WIHODA, Martin. *THE MAKING OF MEDIEVAL CENTRAL EUROPE. POWER AND POLITICAL PREREQUISITES FOR THE FIRST WESTERNIZATION, 791–1122.* Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Lexington Books, 2024, 380 p.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/histcaso.2025.73.3.9

The medieval formation of East-Central Europe has long captured the interest of historians. Numerous scholars have observed that from the end of the 8th century, the regions situated between the Elbe, Vistula, and Danube rivers—and even areas beyond—were shaped by shared historical processes. These were affected by the absence of a Roman imperial legacy and the unique position of these regions as "the Other" or "the New Europeans," as termed by Oskar Halecki. One of the key features of the Central European Middle Ages was the evolving relationship with the Latin West—specifically with the Carolingian realms and later Holy Roman Empire, as well as with the Holy See. The early medieval polities of the Árpáds, Přemyslids, and Piasts, and their complex interactions with the German-speaking world and the papacy, constitute the central theme of a recent book by the Moravian historian Martin Wihoda.

Although written primarily for an audience outside of Central Europe, the book is by no means modest in its ambition. Wihoda places particular emphasis on the political developments that led to the emergence of the East-Central European monarchies of Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland. At the same time, he also touches upon the early political evolution of the Polabian Slavs, the Carantanians, and the Bavarian Eastern March (later Marcha Austriae). This broad thematic scope leads the author to adopt a narrative political history as his principal analytical framework. Through this "traditional" approach, he aims to explain the major socio-political shifts among local elites, rulers, and ecclesiastical institutions as they increasingly oriented themselves toward Western political and cultural norms.

As the title of his book *The Making of Medieval Central Europe: Power and Political Prerequisites for the First Westernization, 791–1122* suggests, Wihoda is primarily concerned with the processes that shaped the first phase of Central Europe's "Europeanization" or "Westernization" between the 9th and 12th centuries. This topic, while previously explored by scholars such as Jenő Szűcs, Karol Modzelewski, and František Dvorník, remains a fertile field of inquiry. In recent decades, synthetic overviews of the medieval histories of individual Central European regions (and also of East-Central Europe as a particular area) have appeared in English, German, and French, alongside ongoing local scholarship in Slavic and Hungarian academic traditions. Nevertheless, Wihoda's work brings a fresh perspective to the broader historiographical debates, particularly through its focus on the conditions and power mechanisms of Westernization—understood here as processes of acculturation of the elites and socio-political integration of their domains into the sphere of Latin Christendom.

In the introduction, Wihoda offers an insightful examination and contextualization of the historiography surrounding the construction of Central Europe as a distinct region. He begins by discussing terminological nuances in scholarly discourse—from Mitteleuropa and *Ostmitteleuropa* to *Zwischeneuropa*—before turning to earlier historiographical

debates, such as the concept of the "Central European Model," which he explores further in Chapter 4. He then shifts to more recent scholarly discussions, particularly those that frame Central Europe in terms of its peripheral or semi-peripheral status in relation to the West. Subsequently, he pays special attention to the presentation of relevant sources and their explanatory possibilities.

Wihoda proposes yet another perspective on the formation of (medieval) Central Europe, emphasizing the role of political adaptation to the West and the acculturative transfer of Western models. He also highlights the importance of a cautious and reflective reading of narrative sources, advocating for a sensitive approach to medieval textual —and, where relevant, archaeological—evidence. Such an approach, he argues, must remain aware of the inherent limitations of interpretation and the epistemological boundaries of historical knowledge. In this way, Wihoda makes clear to the reader that his book does not claim to provide definitive answers. Rather, it represents what he calls *"an honest, source-based attempt to reflect on the prerequisites that gave rise to a mentally Westernized medieval Central Europe"* (p. 22).

The first chapter, titled *Avar Heritage*, focuses on the political dynamics of the Middle Danube region and the northern parts of Central Europe during the 9th century. Wihoda begins his interpretation with the Frankish campaigns of Charlemagne and his sons against the Avars in the Carpathian Basin. He skillfully constructs his historical narrative on the basis of older and current research into Slavic-Avar-Bavarian relations. The chapter explores the Frankish policy of expansionism and its accompanying political rhetoric towards "barbarians," grounded in the concept of *bellum iustum*—a just war—and framed as a civilizing and Christianizing mission directed at infidels to be converted under the rule of Charlemagne and his successors. Wihoda devotes particular attention to the polity known as Great Moravia (or the Moravian Principality), examining the ambiguous ties of the Mojmirid dynasty to Frankish rulers on one hand, and to the Bavarian aristocracy on the other. His interpretation of the internal structure and supra-regional role of the Moravian Principality is more moderate and critical in comparison to previous (national) narratives that have exaggerated the significance of Moravian Slavs for the broader Central European context. Nonetheless, the hereditary domain of the Mojmirids—distinct from tributary or subordinate areas—is reasonably identified as the primary Slavic region in the Middle Danube basin through which Western models, particularly from the Frankish and Bavarian realms, were adopted. Importantly, Wihoda also highlights other regions such as Carantania, the Eastern March, Bohemia, and the territories of the Polabian Slavs to illustrate the diverse and complex degrees of interaction with the Frankish realm.

The second chapter turns to what Wihoda terms the *Ottonian Foundation* of the 10th century. As in the previous chapter, he surveys various Central European Slavic regions and the evolution of their elites' relationships with the Empire, which had undergone a dynastic shift in 911. He provides a detailed account of the political changes that resulted in the replacement of the East Frankish Carolingians by the Ottonian and later by the Salian dynasty. The Ottonians, originally from Saxony, succeeded in asserting their authority over Bavaria during the 10th century, eventually extending imperial influence to the eastern periphery. Wihoda's narrative goes beyond the pivotal Battle of Lechfeld

(955)—which marked the end of Magyar raids and their settlement in the Carpathian Basin—to encompass also the political developments of the 11th century. He offers a separate analysis of the establishment of the Přemyslid and Piast domains, paying particular attention to the policies of Otto III toward the Slavs. He concludes that, by the symbolic year 1000, the political map of Central Europe began to take shape with a sense of "proud individuality" (p. 109), signifying the formation of monarchical institutions and ecclesiastical structures modeled on Western forms of governance. However, Wihoda also notes that the distinct social realities of the Central European milieu—characterized by less hierarchical and more horizontally organized Slavic and Magyar societies—made it impossible to adopt the Carolingian-Ottonian political and cultural models in their entirety. In the Central European polities, one can observe, for example, the remarkably strong position of local elites in relation to rulers (whether princes or early kings).

The third chapter, *The First Westernization*, is the longest and most detailed section of the publication. Here, Wihoda traces the multifaceted processes of adopting and adapting Western political models and norms of governance. Spanning the 9th to 11th centuries, he uses a range of Central European regions to examine phenomena associated with the Christianization of local societies. These include baptism, the emergence of a Slavic liturgy, the establishment of bishoprics, and evolving relationships with the papal curia. Wihoda introduces the concept of *Small Empires* to identify and analyze the shared characteristics of four ruling dynasties—the Mojmirids, Přemyslids, Piasts, and Árpáds. These families, through the strategic adoption of Western forms of governance and modes of representing power, were able to establish and consolidate their political domains. Yet Wihoda also emphasizes that this process was not driven solely by ideological or religious motivations. Practical constraints—particularly economic pressures such as declining princely revenues during times of crisis—frequently hindered the rapid and uniform adoption of new values and institutional models. By balancing attention to ideological inspiration with a clear-eyed view of material limitations, Wihoda presents a nuanced interpretation of the formative centuries of Central European political development within the Latin-Christian context.

Chapters 4 and 5, metaphorically titled *Time of Trials* and *Bad Western Europeans?*, bring Wihoda's interpretation to its conclusion by addressing some of the most frequently debated topics in current medieval studies—including the role of the slave trade and the so-called "Central European model" of the medieval state. In both cases, he enriches existing scholarship with thought-provoking reflections and nuanced reinterpretations. Drawing on structural analogies, Wihoda identifies the inherent limitations—or structural shortcomings—of the early medieval Central European monarchies ruled by the Árpád, Přemyslid, and Piast dynasties. He devotes particular attention to the succession crises that unfolded in the first half of the 11th century following the deaths of these dynasties' respective "founding fathers." In this context, he highlights the crucial stabilizing roles of what he calls the "Fathers-Restorers": in Bohemia, Oldřich and Břetislav; in Poland, Casimir the Restorer and Bolesław the Bold; and in Hungary, Saint Ladislaus. The final chapter also offers an original perspective on the contributions of major ecclesiastical figures of Central European significance, such as Saint Adalbert (Vojtěch) and the Olomouc Bishop Henry Zdík, the latter of whom sought to establish a new symbolic Jerusalem

within the region. Additionally, Wihoda situates Central European developments within the broader framework of papal politics during the pontificate of Gregory VII. In doing so, he sheds new light on the implications of the Investiture Controversy, revealing how these broader imperial-papal tensions had a tangible and lasting impact on the shaping of Central European political and ecclesiastical structures.

From the perspective of a reader interested in the medieval formation of East-Central Europe, there is little to criticize in Wihoda's book. It is true that the author adheres to a predominantly "positivist" narrative methodology, rather than engaging in an in-depth analytical examination of selected phenomena and processes. Nevertheless, even through his political-historical approach, Wihoda clearly and convincingly demonstrates the key phenomena in which the main features of "Westernization" can be observed. Looking ahead, his historical narrative on the formation of Central Europe could serve as a valuable framework for further analytical research. Promising avenues include, for instance, the question of continuity versus discontinuity in Moravian ecclesiastical structures and Christian practice during the 10th century, or the ideological and political frameworks employed by the authors of the three major "national" chronicles from the High Middle Ages—Cosmas of Prague, Anonymus (Master P.) and Gallus Anonymus.

In any case, Wihoda demonstrates not only an impressive knowledge of contemporary historiography about various Central European contexts, but also a careful and thoughtful interpretation of well-known medieval sources. Although the English translation inevitably sacrifices some of the linguistic nuance and stylistic distinctiveness characteristic of Wihoda's original Czech prose, the book remains highly readable. Its wide thematic and geographic scope is handled with clarity, and its conclusions are presented in a coherent and skillfully constructed form. The publication represents a valuable and original contribution to the historiography of the origins and particularities of East-Central Europe. It deserves the attention not only of Anglo-American and Western readers, but also of Central European scholars and those seeking a deeper understanding of their own region's medieval past.

Matej Harvát, PhD.
(Historický ústav SAV, v. v. i. / Institute of History of SAS, Bratislava)