

No. 9: CARTA MARINA*Commentary*

Olaus Magnus (1490-1557) was born in Linköping, Sweden, and is best remembered for his brilliant exposition of the land and culture of Scandinavia in the *Carta marina* map (Venice, 1539) and his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, published in Rome in 1555. A member of a prominent family, he quickly became embroiled in the political and religious upheaval in Sweden in the first part of the sixteenth century. As a Swedish patriot, he exhorted his fellow countrymen and neighboring Norwegians to resist the power and influence of the Danes. As a Catholic priest, he worked strenuously to check the incursion of Lutheran principles into the northern countries, even taking a special mission to travel throughout the northernmost regions of Scandinavia. During these trips, he gathered the information on local topography, wealth, folklore, and customs that would become the foundation for his map.

At first glance, the *Carta marina* appears very geometric in its plotting of the seas and lands of northern Europe, Iceland, and part of Britain. It includes compass roses and loxodromes, and latitude and longitude are given in the margins. However, as one scholar has noted, this is but “idle display.”¹ Olaus actually knew very little about mathematics or astronomy, basing his placement of lands on nautical charts, but using a rectangular projection. Nevertheless, the *Carta marina* is a more detailed rendering of Scandinavia than its predecessors, such as Jakob Ziegler’s map.

The *Carta marina* shows life throughout Scandinavia, both on land and in the deep waters that surround it. In his *Historia*, Olaus dedicated a whole section to describing the monsters of the northern seas depicted on the *Carta marina*. He relied on the descriptions of sailors, with evidence culled from such authorities as Strabo and Pliny, and, of course, on his own imagination. Some creatures induced fear by their very mention, while others, such as the lobster, received scant notice. The lobster, shown in greatly exaggerated size on the map and gripping a man in its giant claws, was known to cling to whatever came into its grasp, especially if the object was hairy.

The scourge of the northern seas was the Spouter, or the leviathan (shown on the title page of the broadsheet), one of the many depictions of the monster on the map. Reaching lengths of 300 feet, the Spouter is shown here attacking a ship using its favorite method—rising above the yard-arms and, according to Olaus, shooting forth “the waves it has sucked into the tubes above its head in such torrents that it frequently sinks the stoutest ships under a downpour of water.” This malicious creature also used its “lamprey-like mouth” or its large tail to

grasp and squeeze the hapless vessels or used its back or tail to capsize them.² The only way to ward off this malevolent creature known to Olaus was to use a trumpet.

Not all of the denizens of the oceans were as destructive as the Spouter. Off the coast of Norway, the *Carta marina* shows four small fish, called *boloma* in Italian or *haafisck* in Norwegian, attacking a man (shown below the poem on the broadsheet). According to Olaus, they will drag him deeper into the water and then “devour his tenderer parts.” Their nefarious plot does not last long, for “then the ray appears on the scene, the avenger of their crimes.”³ This broad-headed fish swoops in and drives away the smaller fish. Furthermore, the ray either helps the injured man to shore or, if the unfortunate victim has died, he will guard the body.

A detail of the eastern coast of Iceland is illustrated on the page opposite the poem. Iceland was an exotic land for Olaus full of both danger and abundance. As one scholar has remarked, Olaus saw Iceland as utopia and dystopia all on the same island.⁴ The coast is shielded by glacial ice, jagged and dangerous, which stands in contrast to the ice on the rest of the *Carta marina*. On the European continent, ice provides entertainment, travel, and even business opportunities for Scandinavians, yet on the oceans it represents danger.

¹ Edward Lynam, *The Carta marina of Olaus Magnus, Venice 1539 & Rome 1572* (Jenkintown: Tall Tree Library, 1949), 5.

² Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, 3 vols., ed. Peter Foote, trans. Peter Fisher and Humphrey Higgens (London: Hakluyt Society, 1996-98), 3:1087-89.

³ Magnus, *Historia*, 3:1119.

⁴ Sumarliði Ísleifsson, “Carta Marina, Olaus Magnus and Iceland,” *IMCoS Journal* 83 (2000): 21-26.

Poem commissioned by the History of Cartography Project and written by Lucia Perillo. (See related story in the winter 2000 issue of the History of Cartography Project newsletter.) Commentary by Brian Covey. Broadsheet images taken from a colored facsimile of the Olaus Magnus map published by Kartbutiken (kartbutiken.online@kartbutiken.se) Broadsheet printed on Rives Heavyweight with a Vandercook No. 4 press at the Juniper Press, Madison, Wisconsin. Type is Walbaum set by Michael and Winifred Bixler, Skaneateles, New York. Blocks by Royal Graphix, La Crosse, Wisconsin. 282 copies have been initialed and numbered.

Published 2001 by the History of Cartography Project, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin, 550 North Park Street, Madison WI 53706-1491 USA. Phone: (608) 263-3992; Fax: (608) 263-0762 Email: hcart@geography.wisc.edu Website: <<http://www.geography.wisc.edu/histcart/>>