Journal of Northern Studies

Journal of Northern Studies

The *Journal of Northern Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic publication issued twice a year. The journal has a specific focus on human activities in northern spaces, and articles concentrate on people as cultural beings, people in society and the interaction between people and the northern environment. In many cases, the contributions represent exciting interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Apart from scholarly articles, the journal contains a review section, and a section with reports and information on issues relevant for Northern Studies.

The journal is published by Umeå University and Sweden's northernmost Royal Academy, the Royal Skyttean Society.

UMEÅ UNIVERSITY

ISSN 1654–5915

Journal of Northern Studies

Vol. 14 • No. 1 • 2020

Published by Umeå University & The Royal Skyttean Society

Umeå 2020

The *Journal of Northern Studies* is published with support from The Royal Skyttean Society and Umeå University at www.jns.org.umu.se

For instructions to authors, see www.jns.org.umu.se

ISSN 1654-5915

Cover picture
Scandinavia Satellite and sensor: NOAA, AVHRR
Level above earth: 840 km
Image supplied by METRIA, a division of Lantmäteriet, Sweden.
www.metria.se
NOAAR. cESA/Eurimage 2001. cMetria Satellus 2001

Design and layout
Leena Hortéll, Ord & Co i Umeå AB
Fonts: Berling Nova and Futura

Contents

Articles

Reviews

Dolly Jørgensen & Virginia Langum (eds.), *Visions of the North in Premodern Europe*, Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers 2018, ISBN: 9782503574752, 370 pp.

An impressive amount of erudition has gone into this project, not to mention linguistic skill. The cultures being surveyed span from ancient Greece and the Roman Empire to Early Modern Spain and Italy, ending in late Eighteenth-Century Paris. All of this is made accessible to an interested lay audience. All quotes are translated to English, and most authors take special care to describe the historical context about which they are writing, which means one need not be an expert to follow along. This contextualizing can lead to some unavoidable repetition, but nevertheless enables the individual entries to stand alone. Another welcoming feature for the intellectually curious is the Appendix, which provides translations of excerpts of primary source material. This buffet of expertise is available through open access, so everyone can stop by for a nibble or a full meal.

The editors, Dolly Jørgensen and Virginia Langum, introduce the volume with the statement: "The North is both a geographical region and an imaginative concept that varies, transforms, and coheres diachronically and synchronically according to the perspective adopted" (p. 1). A nod is made to Edward Said's O*rientalism*, but rather than the West defining the East, the bulk of the essays describe the South trying to make sense of the Otherness of the North.

In the first chapter, Pär Sandin looks at Early Greek Literature and the Hyperboreans, or the people from beyond the North wind. The view of the North seems to have been split. Some, such as Herodotus, thought the Hyperboreans were of the Scythian type, a rough and somewhat barbaric group with an affinity for horses, and others, most notably Pindar, depicted them as supernatural and sacred as well as "emblems of the perfect mortal condition" (p. 23). A thread that goes through many of the contributions in the volume is a consideration of the usefulness a given perception of the North might possess. What is the goal? Most often such depictions say more about the culture that produced them than any reality. That is certainly true of the Romans, according to Lewis Webb:

> Thule and Hypeborea, recurrent manifestations of northern alterity through-out Greek literature, were appropriated and transformed by Roman authors, not to disparage or praise northern societies, but as a self-reflexive discourse on Roman imperium and autocrats. Essentially, Thule and Hyperborea were not particularly dystopian or utopian spaces for Roman authors but, instead, were useful metonyms for Rome. (p. 52)

In Mirela Avdagic's look at early Greek and Roman geographers, the Romans in particular have a clear use for this evolving field:

> It should be noted that the development of geography as a discipline was closely connected to the expansion of the Roman Empire, and the writers were engaged in describing the "inhabited world" and "known world" to meet the needs of the growing Empire. (p. 64)

Further, it is this unknown, barbaric world that brings about the doom of the Roman Empire.

The Northmen famously settled in Normandy, giving that region its name. Barbara Auger looks at the written accounts of the history of Normandy, generated by firmly

Christian medieval writers who had very little material evidence of early Norman settlement. As Auger states, "[a]s non-Christian, the pre-baptism Northmen belonged to a fantastical other world polarized by infernal elements: sacrifice, blood, war, cold wind, polygamy" (p. 96). They are, however, eventually assimilated into the Christian narrative, much as the Northmen themselves assimilated into the local culture. This same Christian narrative is of keen importance to the Latin history writing of Twelfth-Century Norway, described by Stefan Hope. In this case, the historians are writing against the narrative of Norway being populated by beastly barbarians. Their focus is on the native holy men, such as Saint Olaf, thereby subsuming Norway into the salvation history of the Christian world (p. 111).

For me personally, one of the most interesting contributions in the volume came from co-editor Virginia Langum, "Cold Characters. Northern Temperament in the Premodern Imaginary." In recent years, there has been much discussion about whether the concept of race is applicable to medieval thought. As Langum succinctly sums it up:

> The debate centres upon how medieval thought understood differences between groups, whether difference is an essential, material, biological matter, or whether difference is more culturally conceived, with groups bounded by language, law, conventions, and customs. (p. 124)

Langum takes the approach of examining these ideas through the lens of medieval medicine, and how climate and geographical factors might influence the balance of the four humors: choler, blood, phlegm, and melancholia. These might also be expressed in terms of a balance of elements: cold, hot, wet, and dry. The balance of these elements could express themselves in terms of both temperament and external markers, such as skin color. Arabic thinkers thus could explain that the "cold and dry southerners were intelligent but weak, and the hot and wet northerners were stupid and strong" (p. 126). The French writer, Jean Bodin, could then go on to argue that this was why people from the North drank to excess: the body is greater than the soul, so the soul cannot dominate (p. 130). In other words, they can't help themselves.

Vicki Szabo's essay on the northern seas takes an ecocritical approach, sifting through accounts of transforming animal populations and monstrous whales, and interpreting them as "climate bellwethers, presaging more monstrous and massive ecological challenges that defined the premodern North" (p. 176). Also, with an ecocritical angle, Dolly Jørgensen considers Olaus Magnus' *A Description of the Northern Peoples* (1555) and his *Carta marina* in terms of the dangerous and useful animals depicted and how they are inferred to have been created by climate and geography.

Jeremy Deangelo looks at how images of the Sami impacted the perception of the Scots during the reign of James I. He tells the interesting historical anecdote of how James' wedding to Anne of Denmark was delayed in the autumn of 1589 because of storms in the North Sea. Anne had to turn back to Denmark, where James then sailed to meet her and stayed over the winter at the Danish Court. The bad weather was blamed on witchcraft, the magic of the Finnar (Sami). As a result, James entered into a series of witch hunts directed toward the North focusing on weather magic. Dawn Hollis also looks at Scotland as a particular incarnation of the North.

Mateo Ballester Rodriguez's essay on the images of the North in Early Modern Spain contained much information that was new to me. One of Miguel de Cervantes' last works, *The Travels of Persiles and Sigismunda. A Northern History* (1617) features the North prominently as a barbaric realm. Francisco López de Gomara was an important

chronicler of the New World, and he had lengthy chats with Olaus Magnus in Bologna and Venice, yet perpetrates the enduring myth of a day lasting half a year and one night another half a year, as well as the belief held by the ancients that in the North when people grow old, they kill themselves (p. 251). Spanish authors imagined the unknown savages of the North in terms of the known savage, which for Spain was the indigenous American (p. 244). Because they were unknown, the people of the North were invested with marvellous and fantastical qualities that the indigenous Americans did not share.

The red thread of the usefulness of various depictions of the North returns vividly in the essay by Helena Wangefelt Ström and Federico Barbierato, which views depictions of the North in the context of Early Modern Italy and its struggles with the Protestant reformation. The issues are summed up in a story about Queen Christina's reception in Rome after her conversion and abdication. She was to be given temporary housing in the Vatican in a place called the Tower of the Winds, which was decorated with frescoes depicting the four winds:

> Upon his [the Pope's] request, the biblical motto on the northern wall, O*mne malum ab Aquilone* (All evil comes from the North), was hastily painted over with a thick layer of paint to avoid the risk of offending the prominent guest. This rushed coverage and makeover of a wall was also a metaphorical act: a major change of identity was taking place, with some elements needing to be publicly eradicated while others could be usefully retained. Although the North had persistently been associated with the brave, dangerous, powerful, savage, bold, and evil, Christina's visit forced a quite literal cover-up of such evil associations. (pp. 279–280)

Indeed, the North had suddenly become quite useful for Catholic propaganda.

In his essay on the Faroe Islands and the Early Modern North, Kim Simonsen traces a general move from imagining the North as a place of darkness, death and evil towards an elevation of everything medieval "including the O*ssian cult*, the adoption of Nordic mythology, and de Staël's sublime image of the north" (p. 292). Stefan Donecker looks at the characterization from Jordanes of the North as "the womb of nations" and its use as a tool to enhance the prestige of the Swedish kingdom during *stormaktstiden*, the Swedish era of great power (p. 321). This, of course, culminates in Olaus Rudbeck's presentation of Sweden as the lost Atlantis. The final essay of the volume by Päiva Maria Pihlaja is written from a history of science perspective and shows how the French astronomer Jean Sylvain Bailly revisited Rudbeck's arguments, removed the patriotic content and instead harnessed "the idea of a universal progress, the starting point of which was a single northern location" (p. 343). Bailly suggests that the first advances in astronomy and of human civilization took place in Spitsbergen, an idea that was hardly welcomed in Enlightenment France.

In short, *Visions of North in Premodern Europe* covers a lot of ground, both literally and historically. There are some fresh perspectives presented upon some old issues, and it is indeed a valuable resource with something for everyone.

Susan C. Brantly
Dept. of German, Nordic, and Slavic
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA
sbrantly@wisc.edu