

¶ Olaus Magnus: *A Description of the Northern Peoples*. 3 vols. Trans. by Peter Fisher and Humphrey Higgens. Ed. by Peter Foote. [The Hakluyt Society, Second Series, Nos. 182, 187, 188] London: Hakluyt Society, 1996-98. Pp. xcv + 1248. ISBNs: 0-904180-43-3, 0-904180-58-1, 0-904180-59-X.

In 1539, Olaus Magnus, secretary to his brother, Johannes, the archbishop *in spe* of Uppsala, published his *Carta marina*, and promised a commentary on it. This was duly provided in 1555 by his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, here translated as *A Description of the Northern Peoples*. Olaus' large book of 899 pages was reasonably popular, especially in the form of an epitome made in 1558, and has a good claim to be the first of what we might today call an ethnographic survey of Scandinavia, especially Sweden-Finland. Its frequently original illustrations have helped make it especially popular in our time, which has seen two facsimile reprints (1971, 1972) and a Swedish translation (1909-25), the latter reissued some years ago. Though Olaus Magnus' book ap-

peared in many translations early on, and achieved some kind of authoritative status, the only previous English edition of any of its text was a publication in 1658 of a translation of the 1558 epitome. The present translation of the complete book under the auspices of The Hakluyt Society is, therefore, especially to be welcomed.

Olaus divided his volume into twenty-two books in 677 chapters. There is a loose general structure to the whole: the first books mostly deal with physical and anthropological matters; the second with matters of governance, including war; and the third with the fauna. Olaus prefaced the whole with an *Index rerum* of eighty-four pages (not reproduced *per se* in these volumes, though its absence is more than made up for by four greatly improved indices of persons named, places and peoples mentioned, authors cited, and subjects discussed). Unlike the Swedish translation, this one follows Olaus' own practice of not publishing a table of contents giving the chapter headings in each book. The three volumes into which the translation has been divided for practical reasons are consecutively paginated: since this is the only complete English translation, and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, this fact should cause little bibliographical difficulty. Volume One contains a generous Introduction and Bibliography, and Books I-V. Volume Two holds Books VI-XV, and Volume Three, Books XVI-XXII, and the indices. Appropriate notes, including comment on the illustrations, follow each book. There is a large bibliography which has been updated to 1997 at the end of the third volume.

Books I-XVII were translated by Humphrey Higgens. Upon his severe illness in 1981 and subsequent death, Peter Fisher, who, with Hilda Ellis Davidson, had produced Books I-IX of Saxo, completed the work. The whole project has been edited by the Viking scholar, Peter Foote. Hovering over this production is the presence of John Granlund, whose discussion of and commentary to the Swedish edition permeates the introduction and notes to this translation. The Introduction is in three parts, the first two, by Peter Foote, concentrate on the historical coming into being of the book, including political matters of the early sixteenth century, and its author and compiler. The third part is by Peter Fisher, who writes about the design of the book, its sources, and some

of the pleasures to be found in it, not least its humor.

Apart from his highly formal dedication to Adolf of Schaumburg, the archbishop of Cologne, and those texts he directly incorporated from other writers, Olaus' Latin is relatively easy and straightforward. The translations here are clear, efficient, and well-illuminated by the notes, and catch the school-mastery flavor often found in the text. Though the resultant tone is fairly consistent between the two translators, they have each adopted a different approach to periodization. That is to say, where Olaus typically runs many clauses together, frequently tying them with an ampersand, rarely using a period, more often a colon, Higgins has elected to break the often lengthy compound Latin sentences into shorter English ones, while Fisher has tried to recreate Olaus' periods. In this latter, he is largely successful.

One of the salient features of Olaus' book, of course, is its many illustrations, a great proportion of which are unique to his work. He had used some in printing his brother's Swedish history, *Gotthorum Sveonumque regibus historia*, in 1554—the Gothic (=runic) alphabet at I:36 (p. 77), for instance—while others were clearly made for his own book under his direction. All are reproduced here and commented upon in the notes, even to the point of removing one of them to its “correct” place, at XXI:4, instead of where Olaus actually put it, at XVII:4. The volumes also reproduce Olaus' copious marginalia.

Olaus tells a good story, with vigor and enthusiasm, and that infection has been passed on to the editor and translators. They, and The Hakluyt Society, have put us all in their debt for this fine edition. If it encourages new readers to explore the Scandinavian late-middle ages or just to meet an interesting writer, it will more than have served its purpose. But more than that, it also provides a solid, standard, edition in English of this never-quite neglected work.

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