

## REVIEW

Olaus Magnus

*Historia de Gentibus  
Septentrionalibus. A  
Description of the Northern  
Peoples*, Rome 1555, Volumes  
II & III

Edited by P. G. Foote

The Hakluyt Society,  
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The first volume of Olaus Magnus' *A Description of the Northern Peoples*, 1555, also edited by Peter Foote and published by The Hakluyt Society, appeared in 1996 and its introductory section, in particular, is essential reading prior to Vols. II & III which are reviewed here.

The three volumes incorporate the first complete translation into English, from the original Latin, of Olaus Magnus' *Historia* and the editorial work throughout is masterly, as is the quality of the

translation.

The *Historia* has appeal for a very wide audience who, whatever the nature of their interest in the northern peoples, will warm to Olaus' style of presenting his information in a way that engages the emotions as well as the intellect. No dry text this, but an amusing, vividly detailed and often very perceptive account of the Swedish people and their way of life and international connections in the late medieval period. As well as the text, most chapters have period woodcuts as illustrations at the start and these, also, reward close scrutiny.

Obviously Olaus relied quite heavily on previous writers for some of his material and the introduction to Volume I makes useful comments on the extent of his borrowing, noting that in Volume II 'much of the matter depends on Olaus's own observation' (p. li), whereas the other two volumes lean more heavily on the work of other writers such as Pliny the Elder and Saxo Grammaticus.

Olaus, Archbishop of Uppsala, wrote his *Historia*

while in exile in Rome but he was using material from his earlier travels in Sweden and his love of his homeland is evident, along with his desire to reclaim it from Lutheranism for the Catholic church. He always refers to himself, with a strong tone of national pride, as Olaus Magnus the Goth. His national pride also crops up more invidiously in his frequent criticisms of other nationalities – particularly the Danes and, to a marginally less vitriolic extent, the Russians. Religion is a very significant topic throughout and it impinges on many other subjects which are covered in the twenty-two Books of the *Historia* such as the uneasy relationship between the Roman Catholic Magnus brothers (Johannes and Olaus) and the Swedish monarch in the early 16th century (King Gustav Vasa) who had promoted Lutheranism in the Swedish Church; a faith detested and reviled by Olaus.

It is impossible to do justice to the diverse topics in a review but, to give the reader an idea of the sheer scale of Olaus' enterprise, a brief note

of contents is given here:

*Volume I:*

- I: the way of life, physical environment and warfaring of the northern peoples;
- II: the wonders of nature in the north;
- III: the superstitious worship of demons by the people of the north;
- IV: the wars and customs of the pagan dwellers in the wild and their neighbours;
- V: giants.

*Volume II:*

- VI: mines and metals;
- VII: weapons of war, the practice and cause of fighting and precautions to be taken in battle;
- VIII: the position of rulers and officials and on military training;
- IX: land warfare;
- X: sea warfare;
- XI: warfare on ice;
- XII: the buildings of the north;
- XIII: agriculture and the food people eat;
- XIV: the various customs and usages of the northern peoples;
- XV: the various activities of men and women.

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### *Volume III*

XVI: the instructions of the church;  
XVII: domesticated animals;  
XVIII: wild animals;  
XIX: birds;  
XX: fish;  
XXI: sea-monsters;  
XXII: insects.

For an archbishop, it would appear that Olaus had a very marked fascination with warfare but in that respect, as in many others, he was a man of his times. In some ways, to give the titles of Books, belies the true extent of topic coverage because Olaus interpolates additional anecdotal information and drifts fascinatingly off the main topic on various occasions. The contents of the three volumes provide a treasure-house of period information for scholars from various disciplines and the detailed editorial notes which follow each Book provide scholarly textual comment as well as invaluable pointers to further reading for researchers wishing to pursue particular topics.

This reviewer's favourite Books are in *Volume III*, which begins with a section

on the social organisation of human beings and then moves towards animals and birds and their social activities which, in many amusing and revealing ways, reflect the squabbles and tensions of the human world.

In his final chapter, Olaus says 'if it (this volume) achieves nothing else, at least its variety and the diversity of its illustrations can be relied on to mitigate the boredom of its readers.' It certainly does that, and a great deal more. All three volumes are recommended to the reader as texts which will give many hours, weeks and years of pleasure and edification.

*Doreen J Waugh*