

# Olaus Magnus' Picture of the Corn Harvest in the Nordic Countries

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The picture on the cover of this journal is taken from the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* of Olaus Magnus, printed in Rome in 1555. The author was the exiled last Catholic Archbishop of Sweden. The picture illustrates Book 13, Chapter 8: On Various Ways of Harvesting.

Many years ago the author of this paper noticed that the picture, laterally reversed, is closely similar to one by Hans Holbein the younger in his *Icones veteris testamenti*, printed in Leiden in 1538. The paper analyses departures made from the prototype in order to give the content a more Scandinavian character.

It is shown how Olaus Magnus builds wholly or partly on Holbein's Bible illustrations in other cases too. Finally, some reflections are made on the value the former Archbishop attached to the pictorial material. Not least because of this material, his work became the oldest source of major significance for knowledge of Scandinavian folklife at the beginning of the modern era.

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The picture which adorns the cover of this journal is taken from Olaus Magnus' famous work *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, which was printed in Rome in 1555. The author was the last Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sweden (1490–1557) and was then living in exile.<sup>1</sup>

This picture (Fig. 1) illustrates Chapter 8 in Book 13 and is entitled "De diversitate messium colligendarum". On the left, there is a man with a sickle and a woman picking up the corn stalks after him to bind them into sheaves. On the right, there stands a man (the foreman?) and beside him the farmer holding a drinking vessel in his hand, ready to refresh his labourers with good ale. K. R. V. Wikman thinks that the latter is the main motif in the picture and refers to Olaus Magnus's statement at the end of the chapter about the subsequent harvest feast and its importance in connection with the institution of marriage (Wikman, 1939:26 f.). However, it should be pointed out that the surrounding chapters all deal with farming techniques and do not dwell on social questions.

From the fact that all the figures are de-

picted as left-handed, it is already clear that the picture is a mirror image and must thus have had an original. Some time in 1926 or 1927, I observed by chance that this original was to be found among Hans Holbein the younger's illustrations to the Old Testament, *Icones veteris testamenti*, executed in 1529–30 and printed at Leyden in 1538. A few years later, I presented my observations in an article in Swedish in *Fataburen* (Berg, 1934).<sup>2</sup>

In Holbein's book, the picture (Fig. 2) shows Ruth gleaning ears of corn in Boaz' field (Ruth, Chapter 2). It is, of course, of great interest to compare the original with Olaus' picture. In the latter, Boaz no longer appears wearing a Jewish cap and carrying a stick in his hand. He has been changed into a Swedish farmer in a jacket and a casquet. The foreman wears a beret with a feather in it and Ruth's large chaplet (of the kind which was customarily worn in the Alpine countries) has been exchanged for a simple head-scarf with hanging ends (cf. Geramb, 1931:117).

The wide folds in the seat of the trousers of the man who is cutting the corn also seem



Fig. 1. Harvesting Scene. Olaus Magnus' *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* 13:8. Rome 1555.

rather un-Swedish. But the composition of the whole scene, the arrangement of the figures and the ornamental details down to the stone on the ground are the same in both pictures. It only remains to observe that the wood-carver was a particularly poor dilettante in comparison with the excellent artist who engraved the biblical scene.

In addition, there is the peculiar fact that here, as Sigurd Erixon has pointed out, it is men who are wielding the sickle, whereas, "in the whole of Sweden, as well as in the greater part of the rest of northern and eastern Europe, this was the women's task" (Erixon, 1931:199 f.). It also looks as if the wood-carver wished to copy the toothed sickles in Holbein's picture. Such sickles did not, as far as is known, occur in Sweden in modern times. Only one find, dating from prehistoric times, is known in Sweden. On the other hand, this type is not uncommon in Norway (Myrdal, 1982:25; Petersen, 1951:130).

Naturally, I was anxious, after this chance observation of mine, to examine the rest of Olaus Magnus's pictures, in order to see if any more parallels could be demonstrated. However, the picture in question seems to be the only one in which the wood-carver copied the original so fully. On the other hand, he made use, in a fairly large number of cases, of parts and details which he later enlarged to form

complete pictures. There is an example of this in the vignette to the next chapter (13:9), in which the man with the scythe and the woman picking up the stalks recur in connection with a description of "how the little children are protected from snakes by hanging them up in baskets in the trees". In the above-mentioned paper, I presented several such cases, in which Holbein's illustrations had been used in making the vignettes.

Later on, John Granlund, in his great commentary, made a critical examination of my information and added some further cases. He calculated that altogether 21 pictures could be traced, in varying amounts of detail, back to Holbein's work. It was also of the greatest interest to note that he was able to show that Olaus, with remarkable rapidity, used one of the biblical illustrations for the *Carta marina*, which he published in 1539, i.e. the year after *Icones veteris testamenti* (Granlund 1951:596).

The illustrations in *Carta marina*, which are also distinguished by their very high, artistic quality, came to be the most important source for the illustrations in the historical work. Granlund estimates the number at 124 and this includes many of those that are the most interesting from the culture-historical point of view. The wood-cuts with culture-historical contents, for which it has not been possible to demonstrate any original and which Granlund

Fig. 2. Harvesting Scene. Ruth, Chapter 2. Hans Holbein the Younger, *Icones veteris testamenti*. Leyden 1528.



described as "Olaus Magnus' own", were estimated to number 228 in the commentary (Granlund, 1951:594 ff.).

However, Granlund also knew of other sources for the illustration of the history, though this concerned to a large extent illustrations that were of less importance from the documentary point of view. As regards the animal pictures, Hjalmar Grape had already pointed out a certain connection with *Dyalogus creaturarum moralizatus* (printed in Swedish in 1483) or one of its originals (Grape, 1942:328). This fact was analysed in greater detail by John Bernström (1958).

Down the years, several authors have analysed Olaus Magnus' illustrations from the factual point of view. Their results have generally been recorded in Granlund's great commentary. Later, there appeared, *inter alia*, Martin Olsson's analysis of Olaus Magnus' (unsatisfactory) picture of Kalmar Castle (Olsson, 1983:43 f.; cf. note 58 on a manuscript work about Olaus Magnus' pictures by Dr. Ragnhild Boström). However, further observations of direct originals have also been made by several scholars. In the Michaelis Society, which published the Swedish translation, as well as Granlund's commentary and several minor contributions to Olaus' biography, it has been

suggested that we should compile a record of what has happened since in this field.

Obviously, particular value attaches to those pictures from which it is possible to obtain information which goes beyond what is given in the text. The vignette to 19:28 (repeated in 2:118) has long been noted; in it, we see "the crane carrying a candle to bed", a reflection of a current popular belief in southern Sweden (von Sydow, 1916). A few cases of a similar kind may certainly be observed on closer analysis of the pictures. Such an analysis should also be concentrated on Olaus Magnus' method of presenting them. In his Postscript, Granlund expresses himself as follows on this point: "Probably it was only a few main facts which Olaus Magnus was anxious to illustrate by means of pictures and for these he apparently made the sketches himself, whereas he left it to the wood-carver to compose freely the ornamental details or the background, which may therefore seem strange or stereotyped" (Granlund, 1951:595). Also details from pictures with completely different motifs can, to a certain extent, be compared with Olaus' abundant quotations from classical and later literature, which have been explained with such learning by Granlund. To have recourse in this way to already existing material and thus to save one-

self the trouble of describing the course of events oneself was, as Granlund has finely sketched in his English introduction to the edition published in Denmark, part of the contemporary method of preparing an account of the step concerned here. A valuable, all-round illustration of Olaus Magnus' background and outlook has been given by Kurt Johannesson in his recently published book *Gotisk renässans* (1982).

Olaus Magnus' *Historia* has been called a "superb cultural history – the first work worthy of such a name to appear in Europe" (Copenhagen edition, 1972). At any rate, it is the oldest source of any importance of pictures illustrating manners and customs in the Nordic countries at the beginning of the modern era. When Olaus adorned his great work with all these pictures deriving from the life of the Scandinavian peoples, he was guided by the idea which he himself expressed in his preface: "Presentation by means of pictures is not only pleasing in itself and affords particularly great amusement but also has the faculty of retaining past events in the memory and of constantly representing them to our sight". But it is difficult to imagine that, when he put the book to press in the Brigittine monastery in Rome, he himself can have understood the importance that the illustrations would come to have and how frequently they would be used. Their importance and status justify a careful examination of the context and history of the individual figures, which, it is to be hoped, will be accomplished both now and in the future.

*Translation: Neil Tomkinson.*

## Notes

1. This work appeared in a large number of different editions in various languages. The original edition in Latin was reprinted in Copenhagen in 1972. A Swedish translation was published in four volumes between 1909 and 1925, and John Granlund published a one-volume commentary on it in 1951. This edition was reprinted (in a smaller format) in 1976. An English translation is in preparation for inclusion in the publications of the Hakluyt Society.
2. I learned afterwards that other scholars had also made the same observation, amongst them Carl Anton Ossbahr, the Keeper of the Royal Armoury (1859–1925; communication from Rudolf Cederström) and possibly also Kristofer Visted, the Norwegian museologist (1873–1949; communication from Nils Lid). Moreover, Arthur Sjögren, the artist, had observed that also August Strindberg had mentioned, in a letter to Hans Hildebrand, the Chief Custodian of National Antiquities, dated 21 December 1881, a drawing by Holbein as the original of the picture in Olaus Magnus's book (Sjögren 1941:24). Strindberg's letter has now been printed (Strindberg, 1950:334 ff.). Cf. Granlund 1951:595.

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