

SUMMARY

Helmold's Chronica Slavorum as a Source for the History of Denmark, the Wends, and Northern Germany

Helmold's *Chronica Slavorum*, composed over several years and probably finished no later than 1171, is undoubtedly a most valuable piece of source material regarding Denmark's nearest neighbours to the south, Holstein, Wagria and Wendland – and all the more so because it is the only available source regarding a large part of the subject matter dealt with on its pages. However, Helmold's indisputable aptitude for rendering characters and events has had an almost hypnotic effect on especially German researchers who largely contented themselves with passing his version on, in neglect of source criticism. Early in the 20th century, Curt Weibull, a renowned Swedish historian, acknowledged Helmold's importance for understanding the history of Denmark in the 12th century, yet abstained from analysing the text thoroughly. Over the following years Danish historians have made good use of Helmold's Chronicle on a number of occasions. Still, they have given more attention to individual chapters and scattered pieces of information than to getting a grasp of its general quality in terms of composition, chronology and narrative flow, not to speak of the fundamental features of its content. The present article is a survey of the Chronicle, seeking to remedy such inadequacies and lacunae. Also, it was written in order to evaluate the enunciative power of the Chronicle and its value as a source of information regarding some of the recurrent themes.

On a number of important points, there is good reason to attribute a high degree of trustworthiness to the Chronicle in its representation of the history of Denmark c. 1130-1156/57 and the political power configuration in Northern Germany, particularly from 1148 until 1171. This is due to the fact that Helmold, when seeking out his sources, was not susceptible to influence from »authoritative« historiographies sponsored by the Danish monarchy, such as the hagiographies of Knud Lavard, Saxo Grammaticus, and the *Knýtlinga Saga*. Thus, Helmold represents an independent tradition in his description of the activities of Knud Lavard in Slavonic lands. Furthermore, he is alone in emphasizing Knud's alliance with and vassalage to the German crown. His version of the Danish civil war 1146-1157 conveys independent information on events leading up to and including the meeting of the Council of the Realm in the spring of 1157 when Denmark was divided between Sven, Knud and Valdemar; for the following period Helmold and the Danish sources largely coincide. As for later events, for instance the conquest of Rügen Island, a comparison of Helmold's depiction with Saxo's is useful for assessing the accuracy of the latter.