

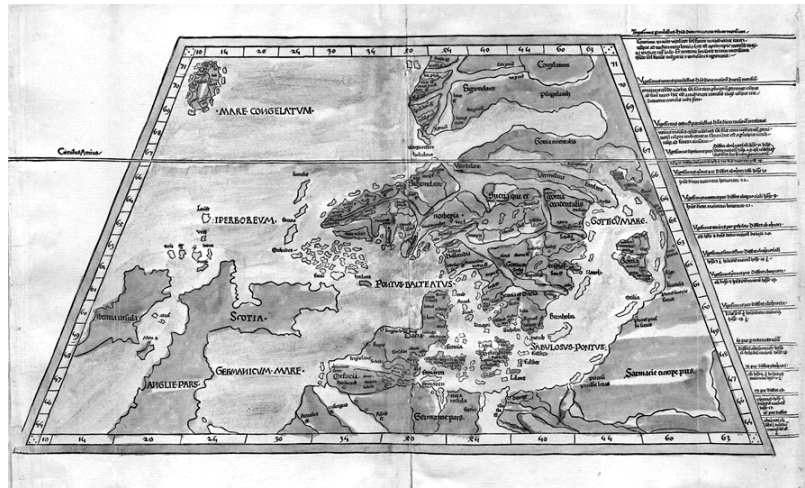


Unknown Europe : the mapping of the northern countries by Olaus Magnus 1539

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Abstract

In the beginning of the 16th century, the Northern countries were a very little known region to the peoples of southern Europe. The information about the North was based on the descriptions written in antiquity and medieval times, and on only a few maps. The region was often described as an island in a nameless northern sea, or as an east-to-west 'peninsula' resembling the shape of an oak leaf. Before Olaus Magnus's map, the most important earliest maps of the Nordic countries – surviving even to our days – were those that appeared in the numerous 'Ptolemy Editions'. They include the map compiled in 1427 by the first Nordic cartographer, the Dane Claudius Clavus, and the map published in 1532 by the Bavarian Jacob Ziegler. The cartographic representation of the North was, however, quite faulty and far from realistic.



Map of the Northern countries based on Claudius Clavus, 1427, printed in the Ptolemy edition Ulm 1482 (National Library of Finland)

Olaus Magnus wanted to remedy this ignorance with the map he had started compiling already in 1527.

Olaus Magnus (Linköping, Sweden 1490 – Rome 1557) was a highly educated Swedish scholar and the last – though only nominal – Catholic archbishop of Uppsala. Because of his duties for the Church and the King, he had travelled widely both in the North and also in central and southern Europe. He had studied in Germany for seven years and lived several years abroad, for instance in Danzig. In addition to the literature of his own time, he knew the texts of the classical and medieval writers and many of the maps of his predecessors. He had many connections with several scientists and scholars as well as mapmakers. During his travels in the Northern countries, he had made observations and recorded everything he had seen and heard very carefully. Thus he had good qualifications to compile his map which he named *Carta marina*, but which he always later referred to as *Carta gothica*.

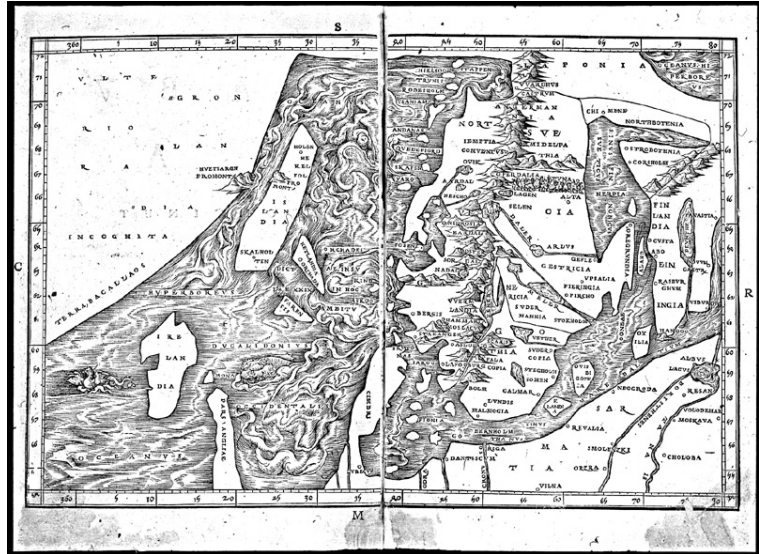
Olaus Magnus started compiling his map in Danzig (now Gdansk), and after twelve years' work it was finished in Venice in 1539 'through the generous assistance of the Most Honorable Lord and Patriarch Hieronimo Quirino'. Only two original copies of the *Carta marina* are known to have survived. One of them was found in Munich in 1886 at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, and the other – of which the Uppsala University Li-



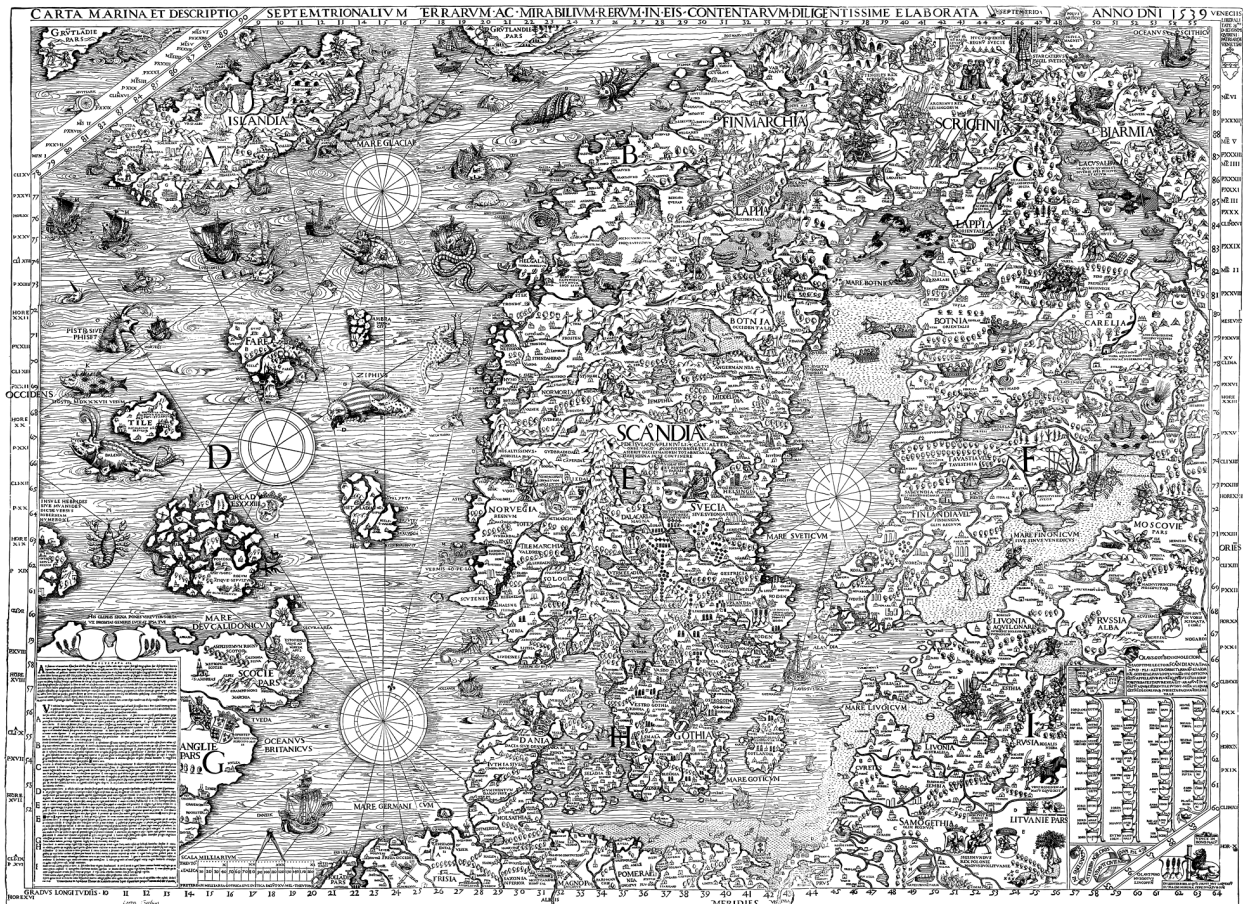
brary managed to gain possession – turned up in Switzerland in 1962.

With his map, Olaus Magnus wanted to rectify the faulty representation of the earlier – especially the widespread Ptolemaic – maps, and he also wanted to show the Catholic Church the extent of the area which had been lost to Lutheranism. But above all, he wanted to describe his beloved native country as accurately and impressively as possible. As a devout Catholic, he was obliged to leave Sweden in 1524, never to return again.

The *Carta marina* was one of the largest printed maps (125 x 170 cm) of its time. Olaus Magnus understood that his great, profusely illustrated map might be difficult for ‘an ignorant reader’ to understand. That is why he marked the nine sheets of his map with large letters, from A to I, and several small letters within the area of each large



Map by Jacob Ziegler 1532
(National Library of Finland)



Carta marina by Olaus Magnus 1539
(Facsimile of the original at the Uppsala University Library by Karttakeskus 1993)



letter to indicate matters briefly referred to in the Latin commentary in the lower left-hand corner of the map. He also wrote two, more extensive, vernacular commentaries in Italian and German which were slightly different in content. This was because the Italian *Opera brevis* was aimed at the southern European and the German *Ain kurze Auslegung und Verklärung der neuuen Mappen* [A short presentation and explanation of the new maps] at the northern European nations. Olaus Magnus said – combined in the text of the name of the map and the beginnings of the commentaries – that the *Carta marina* with its commentaries was ‘a description drawn up most carefully about the marvellous things, both on land and at sea, in the old Gothic realm and the other cold northern countries, until now unknown to both Greek and Latin authors, and which up to now has not been clearly described in the world.’ In his commentaries, Olaus Magnus often mentioned that he would later write even more about these marvels. This he did in 1555, when he published an extensive, more than 800-page work on the history of the northern peoples: *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*. The work contained much of the same material as the *Carta marina* and more than 100 of its illustrations.

In the map and its commentaries, Olaus Magnus spoke about life in the North during the 16th century in a fascinating way and with an enthusiastic patriotism. He described almost everything concerning man and nature: geography, history, means of livelihood, politics, etc. The wealth of his information was enormous. Some of it was fiction, although Olaus Magnus asserted that everything he said was true, seen by his own eyes and experienced and researched by himself.

When the *Carta marina* was published, it attracted much attention. Even today the map draws researchers’ attention and has even caused debate. The last word has not yet been said about many matters concerning the map, and specifically about these three, perhaps most important, questions: What were the sources when Olaus Magnus sketched out the geographical shape of the region? How was his strange graduation system to be interpreted? and why are the known original copies of the map not quite identical?

These questions may be left unsolved, but that does not reduce the value of the *Carta marina*. It was one of the most remarkable maps of its time. A large part of Europe, including the whole Scandinavia with its surroundings, was mapped better than ever before. The *Carta marina* became a model for many notable cartographers and the basis for describing the Northern countries on the map for nearly 100 years. ■



Olaus Magnus on his way to Norway'