



**Olaus Magnus, *Description des Peuples du Nord: Rome 1555*, ed. and transl. Jean-Baptiste Brunet-Jailly, 3 vols (Travaux d'humanisme et Renaissance), Geneva: Droz, 2128, pp. 2128, ISBN: 9782251071053, 148.76€**

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The beginning of the sixteenth century in Sweden was a time of troubles. War against the Danes, riots, rivalry and bloodbaths – until the final victory of King Gustav Vasa, the founder of the country's hereditary monarchy. These events were taking place against the background of the increasing propagation of Lutheranism, which became the official religion of the Swedish kingdom in 1527. The religious conflicts forced several Catholic dignitaries to flee the country. Among them was a young priest Olaus Magnus (1490–1557). In 1526, he arrived in Danzig (today's Gdansk), where he joined his elder brother, Johannes (1488–1554), the penultimate Catholic archbishop of Sweden. Olaus would be the last.

During the brothers' exile, first in Poland, and then Italy, which became their new homeland, Olaus worked on a description of Northern regions. His interest was not purely intellectual: the influence of Protestant doctrine continued to grow there; and by describing the wealth and beauty of these regions, he wished to encourage the papacy's efforts to bring them back to the Roman church.

To begin with, he elaborated a map, the famous *Carta marina* (1539), printed in Venice – of which only two copies are known today – that for the first time offered an adequate representation of the Nordic countries. It was followed by *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555), printed in Rome, a monumental work of 815 pages, divided into 178 chapters dealing with nature, climate, history, customs, folk belief and so on. The volume was handsomely illustrated: each chapter was introduced by a skilful engraving, and the sum of these images (with high probability due to Olaus himself) formed a sort of a fascinating 'comic strip' several centuries before the genre first emerged.

In order to stress the uniqueness of the Nordic regions, but certainly also to impress the European scholars for whom his book was intended, Olaus Magnus cited numerous quotations and paraphrases from ancient and medieval writers. About 30% of his text consists of borrowed erudition, whereas the remaining 70%

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is a mine of highly original material, which places his *Historia* among the principal sources of information about sixteenth-century Scandinavia.

Thanks to its numerous translations, the book quickly became a best-seller. However, the translated text was not that of the original edition. In 1558, three years after its publication (and a year after the author's death), a Dutch author called Cornelius Scribonius (1482–1558) published an abridged version of the book in Antwerp. A volume of 191 octavo pages, containing illustrations from the original edition, contributed largely to the spreading of *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* in Europe. It was this version that was translated into French (1561), Italian (1561), Dutch (1562), German (1567) and English (1658). At the same time, the Latin version was regularly reprinted. Thus, within a century, more than twenty different editions had been produced.

Scribonius's version offers a complete revision of the initial text. He kept (in a condensed form) half of the chapters, those that deal with Nordic countries, whereas the paraphrases and quotations of other authors were removed.

Olaus Magnus would certainly not have appreciated the 'weight-loss programme' to which his work was submitted, and still less the fact that it had been done by a 'heretic'. Indeed, Cornelius Scribonius, a humanist poet, friend of Erasmus and of Dürer, was on rather bad terms with the ecclesiastical authorities; he was even forced to burn his own writings publicly in Brussels in 1523. Still his religious opinions did not prevent him from undertaking the tremendous task of remodelling the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (whose author was a notorious adversary of the Lutherans) and thus contributing to its diffusion.

Strange as it may seem, it took four centuries for the book to be translated into Swedish. This task, performed by a team of experts, resulted in a lavish edition in five volumes, under the title *Historia om de nordiska folken* (1909–1951). The head of the project was the ethnologist and folklorist John Granlund, author of the afterword, the commentaries and a number of highly useful indexes. This edition was extensively used during the preparation of the English translation: *Description of the Northern Peoples, Rome 1555* (1996–1998) under the supervision of P. G. Foote. The recent Italian and French translations (2001 and 2004, respectively) were much less ambitious, selecting extracts corresponding to about one-third of the original.

The present edition is the third in French, following those of 1561 and 2004, but the first unabridged one. It comprises three volumes: the first contains Parts I–XI, the second Parts XII–XX of the original, while the third takes over and adapts the editorial part of Granlund's Swedish edition, as well as updating the bibliography, which was over 70 years old. This volume even contains a fold-out reproduction of *Carta marina*, a treasure of Renaissance cartography.