recent research of H. Janson who clearly favours the identification of bishop Osmund with Åsmund Kåresson we must reject this theory.<sup>7</sup> This research, like the previous works, is mainly based upon linguistic analysis of the runestones created by Åsmund. We could discuss in length the runestones carved by him, but as long those runestones are all we have, it is impossible to prove that bishop Osmund and Åsmund Kåresson were the same man.

The second approach is far more acceptable to scholars. Most scholars argue that Osmund was an Anglo-Saxon. They identify him with Osmund of Ely, who, as they claim, was sent to the school of Bremen by Sigefrid of Norway, then consecrated by Stephen I, archbishop of Gnesen between 1038-1058, and then went to work in Sweden.<sup>8</sup> After 1060 Osmund returned to England and died around the year 1070.<sup>9</sup> Even if we accept that Osmund of Ely lived and worked

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> JANSON, Henrik. *Templum Nobilissimum. Adam av Bremen, Uppsalatemplet och Konfliktlinjerna I Europa kring år 1075*. Gothenburg: Historiska institutionen i Goteborg, 1998, pp. 105-76.

<sup>8</sup> SCHMID, Toni. *Den Helige Sigfrid*. Lund: Akademisk avhandling, 1931, pp. 17-19.

<sup>9</sup> *De Osmundo Episcopo*, c.XLII.. In: *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift*. OLSSON, Bernt (ed.). Uppsala; Kyrkohistoriska föreningen, 1969, p.94.



in Sweden, we might doubt whether he was the same Osmund mentioned by Adam.

Adam mentions a man named Osmund three times. The first time is in the passage quoted earlier. There, Adam refers to him as a ‘...bishop...of irregular status’– *acephalum*. However, on the second occasion Adam refers to him as an English bishop, who accepted the authority of Hamburg-Bremen’s archbishop Adalbert<sup>10</sup> and on the third Adam refers to Osmund as a nephew of the Norwegian bishop Sigefrid.<sup>11</sup> When Adam describes the ‘first’ Osmund we can feel his fierce dislike towards this man.

The situation with the last two is quite different; the ‘second’ Osmund who accepted Adalbert’s authority is well accepted by Adam. The ‘third’ Osmund is on Adam’s good side too; after all, bishop Sigefrid is praised by Adam as very educated and virtuous – ‘clarus doctrina et virtutibus’.<sup>12</sup> So why would Adam identify him with ‘acephalum... non sana fidei nostrae doctrina.’? Another point; if Osmund acephalus was indeed a nephew of Sigefrid, there was no reason to send him to school in Bremen. Besides all that, Adam never refers to Osmund acephalum as an Englishman, while Osmund of Ely was without doubt from England. Therefore, it is most likely that we are talking about two different Osmunds. These explanations, however, do not clarify anything regarding the identity of Osmund acephalus.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, some scholars proposed that Osmund was in fact a Byzantine missionary. They read the word ‘acephalus’ as meaning an Orthodox schismatic bishop, who had been consecrated in Polania, a region in vicinity of Kiev, by the local archbishop, mentioned by Adam as ‘Polaniae archiepiscopo’.<sup>13</sup> That hypothesis was rejected by Arne. He proved beyond any doubt that the linguistic interpretation of the words ‘acephalus’ and ‘Polania’ is

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<sup>10</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, III. 77.

<sup>11</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, IV. 34.

<sup>12</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, II. 57.

<sup>13</sup> NERMAN, Birger. *När Sverige Kristnades*. Stockholm: Skoglunds Bokförlag, 1945, pp. 111-14.



wrong and that the historical background provides circumstantial evidence at best.<sup>14</sup>

The supporters of the fourth claim tell us that the conflict between Osmund and Adalward of Bremen was a symptom of the upcoming reform in Western church. The missionaries from Bremen represented the old ways, while Osmund and the Polish archbishop represented the new wave that challenged the authority and methods of churches like Hamburg-Bremen. H. Janson talks about the conflict between the Roman curia and the German Imperial court that supported the anti-pope Honorius II. Archbishop Adalbert was keen supporter of the latter and because of this, his stature was increased. On the other hand, Swedish king Emund created a pact with the rulers of Poland and Rus against the Germans and for that reason he accepted Osmund, who was unfavourable to Bremen.<sup>15</sup> This claim is opposed by those who point out that the *Gesta* itself implies that Osmund was a self-declared archbishop and was not trying to conceal the fact, but rather uses the verb '*jactare*'- to boast about something.

All four theories have distinctive disadvantages. It is impossible to identify Osmund using any of them. Recently, Russian scholar Vladimir Rybakov proposed another solution; he claims that Osmund was of Scandinavian origin. He must have been very talented and Archbishop Sigefried sent him to Bremen to complete his education. After that Osmund came to Sweden and started to cooperate with the King Emund who fought to make his church independent. It was impossible, of course, to consecrate Osmund in Bremen, so he was sent to Rome. After the failure there, Osmund was finally consecrated by the archbishop of Poland, who desired to participate in missionary work in Scandinavia. Osmund returned to Sweden and proclaimed himself as archbishop. The young and unstable Swedish church offers no resistance. The expulsion of the German delegates was a symbolic act of independence and it is unsurprising that it found no support from Adam of Bremen.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ARNE, Ture Johnsson. 'Biskop Osmund'. In: *Formännan, Journal of Swedish Antiquarian Research*, 42, 1947, pp. 54-56 at p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> JANSON. *Templum Nobilissimum*, pp. 133-35, 150.

<sup>16</sup> RYBAKOV, Vladimir. 'A Discussion of Bishop Osmund'. In: *Srednie Veka*, 63, 2002, pp. 43-67.



Later in the same chapter, Adam tells us that the most prominent member of the Hamburg-Bremen delegation was the elder Adalward. In that time, he was a dean of the Bremen monastery, but later on he became a bishop of Öster and of Västergötland in Sweden. Adam portrays Adalward in a positive light, but does not provide us with more information regarding him. Adam probably mentioned him as a sign of political victory for Hamburg-Bremen, which eventually succeeded in appointing this man to be a head of the Swedish church.<sup>17</sup>

Adam informs us that the German delegation in Sweden was nevertheless well received by the future King Stenkil of Västergötland. Stenkil, according to Adam, felt compassion for the brethren, offered them gifts and conveyed them over the Swedish mountains to the most saintly queen Gunhild.<sup>18</sup> Gunhild was married to the Danish King Svein Estridsen. We are told that Gunhild was a close relative of Svein and the latter was urged by Archbishop of HB and the Pope to divorce her. Svein refused and threatened to ravage and destroy the whole diocese of Hamburg. After long diplomatic efforts Svein was convinced to back down, but;

sed mox ut consobrinam a se dimisit, alias itemque alias uxores et concubinas assumpsit.<sup>19</sup>

soon after he had put aside his cousin he took himself other wives and concubines, and again still others.

Svein was one of the most important sources for Adam and he must have given Adam a very one-sided version of events. His ex-wife Gunhild must have left the court and, like many other formerly married women, lived a chaste and very Christian life. She probably was not very happy about her marriage to Svein either and must have supported the efforts of Hamburg-Bremen to achieve a bill of divorce.

Stenkil is a figure of further interest in the *Gesta*. He was a ruler of the lands of Västergötland and replaced his uncle on the Swedish throne around the year 1060. His favourable attitude towards Hamburg-Bremen did not change even

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<sup>17</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, III. 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, III. 12.



then. Moreover, it seems he was the one who appointed Adalward of Bremen as his bishop, fixed his see in Sigtuna, and supported his efforts of teaching and preaching.<sup>20</sup> We can assume that Stenkil's kindness for Bremen's expelled delegation was not casual, but rather a symptom of a long term plan for ruling after King Emund's death. We do not possess enough knowledge to discuss the internal intrigues of the Swedish court, but we can assume that Stenkil wanted to replace his uncle's men with his own. Osmund was not Stenkil's favourite man for the job. Stenkil chose to work with Bremen and to appoint a man he had already met. In fact, perhaps the German delegation decided to go and meet Stenkil as a part of an already deliberated strategy, in the event that the mission to Emund failed.

From that story we can see how Adam makes us understand who is on his good side and who is not. The missionary kings and bishops are divided by him into two groups; the good ones, whose teaching is flourishing, their labour is blessed and who are supported by the church of Hamburg-Bremen, and the bad ones, whose teaching is wrong, who make the local population relapse back into paganism, and who do not recognise Hamburg-Bremen's authority. Mostly they are of Anglo-Saxon descent or their pupils. However, we also see that after the official conversion to Christianity, the local rulers in Scandinavia were choosing their own churchmen. When a king died or was killed, his successor would put his own men in charge of the church, just as he would place his own men to rule the lands of his realm.

Let us examine another case from Norway. Adam tells us that;

rex Haraldus crudelitate sua omnes tyrannorum excessit furores. Multae ecclesiae per illum virum dirutae, multi christiani ab illo per supplicia sunt necati... Itaque multis imperans nationibus, propter avaritiam et crudelitatem suam omnibus erat invisus . Serviebat etiam maleficis artibus, non attendens miser, quod sanctissimus germanus eius talia monstra eradicavit a regno, pro amplectenda norma christianitatis certans usque ad sanguinem... Pro quibus causis archiepiscopus zelo Dei tactus, legatos suos direxit ad eundem regem, tyrannicas praesumptiones eius litteris increpans, spetialiter vero admonens de oblationibus, quas non liceret in usum cedere laicorum, et de episcopis suis, quos in Gallia vel in Anglia contra fas

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<sup>20</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, III. 14, IV. 26.





ordinare fecerat se contempto, per quem auctoritate sedis apostolicae deberent iuste ordinari.<sup>21</sup>

King Harold [Harald Hardrada. reigned 1046-1066] surpassed all the madness of tyrants in his savage wildness. Many churches were destroyed by that man; many Christians were tortured to death by him... And so, he ruled over many nations, he was odious to all on account of his greed and cruelty. He also gave himself up to magic arts and, wretched man that he was, did not heed the fact that his most saintly brother [St. Olav] had eradicated such illusions from the realm and striven even unto death for the adoption of the precepts of Christianity... For these reasons the archbishop [Adalbert of Hamburg-Bremen], inflamed with zeal for God, sent his legates to the king, rebuking him by letter for his tyrannical presumption. In particular, however, did the prelate reprimand him about the offerings, which it was not lawful to appropriate to the use of laymen, and about the bishops whom he [Harald] had unlawfully consecrated in Gaul or in England, in contempt of the archbishop himself, who by authority of the Apostolic See should rightly have consecrated them.

According to Adam, Harald was so enraged by these delegates, that he threw them out Norway and declared that there was no other ecclesiastical authority besides him. It seems that Harald was supported in the latest claim by his bishops, since the following letter by Pope Alexander II was addressed to them as well. In this letter the Pope commanded Harald to accept the legate of Hamburg-Bremen.<sup>22</sup> Harald ignored the demand.

The demonisation of Harald is not surprising. Adam used this method of criticism on many occasions, when rulers refused to submit themselves to Bremen's authority. The best example of this treatment could be Olav Trygvasson. He was a missionary king of Norway at the end of the tenth century, who chose to work with the Anglo-Saxon church and not with Hamburg-Bremen. For that Adam referred to him as a heathen barbarian, who practiced witchcraft and persecuted Christians.<sup>23</sup> Just like Olav, Harald Hardrada clearly decided to work with bishops of his own choosing and during his reign ignored the churches of Hamburg-Bremen, Rome, and Denmark. As a strong sovereign, who was involved in many conflicts, Harald had many complicated political

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<sup>21</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, III. 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, II. 37.



reasons to keep his own church free from foreign influence. Adam's claim that he declared himself as the highest ecclesiastical authority in Norway, could in fact be true.

The following chapter emphasises Adam's message to Scandinavian kings.<sup>24</sup> He tells us that around the years 1052 or 1053, archbishop Adalbert wanted to conciliate the Danish king Svein, after making him repudiate his cousin Gunhild. Adalbert must have understood the importance of an alliance with the Danes, given the difficulties he had in Norway and Sweden. Adam also tells us, that after pacifying Svein, Adalbert thought it would be easier to approach and deal with the real matters he had in Denmark. Adalbert and Svein met in Schleswig and;

ubi facile notus et reconciliatus superbo regi, muneribus atque conviviis certavit  
archiepiscopalem potentiam regalibus anteferre divitiis.<sup>25</sup>

there he [Adalbert] easily became acquainted and reconciled with the proud king  
and by gifts and banquets endeavored to put the archiepiscopal power above royal  
wealth.

Ecclesiastical power was therefore a key concern in this visit for both Adalbert and Adam. Adam claims that this visit was a success and that Adalbert achieved everything he desired, and that King Svein started to cooperate with Hamburg-Bremen and to support its missions in the North. It is no surprise that Harald Hardrada saw the Danish as his rivalries in ecclesiastical matters as well.

In this chapter, Adam clearly depicts Svein as a true Christian king; he forgives the offence made to him, he is kind to the archbishop Adalbert and helps him by supporting his cause. The political situation in Denmark was very different from that in Sweden and Norway. Geographical proximity to Germany and involvement in English matters often reflected on political decisions, as well ecclesiastical matters. Unlike Emund and Harald, Svein could not afford to reject Bremen's claims this time. Otherwise, he might find himself in complete political isolation. However, very soon the Danish church started her own struggle for independence from Hamburg-Bremen, by supporting Gregory VII in his conflict with Henry IV.

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<sup>24</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, III. 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



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From the example of the first bishop of Iceland, we learn that approaching Hamburg-Bremen for assistance could be a good political solution, as we learn from the story about Islif, the first bishop of Iceland [consecrated in 1055 in Bremen]. He was a son of the legendary Gizzur Hvít, one of the Icelanders who introduced Christianity to Iceland around the year 1000. Islef encountered strong competition from foreign missionaries in Iceland and decided to turn to Adalbert for help.<sup>26</sup> In this case, we can see how the use of a foreign, remote influence could help to solve problems at home. In Islef's case, the submission to Hamburg-Bremen probably had no practical consequences; however, the prestige of a lawful patron gave Islef a new weapon to fight off the intruders.

The religious initiatives of the Scandinavian rulers in the 1050s and 60s turned the control over local churches into a political tool. However, it would be a mistake to try and describe this period as an awakening of a national church movement in Scandinavia for ecclesiastical independence. The kings simply wanted to keep the church subjected only to them.

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<sup>26</sup> ADAM OF BREMEN. *Gesta*, II. 57, III. 76, IV. 36.