"Things to Be Marveled at Rather than Examined": Olaus Magnus and "A Description of the Northern Peoples"

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"Things to be marveled at rather than examined": Olaus Magnus and *A Description of the Northern Peoples*

BY BARBARA SJOHOLM

He was the first person in history to take on the subject of snowflakes. Long in exile from his home in Sweden, this Catholic ecclesiastic sat in the convent of St. Birgitta in Rome, in the middle of the sixteenth century, and wrote, "it seems more a matter for amazement than enquiry why and how so many shapes and forms, which elude the skill of any artist you choose to name, are so suddenly stamped upon such soft, tiny objects."

Did Olaus Magnus mean us to shiver as we read his book, *A Description of the Northern Peoples*? Was he shivering himself as he wrote:

> The huge power which the frost, or cold, possesses in the North, as if this were its own native region, can be demonstrated in many ways, through the sense of feeling rather than by authorities; for its forceful blight is felt by a great number of creatures who go in fear of it even though they live many thousands of furloughs away from that region; and, when it steals even slightly upon them, they shrink their bodies and limbs, and shudder violently. What would they not do where cold itself holds sway by its own strength and through the laws of Nature? Since I was born and lived subject to this cold, even at a latitude of about 86 degrees, I think that I am capable of proving this and, in

many succeeding chapters, of showing somewhat more plainly than all those others who write from uncertain conjecture how savage and fearsome it is. It extends progressively, as rays do, from the centre and at last over the whole world, in such a way that all peoples among whom it penetrates bear witness to the distressing effects of its harshness.

Growing up in Sweden, south even of Stockholm, he must have known Scandinavia's balmy spring days, its luscious summers, but in Renaissance Rome, sitting at a heavily carved table in the rooms he's turned into a print shop in the convent, dedicated to the lone Swedish saint, Olaus Magnus seems to recall only the cold, and how cold is mitigated by furs, fires, and warm drink. It's almost always winter in his book.

His audience was the civilized world. While many readers lived on the shores of the Mediterranean, others, in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, even Italy, must surely have experienced frosts and snows in season, but Olaus Magnus seems determined to prove that the chill of the northern lands is a thing apart. He paraphrases Aristotle and Augustine on meteorology and the whys of weather change, but once he's established that warming and cooling vapors are the cause, with approval from on high ("All this takes place at the secret commands of God..."), it's still left to explore the effects of cold:

Cold burns the eyes of animals and stiffens their hairs.
Cold causes the pelts of all animals to be thicker and handsomer.
Cold allows fish to be kept fresh for five or six months without salt.
Cold causes copper, glass and earthenware vessels to break.
Cold allows games and most delightful shows to be held on the ice.
Cold opens up all pathless territories to travelers and hunters.
Cold makes the skin peel off one's lips, fingers, and nostrils, if they touch iron.
Cold causes inns to be set up, markets to be held, and wars to take place on frozen waters.
Cold does not permit African negroes taken in war, or arriving in some other way, to live for very long
Cold causes coughs, colds, and similar ailments.

One is struck immediately, on reading Olaus Magnus's treatise, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus (A Description of the Northern Peoples,* literally *the People Under the Seven Stars, or Big Dipper),* by the air of calm authority with which he invests both reasonable fact and wildest myth. Like the medieval encyclopedists who assiduously gathered information before him, nothing is too small for Magnus's attention; from ants to the conduct of kings, from snowflakes to sieges, he catalogues the geography, biology, meteorology, social history, and

folklore of the North. Much is made of the arts of war, especially how to fight in ice and snow, how to keep goats in sieges and throw fire and snowballs from the battlements, how to cross frozen rivers and then cut the ice in such a way that your pursuing enemies fall through. But there is a great deal of practical instruction as well, mixed with moralizing and simple curiosity. Book 13, for instance, is titled "On Agriculture and the Food People Eat." It begins soberly enough with "On manuring the fields," and proceeds through harvesting, threshing, and milling to chapters on baking and brewing. The chapters about beer, wine, and mead are numerous; here Magnus begins to wander. Suddenly we're learning about how Ethiopians brewed beer and how King Hunding voluntarily drowned in mead. This leads to a stern chapter, "On the imprudent familiarity of princes with companions or servants," and more about drunkards, followed by a short chapter, "On maskers or mummers," which fulminates against people dressing up. As if he realizes he's forgotten himself, the next chapter returns to food, "On the decocting of salt," and from salt to butter, and butter to cheese are easy steps. But the mummers and maskers, which somehow became tangled in Olaus Magnus's mind with foreign artists who painted semi-nude women, leads to a burst of several chapters on painting at the end of Book 13. For there *are* standards in art, especially when the paintings are of the Virgin Mary, which can "recall evil-doers from the path of wickedness."

Like Pliny the Elder, whose *Natural History* was rediscovered by the scholars of the Renaissance, Olaus Magnus desired to do more than list; he had a unifying mind that sought (though some of his associative thought may seem odd to us today) to impose order on a subject, to bring coherency to everything he knew and had read and had heard about the vast unknown northern countries. To study the *Historia* is to encounter a sensibility that could record, delight in, scorn, and bear sad witness to his facts. He could go from a sober description of minting money to a poetic summary of how people performed "activities by moonlight" using "the fat of sea beasts." From the mysterious behavior of bees to stories of pygmies fighting cranes in Greenland, the *Historia* is packed with curiosities, and like Pliny, Olaus Magnus's scientific curiosity sometimes takes a back seat to simple amazement. Pliny claimed that his work dealt with 20,000 matters of importance. One of the marginalia in the *Historia* reads: *Things to be marveled at rather than examined.* You may record it but you cannot explain it. Wonder is the sea his facts floated in.

His personality and his personal history permeate the book. Olaus Magnus hated traitors, usurpers, all Lutherans, and Danes in general, and lost no opportunity to berate the Kingdom of Denmark, that "narrow piece of tiny land" with "unsurfeited pretensions to grandeur." Coldly patronizing, he titled one chapter "Why Danish kings seek to gain neighbouring realms and, after these have been acquired, very soon lose them." Yet, with the eloquence of the eye-witness he also described a massacre in Stockholm, the Bloodbath of 1520 instigated by the Danish King: "Inasmuch as my eyes, bathed in tears, saw everything, I should have to compose a long and terrifying story if I wished to relate one by one the details of this catastrophe, in other words, how things human and divine were turned upside down, no promises kept, no regard for religion, everything in havoc through heedless sacrilege, everywhere groaning, slaughter and death, escape nowhere permitted nor among those active swords and ferocious men any chance to live."

Olaus Magnus was the first travel writer to describe Arctic Scandinavia. First published in Latin in 1555 and then available in abridgements in numerous languages, the *Historia* informed and misinformed many generations about the nature of the northern countries. Milton, Edmund Spenser, Sir Thomas Browne, Thomas Nashe, and Robert Burton all knew the work and made reference to it in their writing. Less happily, Olaus Magnus's stories about witchcraft, dragons, and sea monsters in the North—more ingeniously than maliciously recorded—helped feed the appetite for demonology that was growing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries across Europe. His account of the North held sway for decades; it's still lively and readable today, especially in the new English translation. It's possible to trace, in this work composed of borrowings from classical writers, second-hand tales from sailors and fur traders, and Olaus's own observations and musings, the delineations of a fantasy North that would feed the imaginations of travelers and poets for some centuries to come.

Olaus Magnus was born in Linköping, Sweden, in 1490, the son of a burgher. He and his brothers were educated at cathedral schools, and three of them became priests. He received a degree from the University of Rostock in Germany and returned to Sweden in 1519. A papal legate arrived from Rome and sent Olaus further north to act as a collector of funds for the Pope. For eighteen months Olaus traveled through a wild,

forested, riverine country, heading west over the mountains between Sweden and Norway to Trondheim, the seat of Catholic power in Norway. There, the bishop of Nidaros Cathedral likely filled him in on the fury of the Maelstrom, just off the Norwegian coast in the Lofoten Islands, and of Sami life and customs on the wide plains of the interior further north. They may have commiserated too about the growing threat of the Reformation, so soon to deprive Olaus Magnus of his livelihood and his country. By 1523 the new Swedish king, Gustav Vasa, found the new ideas emanating from Northern Europe more than palatable; in converting his country to Lutheranism, Gustav Vasa could become head of the church, and the rich holdings of the Catholic church would belong to the Swedish state.

Olaus Magnus's self-imposed exile was in the future. In the years 1519–21 he was a traveler, a young man making his way from Sweden to Norway and back again to Sweden, to Torneå, the great market town of the north, near the border of present-day Sweden and Finland, where Muscovites, Germans, Sami, Swedes, and Finns came together to trade wolf and fox furs for silver spoons, dried salmon for silk. Although, as quoted above in the *Historia,* Olaus Magnus spoke dramatically of "being subject to this cold, even at a latitude of 86 degrees," in reality he went north only as far as Pello, at 67 degrees just over the Arctic Circle. He never saw the northwestern coasts of Norway, much less the coastline bordering the Barents Sea. Nevertheless, Olaus Magnus saw enough to ignite his imagination and to form impressions of everything that later travelers would also note about the North: the cold, the extremes of light and dark, the means of transportation by boat and reindeer, the markets of the nomad Sami and the fur merchants.

The *Historia* was originally meant to be a short commentary on Olaus Magnus's own fabulous map of the North, the *Carta Marina,* which was printed in Venice in 1539. Before the *Carta Marina,* the only map of Scandinavia in existence had been one of Ptolemy's, that Alexandrian Greek whose *Geographies,* first written in the second century of the first millennium, was discovered centuries later by the scholars and historians of the Italian Renaissance, and published in Venice, Florence, and Ulm. To anyone raised in Scandinavia, as Magnus was, Ptolemy's map of the North was more than vague; it was wrong. Wrong in its shape, wrong in its coastlines, and wrong in the names it assigned to different regions. Ptolemy had never been north of the Mediterranean; what could he know of snows that lasted nine months, and oceanic waterspouts that made sticks of fully rigged ships?

What could he know of raging river torrents pouring out of forests where thick-furred beasts tore prey limb from limb? What could he know of impassable mountains, chasms, and avalanches? What did he know of the names of towns and villages, of the provinces themselves: Biarmia, Scricfinia, Finmarchia, Lappia?

But Olaus Magnus's map of the North was more than a corrective to Ptolomy. Magnus wished to convince the Pope that Scandinavia was a land of untold natural resources, and a pious, hard-working, warrior-bred population. Olaus and his brother Johannes, the archbishop of Uppsala, had been displaced from their high positions; although they continued to represent Sweden at the Vatican, they never returned to their country. After Johannes died in Rome, Olaus became Archbishop of Uppsala—in name only. Adrift in Gdansk, Venice, and finally Rome, the brothers devoted themselves to diplomacy, intrigue, and the dissemination of knowledge. The map was meant in part to show the Catholic hierarchy how large the North was, and thus how much the Vatican had lost by not fighting the adoption of Lutheranism. The Catholic rulers, fighting to keep the Holy Roman Empire intact all over Europe, remained only nominally interested in Scandinavia, but the *Carta Marina* left a lasting mark. It was the first *regional* map of Europe, a marvel not only of geographical knowledge, but of artistic mapmaking.

Because of the expense, few copies of the *Carta Marina* were printed, and only one survives today, in the Munich State Library (where it was discovered by chance). Copperplate copies, also quite rare, are what most scholars knew of the map for centuries. Its illustrations are famous: sea-monsters munch schooners, hunters harpoon seals, Lappish skiers glide by (women too) with bows and arrows, warriors battle, horses draw sleighs across the frozen sea, dragons fly, and reindeer prance. The exuberant detail of this northern map is what delights any close scrutiny.

About a hundred of these pictures appear in the *Historia,* and it was Magnus's intention to explain in detail what was only suggested in the map. Almost all of the hundreds of chapters in the twenty-two books (scholars have noted that the Old Testament and St. Augustine's *City of God* are also composed of twenty-two books) have a small rectangular black and white engraving, and these, as much as the writing, render daily life and the arts of war alive to us today. The illustration to "On various ways of shaping loaves" shows two women with a griddle between them. One woman forms loaves by hand and the other rolls

hers out with a pin. This charming and information-packed (more women labor in the background, stacks of flatbread are in two towers) picture amplifies the description by Olaus, who doesn't feel it beneath him to write of ordinary tasks: "Sitting round in a circle, the women very quickly and one after the other put the dough on the griddles (it looks as thin as the leaves of paper in a printing press), and equally swiftly snatch away the loaves after baking and set them down in order. When a pile has been raised to a certain height they hold it down under a weight of stones so that it is only with difficulty that the heap can be broken or cut with an iron tool, still less by the tooth of a gnawing animal. In this way, should parents think it wise, it will be able to last between sixteen and twenty years, or longer, if only it is kept under cover from rain and snow."

The outline of the *Carta Marina* will be familiar to anyone who looks today at a map of Scandinavia, but the region of the four countries (including Russia's Kola Peninsula and the area around the White Sea) is severely compressed. This isn't so strange considering that Olaus came from Linköping in the south and, except for his two years of travels, considered Uppsala home. Moreover, most of the descriptions of the history and daily life of the northern people came from Sweden. Norwegians and Finns are mentioned relatively little in the *Historia,* the Icelanders and Greenlanders only a few times, and the Danes are left out completely, except as enemy armies, regal usurpers, and defeated warriors. The "northern people" and their snowy landscape of rivers and forests turn out mainly to live in the southern half of one country: Sweden.

The far north in both the *Carta Marina* and the *Historia* is a more fantastical place. Within its squashed geography are depicted creatures "monstrous and strange." They are the Biarmians—wizards, warlocks, and idol-worshippers—and their realm is further, much further away than Olaus Magnus ever managed to travel: "They are inaccessible, for the path of approach is beset by insurmountable perils, nor is it easily penetrable to mortal men, since most of that route is blocked by snows of vast depth all the year round. If any person should want to get beyond these, he must provide himself with reindeer yoked to a sledge (there is a copious supply of these creatures in that country, as of donkeys in Italy), by means of which he can cross the hard, thick-frozen ridges at an amazing speed."

The most vivid illustrations on the map come from the unknown Atlantic seas and the upper part of Scandinavia. Dragons live far north, and so do witches. This focus on the Arctic as the home of the sinister is taken for the most part from the writings of Saxo Grammaticus, whose twelfth-century *History of the Danes* was the source of much of what is superstitious in Olaus Magnus's *Historia,* stories of heroes, nobles, and giants, but also stories of those with the craft and knowledge to raise winds, quiet storms, foretell the future, and cause harm. "Among the Bothnian people of the North, wizards and magicians were found everywhere, as if it were their particular home." And, further, ". . . in the regions under the Seven Stars, in other words, the North (where in a quite literal sense the abode of Satan lies), demons, with unspeakable derision and in diverse shapes, express their encouragement to people who live in those parts."

Olaus Magnus's writing about witchcraft, which in the Scandinavian languages is called *trolldom,* received great notice and was a frequently reprinted and quoted part of the translated and abridged editions of the *Historia,* which appeared at a time when demonology was seen as a serious problem in Europe and trials, burnings, and hangings were on the rise, to culminate in the great persecutions of women during the following century. The French judge Jean Bodin, credited with being the first to legally define witchcraft, published *De la demonomaie des sorciers* in 1580, a book that spurred on the frenzy of witch-hunting. Bodin wrote extensively about northern devils, werewolves, and witches' Sabbaths. He asserted that the North wind itself brought evil and that witchcraft was especially widespread in Lappland. And Bodin referred any doubters of this geographical malfeasance to Olaus Magnus. This passage from the chapter on sorceresses in Book 3 would become one of the templates for later descriptions of witches. But where Olaus Magnus seems to acknowledge some tradition of pre-Christian goddess worship, later writers like Bodin would see only evil:

> How proficient some women among the people of the North once were in magical skills I shall show by means of a few instances. Habgerta, daughter of the giant Vagnhofthi, could change the shape of her body as she pleased, giving extraordinary appearances to her size: sometimes she would dwindle to a small, thin, shriveled object, at other times she would swell to huge proportions. At one moment she would be tall enough to reach the sky, then contract into a person of dwarfish dimensions. She was believed able to bring down the heavens, hang up the earth, solidify springs of water, melt mountains, lift ships into the air, bring low the gods, put out the stars, and light up the underworld.

Yet Olaus Magnus himself doesn't seem to castigate either northern folk beliefs or Sami shamanic traditions. To Olaus Magnus the nature religion of the North was regrettable but not directly menacing. He remarked several times on the piety of the converted Sami, who would travel long distances to go to church. The publication of the *Historia,* however, opened the door to rumors that witchcraft had something to do with Sweden's success in war, especially in the Golden Age to come, and that the Sami had something to do with witchcraft. The Swedes felt these accusations—that they won their battles and extended their empire by demonic means—as a great affront. For this reason Queen Christina's chancellor engaged the scholar Johannes Schefferus to write a book about the Sami that demonstrated how little they had to do with the Swedes at all. This book, *Lapponia,* was published in 1673; as with the *Historia,* sections about shamanism and witchcraft were those reprinted most often, in spite of their original intent of rebuttal.

How do Olaus's notions of the Sami population square with reality? His descriptions of them are among the first we have of this indigenous people, and he reports on their hunting and herding of reindeer, their fishing and fur-trading. He admires their boats and sleighs, remarks on their skiing abilities: "They steer themselves with sticks held in the hand, by means of which they move rapidly just as they choose, upwards, downwards, or aslant over the top of the snow. . . ."

At the time Olaus Magnus was writing, in the sixteenth century, the Sami—hunters, fishers, and often fiercely attached to one place, though without a concept of ownership—still had the coastlines and interior of the North mainly to themselves. In the next several hundred years they'd be displaced by Norwegians moving up the coast in search of fishing grounds, and by Swedish and Finnish settlers. The Sami would withdraw further north, and make following the reindeer migration a way of life, until *nomad* was synonymous with Sami. Missionaries would pursue them and convert them, anthropologists would study them, and they themselves would develop a complicated relationship with an identity based on reindeer ownership. To the outside world there would always be something unchristian and unsettling about them. But that was all in the future. To Olaus Magnus, sitting in St. Birgitta's convent in Rome, the Sami were Lapps, and not at all the same as the Biarmian sorcerers or Finn wizards who controlled the far reaches of the *Carta Marina.*

It is one of the ironies of history that had Sweden remained

Catholic, we would never have had either the map or the *Historia.* Both are products of an exile's recollection and imagination, produced in part to make a case for his country, and also as an act of memory and longing. Olaus Magnus died in Rome, but his writing remained, and helped shape how every traveler, historian, and poet would see the North from then on.