



# ARGUMENTS AGAINST BARBARISM. EARLY NA- TIVE, LITERARY CULTURE IN THREE SCANDINAVIAN NATIONAL HISTORIES

Johannes Magnus's History of Sweden (1554), Johannes Pontanus's History of Denmark (1631), and Tormod Torfæus's History of Norway (1711)

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*The article compares three Scandinavian national histories, all written in Latin, published between 1554 and 1711. While sharing the same basic message, viz. that Scandinavia can boast long traditions of refined civilization, they differ considerably in the way this is argued. While the oldest of them, Johannes Magnus' History of Sweden (1554), adopts a classicizing discourse using it as an indirect argument about ancient Scandinavian literacy, the two younger ones, Johannes Pontanus' History of Denmark (1631) and Tormod Torfæus' History of Norway (1711) display no such stylistical ambitions. Strongly influenced by the antiquarian revolution their argument in favour of early Scandinavian literacy is based on discussions of a wide variety of ancient and medieval texts, runic stones etc.*

## Introduction

In the early modern period the three Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, all had their national history written and published in Latin. The earliest of them, Johannes Magnus's history of Sweden, was written around 1530 and posthumously published in 1554. The next one, Johannes Pontanus's history of Denmark, is approximately 100 years younger, written in the 1620s and published in 1631. And towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century we find Tormod Torfæus working on his huge history of Norway, which was published in print in 1711.

It was the basic project of these three histories to present native, Scandinavian traditions to a European public, to describe the culture of the periphery in the literary language of the centre – thereby claiming that peripheral Scandinavia had a share in the culture of the centre, indeed that it be-

longed to the centre. Common to the three histories is their insistence that Scandinavians are not barbarians – and that they never were. On the contrary the early inhabitants of Scandinavia are described as having had an advanced intellectual culture.

On the following pages we shall follow how this theme, the high level of culture in early Scandinavia, is treated in the three national histories. They differ considerably in the way this is argued. These are differences which reflect changing conditions for writing national history in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries: Political circumstances and literary fashions underwent changes, the source material became richer, and together these factors combined to form new historiographical ideals.

### **The medieval History of Denmark by Saxo Grammaticus**

But first a common source and inspiration to all three authors should be mentioned. This is the medieval history of Denmark by Saxo Grammaticus written around 1200. Saxo tells the history of Denmark from the first king, Dan, who lived many generations before Christ and up to his own time. He wrote in Latin, a classicizing and stylistically ambitious Latin. He is a full-blown representative of the Twelfth Century Renaissance – and basically Saxo's project was the same as that of the later historians of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, to highlight native, Scandinavian traditions to a European public.

One of the peculiar features of Saxo's narrative is the inclusion of poems. The first half of the work is in fact a prosimetrum, a mixture of prose and poetry. Saxo built on a vernacular poetic tradition, not a purely Danish tradition, but an Old Norse tradition, which to some extent is known to us today. Also in the Old Norse sagas prosimetrum is a common feature, and Saxo's prosimetrical style is to be seen as a blend of Old Norse and Latin prosimetrical traditions.<sup>1</sup> He has used a number of classical metres. The history told in this first half of the work, moreover, is – discreetly – made to coincide in time with the centuries around the birth of Christ, that is with the Roman empire. The result is, in Karsten Friis-Jensen's words, that Saxo's verse can be seen as “a conscious emulation of pagan Roman poetry, an endeavour to establish a corpus of classical Danish poetry of similar age, grandeur, and thematic and metrical diversity.”<sup>2</sup>

Saxo's History of Denmark came to influence practically all succeeding national historiography in Denmark. The first printed edition of Saxo's work came in 1514, printed in Paris. It became a great success in learned European circles – Erasmus of Rotterdam, in the dialogue *Ciceronianus* (1528),

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<sup>1</sup> Friis-Jensen 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Friis-Jensen 1987, 178 (cf. note 1).

had one of the interlocutors express his surprise that such elegance and learning should have existed in the barbarian North in a barbarian period. The publication seems to have been part of a political power struggle. The Danish King Christian II (1513-1523) wanted to secure his position as king of the Kalmar Union between Denmark, Norway and Sweden, a position threatened by Swedish attempts to gain independence. Saxo's grand history may be seen as an emphatic statement of Danish power, well suited to support the king's claim.<sup>3</sup>

### **Johannes Magnus's History of Sweden (1554)**

In the following years tensions between Denmark and Sweden (still formally united) grew – culminating in the massacre of Stockholm in 1520 where more than 70 Swedish noblemen were executed. Three years later Christian II was forced into exile, and the union between the Nordic countries was dissolved. In Swedish leading circles anti-Danish feelings were vehement. They found an eloquent expression in the grand Swedish history by Johannes Magnus, Catholic arch-bishop, who was himself forced into exile when the new king, Gustavus Vasa, began to carry through the Protestant Reformation in Sweden. Based in Italy Magnus wrote his extremely influential History of Sweden around 1530. It was printed for the first time in Rome in 1554. Johannes Magnus himself had died fourteen years earlier, and it was his brother Olaus Magnus who procured the publication.<sup>4</sup>

Johannes Magnus's work tells the history of Sweden from the earliest times – from the Deluge – up to his own day. Noah's grandson Magog settled in Sweden and inaugurated a veritable Gothic Golden Age, long time before the other ancient empires. Magnus thus provided the Swedes with a link to biblical history, making the Goths direct descendants of Noah.<sup>5</sup>

Magnus's celebration of the ancient Goths – an ideology often referred to as Gothicism – has much in common with the contemporary Germanistic movement.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by Tacitus's description of the Germans in the *Germania*, which had recently been discovered and was published in print in several editions already before 1500, German humanists were able to describe the ways of living and the moral habitus of the ancient Germans in positive terms, against the contemptuous accusations of barbarism from Italian hu-

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<sup>3</sup> Friis-Jensen 1989.

<sup>4</sup> *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque regibus* (Rome 1554). The work was reprinted in Basel 1558; quotations in this article are from the 1558-edition.

<sup>5</sup> The modern standard work on Johannes Magnus and Olaus Magnus is Johannesson 1982 (eng. transl. 1991) (with further references).

<sup>6</sup> On Gothicism in general, see Svennung 1967. A seminal collection of articles on Swedish Gothicism is Nordström 1934. On the Germanistic movement, see the modern standard work by Ridé 1977.

manists. Magnus's Goths share the German virtues, but Magnus went considerably further in his detailed constructions of the earliest past.

As mentioned Magnus belonged to the Swedish elite who had for generations during the Union of Kalmar been in opposition to the Danish dominance. His antipathy towards everything Danish permeates his History of Sweden.

The relationship between his work and Saxo's History of Denmark is intriguing. For one thing Saxo's work served as a very important source of material for the older history. At the same time, however, it was clearly a great provocation and as such also an inspiration. Magnus wants to give the Swedes a national history that not only matches but also makes the better of the recently published medieval history of Denmark.

This complicated relationship with Saxo comes out in the beginning of the Swedish history. Magnus, like Saxo, describes his sources to the oldest history, and thereby he manages to convey the impression of advanced literacy.

First let us take a look at Saxo's description of his sources in the preface. The old Danes, says Saxo, used to compose poetry, and they inscribed commemorative poems in stones in their native language. To these tracks I adhere, says Saxo, and I have 'rendered one metre with another.' Moreover he informs his readers that he has made ample use of the treasures of historical knowledge collected by the diligent Icelanders:

*Saxo*

Nec ignotum volo Danorum antiquiores conspicuis fortitudinis operibus editis, gloriæ emulatione suffusos: Romani stili imitatione non solum rerum a se magnifice gestarum titulos exquisito contextus genere veluti **poetico quodam opere** perstrinxisse: verumetiam **maiorum acta patrii sermonis carminibus** vulgata linguę suę litteris **saxis ac rupibus insculpenda** curasse. Quorum vestigiis seu [*modern editions: ceu*] quibusdam **antiquitatis voluminibus** inherens tenoremque veris translationis passibus æmulatus: metra metris reddenda curavi: quibus scribendorum series subnixa, non tam recenter conflata quam antiquitus edita cognoscatur. Quia præsens opus non nugacem sermonis luculentiam: sed fidelem vetustatis notitiam pollicetur ...

Quorum [the men of Iceland] thesauros historicarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosius consulens, **haud paruum præsentis operis partem** ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui. Nec arbitros habere contempsi: quos tanta vetustatis peritia callere cognoui." (Preface, Fol. 1v (1514-ed.))

(I should like it to be known that Danes of an older age, filled with a desire to echo the glory when notable braveries had been performed,

alluded in the Roman manner to the splendour of their nobly-wrought achievements with choice compositions of a poetical nature; not only that, but they engraved the letters of their own language on rocks and stones to retell those feats of their ancestors which had been made popular in the songs of their mother tongue. Adhering to these tracks, as if [*cf. below*] to some ancient volumes, and following the sense with the true steps of a translator, I have assiduously rendered one metre by another. My chronicle, relying on these aids, should be recognised not as something freshly compiled but as the utterance of antiquity; this book is thereby guaranteed to be a faithful image of the past, not a flashy exhibition of style . . .

Thus I have scrutinised their [the men of Iceland] store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of this present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognised such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses]. (Translated by Peter Fisher).

Johannes Magnus's old Goths have left similar traces. Indeed, Magnus's debt to Saxo also comes out in verbal borrowings (here marked in bold):

*Johannes Magnus*

Sed necessariò prius ostendam, quibus autoribus suffultus res patriæ in historiam conferre decreui: Fuerat enim ab origine regni Gothorum magnus in eius incolis gloriæ & laudis appetitus. Proinde præclara **maiorum gesta** in **carmina** & uersus **quodam poëtico more**, sed **patrio sermone**, redigere curauerunt: eaque in conuiujs, ut iuuentutem ad uirtutem excitarent, frequenter concinebant: quæ tandem, ne æui longæua uetustate aboleri possent, **rupibus & saxis insculpserunt**, a quibus ego **non paruam scribendæ historiæ materiam** mutuare **curauit**. Deinde non pauca **antiquissima uolumina**, quæ publica sacerdotum Vpsalensium fide, & Gotico sermone ac caractere conscripta atque hinc illinc dispersa inueni, ad mei instituti negocium accomodaui.

(ed. 1558, p. 20-21)

(But it is necessary that I first make it clear on which authorities I have decided to base my history of the fatherland. Right from the beginning of the Gothic nation there was among the inhabitants a great desire for honour and glory. Therefore they took care to render their ancestors' great deeds in poems and verses of a certain poetical kind, in their mother tongue; they would often recite them at parties in order to inspire the youth to virtue. Eventually they engraved them in rocks and stones to prevent them from being destroyed in the course of time; from them I have borrowed no small amount of material for my historical work. Besides I have, for this project, been able to make use of

quite a few very old volumes which I found scattered around written in the Gothic language and with Gothic letters and authorized by the Uppsala priests).

Magnus here explains that the Goths used to commemorate great deeds in songs that they sang to the youth to inspire them to great deeds. And in order to preserve these songs they had them written in stones. These stones, Magnus says, have supplied him with much material. Magnus like Saxo mentions both the commemorative songs and the inscriptions in stones – and points to the latter as his sources. His wording suggests direct influence from Saxo, as indicated in the quotation above. In other words, he adapts Saxo’s survey of Danish source material to the – much older – Gothic culture.

Magnus then adds another source – books (*uolumina*). This type of source is not, apparently, mentioned by Saxo. However, even in this respect Magnus probably elaborated on his Danish predecessor. The wording of the 1514-edition of Saxo’s history does in fact suggest that Danes of long gone ages wrote books, *uolumina* – and that Saxo had had access to these books. According to the 1514-edition Saxo says (in the passage quoted above): “Quorum vestigiis seu quibusdam antiquitatis voluminibus inherens ...” (Adhering to these tracks or to some ancient volumes ...). Modern editions of Saxo’s text here read *ceu* (as if) instead of *seu* (or). This small difference of a single letter is significant. The *seu*-reading may well be taken to mean that Saxo indicates that he has used books written in the early Danish past. Johannes Magnus, I think, seized on this suggestion of an old Danish bookish culture, applying it (as he had done with the other sources mentioned by Saxo) to the older Gothic culture. And he then – a typical feature of his construction of the early past – elaborates on this vague suggestion by adding a number of precise circumstances: The Gothic priests in Uppsala were keepers of books written in Gothic with Gothic letters, and somehow – no details are given – Magnus was able to consult them.

Magnus leaves out the Icelanders mentioned by Saxo. His ancient sources are purely native, Gothic. He builds on Saxo’s indication of types of sources – poetical traditions, inscription on stones, and “books” – but he makes it exclusively Gothic, and he pushes it back in time to the period shortly after the Flood.

A little later Magnus returns to this astonishingly early literacy of the Goths. Their letters were runes, and he here inserts the runic alphabet, which, as he suggests, may even go back to the time before the Flood. Magnus’s Goths were thus far superior to the Romans (and, of course, to the Danes), and this is spelt out quite directly. The inhabitants of the North

knew the art of writing a long time before the Latin letters were invented, he declares.<sup>7</sup>

Having shown a woodcut of the runic alphabet Magnus continues:

His apicibus res gestas in lapidibus exprimentes sempiternæ hominum memoriæ tradiderunt. **Quibus etsi Romani sermonis notitia**, quæ tunc ante Romam conditam nulla erat, abesset, attamen **tanta** ad eloquentiæ studium, & ad scribendum patrias poëses diligentia eos inflammavit, **ut** non solum pueri modesti (quod Romanos longo post tempore fecisse scribit Cato) cantaturi carmina antiqua, in quibus laudes erant maiorum, passim instituerentur, uerumetiam graues uiri in tibias de clarorum uirorum uirtutibus (ut etiam hodie fit) canerent: tantusque erat doctrinæ honor & præmium, ut sapientibus non modo sceptræ & regna, uerumetiam diuinos honores plerique impenderent. (1558-ed., p. 31-32)

(Using these letters they told of deeds in stones and thus transmitted them to live forever in the memory of posterity. Even when they had no knowledge of the Roman language, which did not exist before the foundation of Rome, they took such care to pursue eloquence and to put down their fathers' poetry in writing that not only were mere boys instructed to sing the old songs in which their forefathers were praised (as the Romans according to Cato did much later), but even men of respectable age played the flute and sang about the excellent deeds of famous men (as can also be seen nowadays). And so great was the honour of learning and the reward to be had that wise men were given not only scepters and ruling power but also divine honours by many people).

Once more Magnus here adapts Saxo's admiring words about the early Danes to his Gothic context. Saxo had declared:

Quantum porro ingenii illius homines historiarum edituros putemus: si scribendi sitim latininitatis peritia pauissent? **Quibus tametsi Romanæ vocis notitia abesset: tanta** tradendæ rerum suarum memoriæ cupido incessit: vt voluminum loco vastas moles amplecterentur, codicum vsum a cautibus mutuantes? (Preface, Fol 1v (1514-ed.))

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<sup>7</sup> "Credendum tamen non est, ipsos Aquilonares omnino caruisse scriptoribus rerum a se magnifice gestarum, cum longe ante inuentas literas Latinas, & ante quam Carmenta ex Græcia ad ostia Tyberis & Romanum solum cum Euandro peruenisset, expulsisque Aboriginibus gentem illam rudem mores & literas docuisset, Gothi suas literas habuerint. Cuius rei indicium præstant eximiæ magnitudinis saxa, ueterum bustis ac specubus apud Gothos affixa: quæ literarum formis insculpta persuadere possint, quod ante uniuersale diluuium, uel paulo post, gigantea uirtute ibi erecta fuissent. Literæ uero hæ sunt: ALPHABETVM GOTHICVM" (Magnus, 1558-ed., 30-31, on Siggo the 5. Gothic king)

(Moreover, how much historical writing might we suppose men of such genius would have published if they had slaked their thirst for composition knowing Latin? Even when they had no acquaintance with the Roman tongue, they had such an urge to transmit their reord to posterity that in the absence of books they resorted to massive boulders and granite for their pages). (Translated by Peter Fisher).

Magnus's Goths are, needless to say, superior to Saxo's Danes. Saxo's point is that since the old Danes used stones to commemorate great deeds, their intellectual output would have been marvellous, had they only known Latin; still they managed to commemorate deeds in writing, by inscribing them in stone: "in the absence of books they resorted to massive boulders and granite for their pages."

Magnus also notes that his protagonists, the Goths, did not know Latin. But he invests this statement with another meaning. They did not master Latin, because it did not exist, the Gothic nation being much older than the Roman. They held eloquence and learning in high esteem and knew the art of writing long before the Romans. Magnus thus makes it absolutely clear that the Goths *surpass* the Romans in age-old civilization – whereas the implication of Saxo's statement is that the Danes were *almost on a par with* the Romans.

That Magnus's Goths are also superior to the Danes is argued indirectly, through the verbal borrowings from Saxo. A few pages further the anti-Danish polemics become unmistakable. We have now reached the sixth Gothic king, Erik 1<sup>st</sup>. Erik makes good and just laws and benefits his Gothic subjects in many ways. Among his praiseworthy actions is his establishment of a colony for the few criminals among the Goths. They are to be sent to some small, uninhabited islands south of Sweden. Thus Denmark, in Magnus's account, begins as a place where criminals are sent – while peace reigns in Gothic Sweden after the disposal of these criminal elements. These accomplishments are summed up in a poem put in the mouth of Erik himself. It was originally composed in the native tongue, we are told, and as such it is widespread among people.<sup>8</sup> Magnus has adapted it to the form in which it is presented here, viz. Latin Sapphic stanzas:

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<sup>8</sup> "Circumferuntur in tota patria ante publicum omnium conspectum carmina patrio sermone de eius gestis ab antiquissimo æuo ædita, in quibus præter cætera multa, sequentium uersuum sensus habetur." (Magnus, 1558-ed., 33).

Erik I, 6. Gothic king (1558-ed. p. 33-34)

<p>Primus in regnis Gethicis coronam  Regiam gessi, subijque Regis  Munus, &amp; mores colui sereno      Principe dignos.</p>	<p>(I was the first to wear a royal  crown in the Gothic realm, I took  upon me a king's duties and led a  life appropriate to a peaceful  prince.</p>
<p>Horrui quicquid furor aut libido  Suasit, &amp; nulli grauis aut molestus,  Sed probus, uiuens timui præesse      More tyranni.</p>	<p>I detested everything that was  spurred by rage or passion. To no  one was I hard or irksome. On the  contrary, I was righteous and  sought to avoid ruling like a tyrant.</p>
<p>Legibus iustis populos gubernans  Præfui: nullus pauor innocenteis  Terruit: iudex procul est iniquus      Me duce pulsus.</p>	<p>I governed my people with just  laws. No fear haunted the innocent.  The unjust judge was driven far  away under my leadership.</p>
<p>Daniæ regnum caruit colonis,  Donec illius regionis agros  Gotthicas gentes habitare iussi.      Sed sine Rege.</p>	<p>The Danish realm had no inhabi-  tants until I ordered Goths to settle  on the fields of that area – but  without a king.</p>
<p>Non erant pauci populi rebelles,  Quos metus legum uetuit morari  Gotthica in terra, uel habere sedeis      nter honestos.</p>	<p>There were quite a few rebels  whose fear of the law prevented  them from settling on Gothic soil  and living permanently among de-  cent people. By driving them far  away to the remote Cimbrian re-  gions, I provided stable and peace-  ful conditions for the others; nor  did they have to fear the abomina-  ble band.</p>
<p>His ego pulsus procul in remotas  Cimbricas terras, reliquis quietem  Præstiti firmam: nec erat timenda  Turba nefanda.</p>	<p>Having summoned judges I sub-  jected these people to a fair trial.  For a long time they did not have it  in their power to resist such pres-  sure,</p>
<p>Donec Humelo Gothico tyranno,  Natus est Danus similis parenti:</p>	<p>Until a son was born to the Gothic  tyrant Humelus, a son called Dan,</p>

<p>Qui dedit nomen titulumque regni Gentibus illis.</p>	<p>who resembled his father. He gave to those people their name and the designation of their realm.</p>
<p>Non tamen Danos potuit tributo Debito Gotthis liberare, quorum Maximas uires metuebat ipse Viribus impar.</p>	<p>He could not, though, free the Danes from paying the tribute due to the Goths, whose great strength he feared being himself inferior.</p>
<p>Hinc satis iusta est ratio, coarctans Danicos Reges, quod in omne tempus Gothico Regi referant tributa, Collaque subdant.</p>	<p>This is the just reason constraining the Danish kings to pay tribute to the Gothic king forever, bowing their necks.)</p>

Erik here congratulates himself with the establishment of Denmark as a colony – foreseeing that the Danes will always be subjected to Gothic power. The main statement of the poem – which is conspicuously placed very early in the work – is the constant humiliation of the Danes.

At the same time the imitation of Saxo is obvious. Magnus has here inserted a poem in a classical metrum in his account of the earliest Swedish past, just as Saxo, as earlier mentioned, included a number of classicizing poems in the first half of his *History of Denmark*. Like Saxo's poems this one is put into the mouth of an acting person, being rendered as direct speech. And as Saxo in his preface underlines that he builds on vernacular poetry, Magnus presents the poem as a Latin rendering, also metrically, of a vernacular poem. I think it is fair to say that Magnus invites his readers to a comparison with Saxo – with the ironical twist that the poem celebrates the Swedish king's defeat of the Danes. And indirectly the comparison will point to the cultural superiority of the Goths, who mastered this advanced poetry so long before the Danes.

Also the relationship to classical culture is ambiguous. On one hand Magnus's Goths, as we have seen, outdo the Romans by far in age-old civilisation. On the other hand Magnus, by his classicizing rendering, manages to lift this allegedly ancient piece of poetry into a highly civilized sphere, on a par with – not surpassing – classical literature. While explicitly claiming superiority, indirectly Magnus appropriates Renaissance Latin literary ideals.

### **Johannes Pontanus's *Rerum Danicarum historia* (1631)**

It is tempting to smile at Magnus's construction of a Gothic past reaching back to Noah. But it must be remembered that linking national origins to the

sons of Noah was in itself absolutely un-controversial. The crucial issue was how detailed one was able to follow this line. And in this respect Magnus was surely rather inventive.

The biblical link was an important feature – and it was a feature missing in the existing Latin History of Denmark by Saxo Grammaticus written around 1200. In spite of all its stylistical and other merits which made it attractive by 16<sup>th</sup> century humanistic standards, Saxo's grand work had its drawbacks: It did not, of course, cover the period after ca 1185, nor did it provide Denmark with the biblical link. Danish history, as Saxo presents it, takes its beginning with the mythical King Dan many generations before the birth of Christ. A new history of Denmark was called for, the more so after the publication of Johannes Magnus's Swedish history with its constant denigration of the Danish neighbours. As Magnus had been inspired and provoked by Saxo, so succeeding generations of Danish historians wrote in polemical dialogue with Magnus.

The Danish government engaged itself in the production of a new up-to-date History of Denmark. Various men were engaged in the last half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but it was not until 1631 that a Dutch-Danish historian, Johannes Pontanus, historiographer to the Danish king Christian IV, was able to publish a new Latin History of Denmark.<sup>9</sup>

Pontanus had access to a wide variety of printed texts. By modern standards his strategy is much more scholarly than that of Magnus. His account does not contain any of the fantastic constructions of ancient Gothic (or Cimbrian) culture, which are so characteristic of Magnus. Like other contemporary historians Pontanus professed his disbelief in traditional legendary lore, and he claims that knowledge of the Danish past does not go further back in time than the classical sources that tell of Cimbrian invasions around 100 BC. The biblical link is established, but otherwise we do not have evidence of the inhabitants of Denmark until they occur in classical texts, says Pontanus.

This cautious approach does not mean, however, that he is a stranger to extolling Danish bravery and heroic conquerings. But he focusses on the late classical and early medieval period, telling the history of the Cimbrians, Goths, Angli, Longobards etc – all of them coming from Scandinavia and many of them from Denmark in particular. In Pontanus's view the Danes have a huge share in the Gothic glory – at least as much as the Swedes, since the name of Jutland is so clearly related to the word stem Goth-

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<sup>9</sup> The following discussion is based on Skovgaard-Petersen 2002 (with further references).

Although Pontanus declares his lack of trust in the early history as told by Saxo, there are important exceptions. Pontanus goes at some length to demonstrate that the ancient Danes had a rich literary life. In this connection Saxo is useful and not met with Pontanus's scepticism in a passage that well illustrates the old tension between Italian and Northern European humanists. Pontanus here takes his point of departure in the Italian historian Paolo Giovio (1486-1552), who had expressed a rather negative view of ancient German intellectual life. Pontanus argues against this criticism – which is taken to include also Scandinavia – by quoting the words from Saxo's preface about the old Danish poetry and the commemorative inscriptions on stone. Pontanus's point is, however, that these words are confirmed by Tacitus, a trustworthy classical author (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD), and that they can be seen as an explanation of Tacitus's words in the *Germania* about the Germans' songs which served as their annals. Likewise he sees Saxo's mention of bards (*skjoldri*) explained by a reference in another classical historian, Ammianus Marcellinus (4<sup>th</sup> cent. AD). Thus his basic message is the same as Magnus', *vice versa*: The ancient Danes were not illiterate, on the contrary. But his argument rests on the agreement between Saxo and the classical historians, his point of departure being that the latter are to be trusted.<sup>10</sup>

Stylistically Pontanus subscribes to other ideals than Magnus. His work is full of quotations from other authors, classical, medieval, and contemporary authors, quotations of documents, inscriptions – in several languages. Pontanus does not attempt to create the stylistic unity that characterizes the polished classical historians and their renaissance successors, such as Magnus. His extensive knowledge of European intellectual history is apparent on every page, not by imitation but by arguments, references, and quotations.

There is another significant exception to his dismissal of the early part of Saxo. Pontanus did not discard the early Saxo completely, but added an ap-

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<sup>10</sup> “At idem Jovius si ad gentis, præsertim Danicæ, acta antecedentia mentem flexisset, etiam antiquissimis seculis cum Marte coluisse Musas comperisset, &, ut Saxo habet noster, “eandem conspicuis fortitudinis editis operibus, gloriæ æmulatione suffusam, Romani styli imitatione non solum rerum a se magnifice gestarum titulos exquisito contextus genere, veluti poëtico quodam opere perstrinxisse; verum etiam majorum acta patrij sermonis carminibus vulgata, linguæ suæ literis, saxis ac rupibus insculpenda curasse.” Scilicet hoc ipso docere quasi nos volens, quid id esset quod Tacitus initio sui libri de Germanis memorat, eos “antiquis celebrare carminibus (quod unum apud illos memoriæ & annalium genus est) Tuisconem Deum & filium Mannum”: antiqua nimirum Carmina, has ipsas memorias hosque annales intelligendos, qui, rupibus insculpti, vastis semolibus ostentarent, codicum usum a cautibus mutuantes. In his præcipue ingeniis ingentisque spiritus viris primum sibi apud Danos vindicarunt jam olim locum, quos Scioldros vocitabant. Eos subinde fatidicos & triplex eorum genus agnoscit Saxo. Quos nec alios fuisse, quam qui Ammiano Marcellino Bardi, Eubages & Druides appellantur, alibi demonstravimus.” (Pontanus 1631, *Rerum Danicarum historia*, 779).

pendix to the first of the ten books, retelling this legendary past briefly – duly professing his own scepticism. On these pages he includes some of the early poems from Saxo, the poems put into the mouth of acting persons, rendered by Saxo in classical metres. So here Pontanus uses indirect stylistic arguments to depict the advanced literary level of the ancient Danes who talked in Latin metres – just as Saxo and later Magnus had done.

### **Tormod Torfæus's *Rerum Norvegicarum historia* (1711)**

During the years when Pontanus wrote his great History of Denmark, systematic collection and research into the runic monuments had begun to take place in Sweden. The central figure was Johan Bure, and soon similar Danish initiatives were taken, notably by Ole Worm. Again Danish-Swedish rivalry played an important role. Which of the two countries could claim to have the earliest runes? Which of them had the richest material? Who had the most competent researchers? In a competitive atmosphere important progress was made towards gaining an overview of the existing runic inscription and towards reading and understanding them.<sup>11</sup>

Pontanus's work is uninfluenced by these new insights into the runic monuments. As far as I can see, he does not mention runes at all except for the reference to the old inscriptions in stones in the passage just quoted. This is a surprising omission considering that the existence of runes had been known all along, as also the runic alphabet in Magnus's history shows.

Another field of historical study that was eagerly expanded by Swedish and Danish historians in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was the Old Norse literature. It was realized that these medieval narratives contained much information on the earliest Scandinavian past. The two governments hired Icelanders to obtain and to translate this saga material, and a small revolution in the study of the earliest Scandinavian past took place.

Thus all the three types of sources mentioned by Saxo in his preface – oral poetry, inscriptions, and the Icelandic narrative traditions – were explored in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, since the Old Norse texts also threw light on the oral tradition. Ironically these new insights led to a more serious rejection of Saxo as source to the earliest past.

This leads us to the third of our Neo-Latin historians, the Icelander Tormod Torfæus, who wrote a huge history of Norway towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A subject also discussed in the article by Mortensen in the present volume. There is a strong tradition in Swedish scholarship for studying the national intellectual history. Here let me just refer to a general survey of Swedish literature and historical research in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: Schück and Warburg 1927, cf. also Nordström 1934, as mentioned in note 6. Danish intellectual history in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is the subject of Petersen 1929.

century.<sup>12</sup> He was, like Pontanus, engaged by the Danish-Norwegian king to do so. Norway had been united with Denmark for centuries, but Norwegian history had only figured dimly in Pontanus's and others' histories of Denmark hitherto. In the last decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Norway's place in the double monarchy was strengthened in connection with the introduction of absolute monarchy in Denmark in 1660-61. This is part of the political background for the new government's interest in supporting the production of a separate Norwegian history. Moreover, the increased attention to the Old Norse heritage also forms part of the background for the governmental interest in promoting a history of Norway.

Torfæus's Norwegian history is a pioneering work. He is the first to present to the learned world the treasure of medieval Old Norse literature. These sagas present themselves as history, and on the basis of them Torfæus constructs a Norwegian past stretching long back in time.

In his long preface Torfæus gives an interesting and learned exposition of this material, a history of Icelandic medieval literature. Regarding the literary life in the remotest past he draws up a typology of commemorative stones and stresses the tradition of bards (*skjaldri*), singers to the magnates. So in a general way the same picture emerges as in Saxo, Magnus and Pontanus: The old Norwegians were so eager to gain glory and preserve the memory of great deeds that they used the available media to do so. But unlike Magnus and Pontanus Torfæus does not need Saxo to build up this picture. His Icelandic sources – a much richer material – are fully sufficient. Saxo plays a very minor role in Torfæus's preface.

Another noteworthy feature is the way Torfæus links the oldest Norwegian history to the biblical past. Based on Snorre and some of the Edda poems Torfæus constructs both a Norwegian list of kings going back to Odin, whom Torfæus regards as an ordinary human only later cultivated as a god – and a list from Odin back to Priamus and from Priamus back to Noah. These lists are without lacunas. Torfæus takes care to stress that many of the old stories are full of fabulous elements, but they do have a kernel of truth. So basing his knowledge on the Old Norse material Torfæus like Magnus earlier establishes an unbroken chain back to Noah. The scepticism seen in Pontanus regarding the possibility of knowing anything before the classical authors is completely gone in Torfæus's work – due to his trust in this “new” treasure, the Old Norse sagas.

But if Magnus and Torfæus share this optimism, their stylistical message is not the same. We saw that Magnus presented a poem in Sapphic stanzas,

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<sup>12</sup> On Torfæus's colourful life, see e.g. Petersen 1929, 790-800. His *Historia rerum Norvegicarum* is discussed in Skovgaard-Petersen 2003 (with further references) and in the article by Mortensen in the present volume.

thus appropriating renaissance classicizing discourse and transferring it to the old Gothic culture. This is an indirect claim that the Goths were on a par with the Romans, and *mutatis mutandis* Saxo – historian of the twelfth century renaissance – had done the same. Torfæus’s style resembles that of Pontanus, scholarly and argumentative and full of quotations, without any attempt at such classicizing appropriation. But Torfæus goes one step further, proclaiming this pedestrian style to be the appropriate; he does not want to dress his account in artificial and exotic Latin elegance, but prefers to retain the simple, un-affected style that suits the Nordic people, the style that is truly theirs.

Ironically, Torfæus could have adhered even closer to his Old Norse models had he included the poems which are part of them – and which Saxo, as we saw, took care to render in Latin metres, from where a few of them made their way to the histories of Magnus and Pontanus. But Torfæus was probably not able to understand these complicated verse in their original Old Norse version and therefore refrained from including them.

Anyway, the point is that also stylistically Torfæus has a message about a Nordic civilisation independent of the Latin, continental tradition – and we still hear the echoes of the German humanists extolling the simple lifestyle of the old Germans. So what I would like to stress finally, is that although we naturally categorize Saxo as medieval and the three others as early modern historians, it also makes sense to group Saxo and Magnus together as renaissance historiographers, who adopt a classicizing discourse using this Roman style as an indirect argument about ancient Scandinavian literacy. Opposed to them stand Pontanus and Torfæus. Their style is not classicizing and artful. Their argument in favour of early Scandinavian literacy is based on their discussions of a wide variety of texts, runic stones etc. They are marked by “the antiquarian revolution” in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

But the common concern of all these four Scandinavian historians, from Saxo to Torfæus, was to demonstrate that the age-old Nordic civilisation formed part of Europe while at the same time it could boast its own independent cultural traditions.

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