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“Our Ship in Winter.”

Illustration in Ethel Tweedie, *Through Finland in Carts* (1897).

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ELENA BALZAMO

# The Geopolitical Laplander

From Olaus Magnus to Johannes Schefferus

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**ABSTRACT** After being either completely ignored or mixed up with monsters and devils, which in the medieval imagination dwelled in the Extreme North, the Sami were suddenly brought into the limelight by Olaus Magnus (1492–1557), Swedish catholic bishop in exile. His *Carta marina* (1539) and *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555) contain most valuable information, depicting the Sami's natural virtues, practical skills and mysterious magic powers. The image provided by these works became widely spread in Europe thanks both to the reprints of the Latin originals and to the numerous translations. In the seventeenth century the theme was re-actualized by a new publication, entirely devoted to Lapland and its inhabitants: *Lapponia* (1673) by Johannes Schefferus (1621–1679). Translated into a number of languages it replaced the image created by Olaus Magnus with a new one, at the same time similar and different. The present paper examines some crucial points of this evolution in order to show that both “portraits” reflect motivations that go beyond purely scholarly interest: each of them is part of the ideological struggle of its time—the Reformation in one case, the conflicts brought to life by the Thirty Years' War in the other.

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**KEYWORDS** Olaus Magnus, Johannes Schefferus, Scandinavia, North, Sweden, Lapland, Sami, history, sixteenth century, seventeenth century

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Our knowledge of a phenomenon is never a mere sum of facts accumulated in the course of time. Even though empirical accumulation is very important, the relevance and value of a given piece of information depend on a number of factors of ideological, political and cultural nature; they determine the pattern of perception, the way different elements are selected, interpreted—and understood.

I have chosen two examples in the history of early perception of the Scandinavian North and its inhabitants to show how the linear development of empirical knowledge can interfere with ideology, how it can be modified—and even interrupted—influenced by cultural and political needs. The phenomenon in question is the Sami people: image, knowledge and perception.

### Olaus Magnus (1490–1557)

After being either completely ignored or mixed up with monsters and devils, which in medieval imagination dwelled in the Extreme North, the Sami were suddenly brought into the limelight by the last Swedish catholic archbishop in exile, Olaus Magnus, who was born in Linköping in 1490 and died in Rome in 1557. In 1518–1519 he made a long journey to the northern parts of the Scandinavian peninsula, starting in Uppsala and visiting Hälsingland–Jämtland–Trøndelag–Nordland—the Gulf of Bothnia coast–Västerbotten–Norrbotten, up to Tornio, then going back to Stockholm. The trip had nothing to do with tourist curiosity, but had an obvious pragmatic character, being made on behalf of the Vatican authorities. Still its principal result—produced many years later—was primarily scholarly: a map, *Carta marina* (Venice, 1539), and a book, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (Rome 1555).

Both works are a major contribution to several fields: geography, zoology, history, economy—and anthropology. In both the author's goals were not only scientific, but also—if not primarily—political and ideological. His aim was to influence the public opinion of his time by showing the importance of northern Europe at the very moment when Reformation was spreading there, threatening to tear it from the rest of the Catholic world.

Both the map and the book present, according to a specialist, “an astonishing mixture of accurate observation on the one hand and folk belief or received lore on the other” (Fisher 1994: 411), a mixture quite characteristic of the transitional period the author lived in, that between the Middle Ages and the earlier Modern Times. On the one hand, one finds there a vast amount of facts concerning, for instance, “small boats” covered with animal skin, reindeer used for transportation of people and goods, idolatry, marriage rituals, seal hunting, fishing techniques; on the other hand, one gets acquainted with “horrible sea monsters,” “huge sea serpents,” “a grass-eating

HISTORIA  
**DE GENTIBVS**  
 SEPTENTRIONALIBVS, EARVMQVE  
 DIVERSIS STATIBVS, CON-  
 DITIONIBVS, MORIBVS, RITIBVS, SVPERSTITIO-  
 nibus, disciplinis, exercitiis, regimine, victu,  
 bellis, fructuris, instrumentis, ac mineris  
 metallicis, & rebus mirabilibus,  
 necnon vniuersis penè animalibus  
 in Septentrione degentibus,  
 eorumq̄ natura.

OPVS VT VARIVM, PLVRIMARVMQVE  
 RERVM COGNITIONE REFERTVM, ATQVE CVM  
 exemplis externis, tum expressis rerum internarum  
 picturis illustratum, ita delectatione iucun-  
 ditatèque plenum, maxima lectoris  
 animum voluptate facile  
 perfundens.

AVTORE OLAO MAGNO GOTHO  
 ARCHIEPISCOPO VPSALENSI  
 Suetiæ & Gothiæ Primate.

CVM INDICE LOCVPLETISSIMO.

CAVTVM EST PRIVILEGIO IVLII III.  
 Pont. Max. ne quis ad Decennium imprimat.

ROMAE M. D. LV.

fish, big as an elephant, that can climb on rock," evil spirits employed in mines, giants of the times past (Granlund 1946; Balzamo 2005; Balzamo & Kaiser 2006).

The distribution of fantastic elements on the surface of the map shows a specific way to apprehend the reality represented: the number of monsters, trolls, wizards, etcetera is considerably higher in its northern parts. A closer analysis of *Carta marina* (blocks B and C including *Finmarchia*,



*Lappia occidentalis*, *Scricfini*, *Lappia orientalis*, *Biarmia*) brings into evidence the differences between the traditional view—Antiquity and the Middle Ages—and the new way to apprehend the Far North.

Another specific feature is the map's historical dimension. History, including pagan beliefs and practices, is part of it, and thus part of the present. In the first half of the sixteenth century these regions had not as yet been completely christianized, and going north was for Olaus and his contemporaries going back into the past, a feature that fascinated a number of scholars: "His essential experience was that while going north at the same time he travelled back in history" (Granlund 1946: 128).

This cohabitation of the past and the present creates an extremely dense and meaningful "chronotope," and the image of these regions emerging from Olaus Magnus' description has little to do with those one finds in earlier sources. Almost all his forerunners: Plinius, Pomponius Mela, or even, later on, Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus, presented the Far North as a realm of cold, savagery, a waste land almost uninhabited, a desert,

a frozen hell. This was primarily due to the lack of factual information: few people could reach these remote parts of Europe; but it was also determined by the need to conform the existing evidence to the prevailing pattern: the further one moved away from the centre of the *eucumene* to its periphery, the harsher the climate, the scarcer the population, the more abundant and fierce the beasts, the more frightening the monsters. While Antiquity had expressed the dichotomy in terms of civilisation versus barbarism, for medieval authors it became that between Christianity and paganism. Olaus Magnus inherited both.

Surprisingly, even though he borrows eagerly from all kinds of earlier authors (Granlund 1951; Grape 1970), the conclusions he draws are entirely different. There is no longer any talk of a frozen desert; according to Olaus Magnus, these regions are, on the contrary, characterised by constant and varied activities: peoples are hunting, trading, building boats, fishing, fighting, getting married and so forth.

Another important difference is the total absence of human monsters. Fabulous animals are present everywhere in his world, but one would look in vain for monstrous *people* which both Antiquity and the Middle Ages were so fond of. This change is even more significant since earlier all local populations had been automatically put into this category: in Procopius', Jordanes' and others' writings both the Finns and the Lapps, called *Skridfinni* (*Skridfinnar*, *Skridfinner*, *Skridfinns*, *Scrithifini*, *Screrefennes*, *Skrickfinnar*) were neighbouring the mythical Amazons, together with numerous other weird creatures:

There are the *Screrefennae*, who do not seek grain for food but live on the flesh of wild beasts and birds' eggs [...]. Then comes a throng of various nations, *Theustes*, *Vagoth*, *Bergio*, *Hallin*, *Liothida*. [...] All these live like wild animals in rocks hewn out like castles. (Jordanes 1908: 21–22.)

A similar mixture can be found in the works of Adam of Bremen, who evokes Cyclopes, *Himantopodes*, peoples with dog's heads, etcetera:

On the east, Sweden touches the Rhiphaean Mountains, where there is an immense wasteland, the deepest snows, and where hordes of human monsters prevent access to what lies beyond. There are Amazons, and *Cynocephali*, and Cyclops who have one eye on their foreheads; there are those Solinus calls *Himantopodes*, who hop on one foot, and those who delight in human flesh as food. (Adam of Bremen 1959: 206.)

In Adam's writings, but even earlier, one comes across the witchcraft motif, clearly associated with the inhabitants of the extreme North:

These people, it is said, are to this day so superior in the magic arts or incantations that they profess to know what every one is doing the world over. Then they also draw great sea monsters of which one reads in the Scriptures about magicians. (Adam of Bremen 1959: 212.)

This image of wizards and witches is not much different from the one depicted by Saxo Grammaticus, who was Olaus Magnus' main source for ancient history. However, concerning the Sami, Olaus does not follow the authorities: the experience acquired during the journey often prevails on his reading, and it is highly significant that the unique monstrous people—the Pygmies—is located in Greenland (Block A) where they fight the cranes (the anecdote comes from Plinius, the image from *Liber chronicarum* by Hartmann Schedel). Refusing to regard the inhabitants of these regions as monsters, he chooses to present both the Sami and the Finns as part of *mankind*. But apart from his personal experience, humanisation of the Sami is determined by the work's internal logic: they are subtracted from the fantastic universe in order to be integrated into another paradigm, that of a perfectly normal—and human—*nordicity* (Balzamo 2013).

The convergence of empirical knowledge, new theoretical views and political goals culminates in *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*. The book offers a similar mixture of facts and fantasy: one can see the clash between the author's desire to follow the authorities and the factual knowledge that runs contrary to some of their statements. The information on the Sami is mainly found in the chapters “*De Biarmia ...*,” “*De Finmarchia ...*,” “*De Scritfinnia ...*,” “*Ad huc de situ, & qualitatibus eius*,” as well as in different parts of Book IV.

Here again the difference between Olaus Magnus' picture and the one that had prevailed before concerns first of all the way the geographical reality of the Far North is described: climate, landscape, natural resources. The unexplored inhospitable and terrifying areas become a kind of a New World, full of marvels, overflowing with all sorts of natural treasures: fish, game, domestic reindeer.

Another important difference consists in depicting the local populations, Sami and Finns (the author makes no clear distinction between them). These “portraits” are more comprehensive in comparison to the scarce information provided by the map and its bilingual commentaries (*Opera brevis* and *Ein kurze auslegung*). The inhabitants of these regions are endowed with natural virtues that make one think about the “noble savage,” one of the conceptual consequences of the geographical discoveries of the Columbus era. Olaus must have read *De Orbe Novo* (1511) by his contemporary Pietro Martiere de Anghiera, who introduced the notion of “the noble savage” living in symbiosis with nature. To quote a Swedish scholar, “[i]t is as if the

land of Laps and Skridfinns was emblematic for the authentic nordicity” (Lindroth 1975a: 305).

Thus, especially in Books I and IV, Olaus stresses that the inhabitants are numerous (I:3), great patriots (IV:2), strong, courageous and honest (I:2). The women are good-looking and fecund (IV:11), excelling in hunting and skiing (IV:11–12). The natives live long, enjoy their simple life and are happier than many of those who are more fortunate or more powerful (IV:V).

As to pagan beliefs, superstitions and sorcery, Olaus Magnus has to admit the existence of many features traditionally ascribed to them (“When the Biarmians plan to fight, they frequently exchange weapons for wizardry, for it is their custom to dissolve the sky into rain-storms with their spells to upset the air’s joyful aspect with miserable downpour;” I:1)—but he never fails to counterbalance such statements by adding an excuse or a mitigating explanation minimizing the negative features by stressing the positive ones. As in the case of the map, the author discusses pagan rituals (“[...] they venerate with earnest prayers and elaborate ceremonies a red rag suspended on a pole or spear, thinking that it contains some divine power because of its colour, which resembles the blood of animals;” III:2) and magic practices, including that of selling winds (III:16). Still he persists in calling the Sami “ingenuous people” (IV:5), “barbarous, but perfectible” (I:3), living by “the laws of Nature” which compensates lack of education (IV:18). But the real rehabilitation lies less in arguments than in the author’s genuine concern with these people, in the accuracy of his description, the details, the facts: skiing (I:4, IV:1), clothing (IV:4), hunting (IV:12), shooting (IV:11), getting married (IV:7)—due to which the image gains in consistency and leaves the realm of the myth. Thus the Sami appears in his work as: 1. An archaic figure from the fabulous past; 2. An idol worshipper; 3. A natural human being; 4. “a noble savage.”

The image provided by *Historia* became widely spread in Europe due to both the reprints of the Latin original and numerous translations. More than a century later the theme was re-actualized by the publication of a new work, entirely devoted to Lapland and its inhabitants (still called “Laplanders”): *Laponia* (1673) by Johannes Schefferus (1621–1679). His book replaced the image created by Olaus Magnus by a new one, similar and different at the same time.

### Johannes Schefferus (1621–1679)

In the meantime, during the century that separates these two events, things did not stay still, bringing forward several important changes. A number of travellers who managed to reach the Far North and to come back with new

facts and observations increased, leading to further accumulation of empirical knowledge; the growth of academic studies, both on the continent and in Scandinavia, began to bring fruit, namely in humanities: the seventeenth century was the golden age of classical philology in Sweden too; besides, great achievements had taken place in various fields, such as historiography, archaeology, ethnography.

Meanwhile, the changes in the geopolitical situation were even more spectacular: Sweden became a major actor in European politics, a “superpower” that played a decisive role during the Thirty Years’ war (1618–1648). No wonder that the country aroused increasing interest abroad, both among friends and enemies. This interest concerned in particular the topics regarded as specific, exceptional, having no equivalents elsewhere, namely the “half-savage” populations of the northern regions: the Sami.

Within Sweden the interest in Sami culture was stimulated both by the needs for internal colonisation (administration and control of these areas) and for propaganda purposes. Both pressures were strong. At that time the Sami were already christianized, but there was still much to do; the government’s concern with printing in native languages, education and preaching required solid knowledge of different matters.

On the other hand, the authorities had to deal with extremely active anti-Swedish propaganda, both during the Thirty Years’ war and after. Among other things, it accused Gustavus Adolphus of using Sami soldiers, idol worshippers and magicians, in his army. The charge, widely spread, gave bad publicity to the protestant hero monarch, and the fact that during this war military propaganda was used for the first time on a large scale made it even worse (Beller 1940; Rydving 2006). The main accusations against Sami soldiers were, predictably, weather magic and their ability to change guise.

Yet another circumstance has to be mentioned at this point: the extravagant stories made up by some European travellers like la Martinière, and especially Loménie de Brienne (Lindroth 1975*b*: 319), who eagerly stressed the fabulous and demonic character of local populations. Demonology was then a fashionable “science,” no wonder that the Swedish authorities wished to improve this negative image. *Laponia* was therefore a propaganda task, commanded by Magnus Gabriel De la Gardie, Sweden’s Chancellor, to Johannes Schefferus, an Uppsala scholar of German origin (born in Strasbourg, then part of the Holy Roman Empire), known for his philological and archaeological studies.

Schefferus had never set foot in Lapland, and in fact had no need to, no more than he needed to encounter the ancient Romans he wrote about; for him the Sami were an object of purely academic studies, which meant an important change of status. From now on the Sami culture was considered

JOANNIS SCHEFFERI  
ARGENTCRATENSIS  
**LAPPONIA**  
*Id est,*  
REGIONIS LAPPONUM  
ET GENTIS NOVA ET  
VERISSIMA DESCRIPTIO.

*In qua multa*

De origine, superstitione, sacris magicis,  
victu, cultu, negotiis Laponum, item Animalium, me-  
tallorumque indole, quæ in terris eorum proveniunt,  
hactenus incognita

*Produntur, & eiconibus adjectis cum cura illustrantur.*



FRANCOFURTI  
Ex Officina CHRISTIANI WOLFFII  
Typis JOANNIS ANDREÆ,  
ANNO M. DC. LXXIII.

worthy of interest, if not as prestigious as Roman and Greek culture, then at least comparable with his investigations concerning Swedish antiquities, which resulted in a learned dissertation called *Upsalia* (1666).

The enquiry was initiated by the governor of the Umeå region, Johan Graan, himself of Sami origin (Rydving 2006: 22), who composed a questionnaire he sent to a number of literati living in Northern Sweden. The information came mainly from local clergy, some of whom were of Sami

origin as well and who lived in close contact with Sami. The collected material was sent to Schefferus and after a while resulted in an imposing encyclopaedia of Sami culture: “No other Swedish learned publication from the seventeenth century got a greater esteem in the rest of Europe” (Lindroth 1975*b*: 317), to quote a Swedish historian. According to the same scholar, “Schefferus approached the Swedish history as a classical philologist, well trained in modern textual analysis, working only with sources he considered reliable” (Lindroth 1975*b*: 311). In fact, being an expert on Roman philology, he introduced its methods in ethnographical studies, after having used them in his research on Swedish antiquities. Thus the recently established model of high standard text criticism became applied to a mosaic of sources of various kinds, both oral and written evidence, objects, folklore, comparative material, etcetera. The result was highly impressive.

Compared to Olaus Magnus, Schefferus’ task was more limited in scope and therefore somewhat easier: in the centuries that separate the two authors the increase in primary material had inevitably led to specialisation. Olaus Magnus’ work was in many ways—namely, structurally—still close to medieval *summae* that embraced the totality of the sensible world, the whole universe. The pattern he follows is the one we find in most medieval *historiae naturalis*, all of them dwelling on strictly theological grounds. Therefore the Sami culture was merely one of many elements of the panoramic picture of the North provided by *Historia*. And even if the latter was the cradle of all subsequent northern studies, none of Olaus Magnus’ successors (perhaps with the exception of Olof Rudbeck) was able to remain on the same level of generality: the investigation soon branched off into a number of disciplines; and within each of them the respective scholars carried on and developed the embryos of knowledge contained in *Historia*: Erik Dahlberg in his *Suecia antiqua et hodierna* dealt with topographical aspects, Andreas Bureus took care of the mapping of the territory, whereas Johannes Bureus pursued philological studies, etcetera, Johannes Schefferus focused on Lapland. (In the eighteenth century and afterwards such comprehensive studies would no longer be possible: During his journey Linnaeus limited his research almost exclusively to natural sciences).

The architecture of the book containing 35 chapters and numerous illustrations is characterised by both great coherence and great simplicity. The general survey (geography, climate) is followed by detailed descriptions of various features of the population (appearance, character, government, customs, language, food habits), the relationship between sexes, marriage, child-bearing, education, diseases, burial rituals; followed by a survey of their occupations (hunting, handicraft, trade, cattle breeding), and finally that of the land’s natural resources (animals, birds, plants, metals, etc.).

In comparison with the often erratic composition of Olaus Magnus' book, Schefferus' *Lapponia* is strikingly well structured; his style is simple and clear, and his attitude quite balanced. He aims at discrediting both the anti-Swedish political propaganda and the French travellers' exaggerations by opposing them with facts, empirical knowledge and truthful evidence. Still, his own work is not free from fantasizing, and his attitude towards his famous predecessor is often contradictory: even though Schefferus is sometimes critical about his statements, he borrows willingly from him; so that much of *Historia's* fanciful information occurs also in his own work. At the same time, his attitude towards witchcraft—whose existence he takes for granted—is even more severe than that of Olaus Magnus: he firmly condemns all forms of magical practices; closeness to nature is no longer an excuse.

However, the Uppsala scholar faces the same dilemma as his forerunner: how to counter his opponents without running the risk of losing his readers' interest by trivialising the subject? Surely, his aim is to prove that the Sami have been christianized, that they have never used their magical talents in Gustavus Adolphus' service, that they are His Majesty's loyal subjects, like Swedes and Finns—but is not their main claim to interest still in being exotic, in possessing mysterious qualities, in practising mysterious rituals?

That is why Schefferus' book contains a cluster of chapters (VII–XI)—such as “Of the Religion of the Laplanders,” “Of the second, or Christian Religion of the Laplanders,” “Of some remains of Paganism in Lapland at



this time,” “Of the heathenish Gods of the Laplanders, and their manner of worship at this day,” “Of the magical Ceremonies of the Laplanders”—where we encounter again the mixture of facts and fables familiar since Olaus Magnus’ times, namely those concerning weather magic by tying wind knots (Blix Hagen 2009: 152 ff.). No wonder that it was this part of the book—much less than its rich ethnographical and ethnological material—that particularly appealed to the foreign audience: it was reproduced and commented on far more than the rest. In this sense one can claim that the book missed its goal: to dissolve the fantasizing and myth-making around the Sami people—and the idea that the inhabitants of the North are “almost all of them wizards and witches” (Blix Hagen 2009: 162) continued to prevail throughout the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries.

## Conclusion

I have tried to outline some crucial points of the development of the Sami image, arguing that both “portraits” made at the interval of more than a century reflect motivations that go far beyond purely scholarly interest: each of them is part of the politico-ideological struggle of its time—the Reformation in one case, the conflicts brought to life by the Thirty Years’ War, in the other.

As we have seen, both images grow at the intersection of two points of view: the external and the internal ones. The first one triggers off interest, draws attention, puts into circulation various interpretations, offers comparisons; it is expressed in travelogues, in propaganda writings, in popular scholarly works. Even if this information is often inaccurate, hostile and distorting, it remains crucial for the dynamics of national studies, when it is lacking the latter slow down or even cease.

All relevant knowledge being necessarily empirical, one has to be in touch with a culture in order to comprehend it. No wonder that two major works devoted to Lapland are due to the domestic tradition, even though one was written in exile and the other by a scholar of foreign origin. While treating the material both authors bore in mind some goals beyond the purely scholarly ones; both had to take into account a number of external requirements, which were not only stimulating but also restricting. Olaus Magnus’ challenge was to make the North appealing to the South-European reader without trivializing it; he solved the problem by emphasizing the regions’ extreme climate while at the same glorifying the peoples able to live under such conditions: Swedes, Finns and Lapps. Johannes Schefferus adopted a similar approach, though in a somewhat more neutral, “scientific” tone. The former did his best to integrate the Sami into humanity; while the latter clearly stated that even regarded as part of the human race, the

“Lapps” are still the “savages;” in other words they are treated as an object of *both* academic studies and civilizing efforts.

Let me make one more point. Both Olaus Magnus' *Historia* and Schef-ferus' *Lapponia* contain a huge amount of precious information about the Sami people, their way of life, practical skills and mysterious magic powers. No wonder that both immediately became bestsellers, promptly translated as they were into the main European languages: German, French, English, Dutch, Italian. Yet, one had to wait for almost 300 years for the Swedish versions: 1925–1951 for *Historia*; 1956 for *Lapponia*. Why?

On the one hand, one can argue that for the Swedish public the subject was less exotic and therefore less fascinating. Part of the population lived in direct contact with the Sami, and the rest came sporadically in touch with their representatives whose low social status and the prejudices they were surrounded with could not possibly arouse positive curiosity. But on the other hand, at that time there was simply no need for a Swedish translation: in learned circles everyone could read Latin, so that both books, easily accessible to the cultivated readers, never ceased to be part of the learned tradition.

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*Elena Balzamo* has a PhD in Scandinavian Studies and is literary scholar and translator, author of books and articles on different aspects of Scandinavian and Russian literature. Among her publications are *August Strindberg. Visages et destin* (1999), *Den engagerade skeptikern. Hjalmar Söderberg och politiken* (2001), *Soljenitsyne. Aux origines de la Russie contemporaine* (2002), *Olaus Magnus. Carta marina* (2005), *Olaus Magnus. Die Wunder des Nordens* (in collaboration with R. Kaiser) (2006), "Skrifdon och papper, brefkort, frimärken." *Fyra essäer om Strindberg* (2012). In 2001 Balzamo was awarded the Swedish Academy Translation Prize. She is also honorary doctor at Umeå University, Sweden, and Member of the Royal Swedish Academy of History & Belles-Letters. She is currently working on a collection of essays, *Den osynlige ärkebiskopen. Essäer om Olaus Magnus* (in print).