From Pytheas to Olaus Magnus. Early Cartographic Descriptions of the Nordic Countries

The first cartographic description of the Nordic countries, where its shape was depicted approximately corresponding to its true outline, was compiled by Andreas Bureus, a Swede, in 1626. It had taken c. 1300 years from the first experience-based information of the region to actually having a map drawn.

The authors of Antiquity had various hear-say and literary knowledge concerning the northern conditions, but they produced only a little cartographic material. Their oikumene – the inhabited world – stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the river Ganges, and from the forests of Germany to the edge of Sahara.

The oikumene spread out to the north through the first geographical voyage of exploration made by Pytheas from Massilia (Marseille), a skilled Greek navigator, in c. 325 B.C. He sailed north from the British Isles for six days, and arrived to an inhabited place close to the frozen sea. He named it Thule and said it was an island. His written text has vanished, but accounts of it are found in the works of Strabo and Pliny the Elder. Strabo greatly disputed Pytheas’s information, and called him a liar.

Circa hundred years later, Pytheas’s Thule appeared on the map. Eratosthenes (276 – 196 B.C), the head of the Alexandria Library, trusted Pytheas’s information and placed the island on the northernmost part in his map. His famous map from c. 240 B.C. has not survived, but with Strabo’s references it has been possible to reconstruct it.

Claudius Ptolemy (c. 90 – 168), the pre-eminent Greek astronomer, geographer and cartographer of his time, and the head of the Alexandria Library, published his impressive work Geografike hyfegesis, or Geographia, in c. 160. This work is one of the great landmarks in cartographic development and had resounding effects on Renaissance mapmaking some fourteen hundred years after it was written. No original copies of the work have survived, but manuscripts purporting to be from it were brought to Europe from Byzantium during the Middle Ages, and copies of them were made. They contained 27 “Ptolemaic maps” – one world map and 26 regional maps. Ptolemy’s description of the North was influenced by Eratosthenes, and he, too, drew the island of Thule to the northern limit of the known world, which on his map was 63° N.lat. In addition to Thule, Ptolemy had more knowledge of the region based on information given by Strabo, Tacitus and others. Thanks to Ptolemy, the region of Denmark – the Cimbric peninsula – and parts of other Nordic countries were described in the map, as he drew them as an island he named Scandia.

The influence of Antiquity on medieval cartography was slight because under the powerful influence of the Church, also cartography was generally based on the Bible. Maps were formal and symbolic, mostly for religious purposes. The description of the Nordic countries was insignificant in them, including the famous world maps, the Ebstorf (c. 1235) and Hereford (c. 1290) mappamundis.

The so-called Tabula Rogeriana was one exception among the medieval maps. The world map was compiled by Abû al-Idrïsî (1100–1166), an Arab geographer and cartographer, at the request of Roger II, King of Sicily. Information was gathered in a new method for the map – sending trustworthy men to different countries, including the Baltic area – and so the Nordic countries received a new shape.
In the mid-15th century the era of “flourishing cartography” began in Europe and lasted up to the mid-17th century. Three main things made this possible: the recovery of Ptolemy’s Geographia, the great discoveries, and the invention of the art of printing. The admiration of classical Antiquity during the Renaissance awakened interest in Ptolemy’s Geographia and made it popular. The work was translated into Latin in 1409, and since 1475 it appeared in more than fifty printed editions. When geographical knowledge accumulated, new maps started to be added to the 27 Ptolemaic ones.

The first new map added to Ptolemy’s Geographia (Nancy codex) was the manuscript map of the Nordic countries finished in Rome in 1427 by Cladius Clavus (b.1388), the first Nordic cartographer, at the request of Eric of Pomerania, King of Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden and Finland. The king had seen Ptolemaic maps and stated that his realm was not an island. In Clavus’s map Scandinavia was shown as an east-to-west peninsula.

Donnus Nicolaus Germanus (c. 1420- c. 1490), German cartographer and cosmographer, published the first printed map of the Nordic countries in Ptolemy’s Geographia that was printed in Ulm in 1482. The map was based on Claudio Clavus’s map. It became a model for various mapmakers up to the publication of Jacob Ziegler’s map.

A big improvement in the shape of the Nordic countries happened when Jacob Ziegler (1471-1549), Bavarian geographer and humanist, published his map in the section of Schondia of his work Quae intus continentur...in Strassburg in 1532. For the first time, the region was in north-to-south direction and quite correctly placed between latitudes 55 and 72 degrees. The map was copied by many later mapmakers and published in numerous editions of Ptolemy’s Geographia up to the end of the 16th century.

Olaus Magnus (1490- 1557), a highly educated Swedish priest, scholar, patriot and Renaissance man, published his map in Venice in 1539. It had taken him twelve years to complete. With his map Carta marina – Carta gothica, the title translated from Latin A marine map and description of the Northern Countries and their marvels, most carefully drawn up at Venice in the year 1539..., Olaus Magnus wanted to rectify the faulty representation of the earlier maps, especially the widespread Ptolemaic ones. He also wanted - as a devote Catholic - to show the Church the extent of the area which had been lost to Lutheranism. But above all, he wanted to describe his dear native country as accurately and impressively as possible. As a patriot who never returned to his homeland Sweden for religious reasons after 1524, he emphasized its ascendancy over other countries as the original home of the Goths. The map together with its three commentaries – a short Latin one in the map itself, and separate booklets of 16 pages in Italian Opera breve... and in German Ain kurze Auslegung und Verklerung der neuen Mappen – is an extensive encyclopaedia, which gives a fascinating description of the life and nature in the region during the 16th century. Carta marina changed the cartographic description of the Nordic countries completely. It became a model to many notable cartographers for nearly 100 years.

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