

[REVIEW]

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Review of Bernd Roling, Bernhard Schirg & Stefan Heinrich Bauhaus (Eds.) *Apotheosis of the North: The Swedish Appropriation of Classical Antiquity around the Baltic Sea and Beyond (1650-1800)*, De Gruyter, 2017, *Transformationen der Antike*, 246p.

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THROUGHOUT Western history, Antiquity has been a constant and powerful resource for achieving contemporary goals. One of its many functions has been – and arguably still is – to bestow glory on nations. One way to achieve this effect is by evoking favorable comparison, for instance in politics, art or literature. In previous centuries, a more common strategy can be found in attempts to trace lineage back to the Classical world. The edited volume “Apotheosis of the North: The Swedish Appropriation of Classical Antiquity around the Baltic Sea and Beyond (1650-1800)” deals with Swedish use of Classical Antiquity during early modern times and in particular in reference to the role and legacy of Rudbeckianism. It examines “the grand models, the majestically patriotic structures which apotheosized Sweden and Finland” in the 17th and 18th centuries [p.2]. The attempt to shed light on these historical developments is commendable and the volume deals with several topics from a broad spectrum of cross disciplinary perspectives relevant to the appropriation of Classical Antiquity in Sweden. However, while some of the volume’s authors strive to place their findings within the larger discussion of what role Antiquity played for the aggrandizement of the North, others leave this discussion more or less un-commented. Therefore, despite the overarching perspective outlined in the volume’s introduction (and suggested by the title), sustained analysis of the links with Antiquity forged by early modern scholars in Sweden are at times lost in several of the subsequent individual chapters.

It might, of course, be unfair to expect an edited volume to provide such a unified body of work and it should be noted that the contributions offer insight into a wide variety of subject worthy of scholarly pursuit. However, rather than the question of how the Classical world and its literature was made to serve the patriotic needs of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sweden, a common thread of the volume is more easily found in the extraordinary notion known as Gothicism, which, of course, in itself had everything to do with the legacy of the ancient world. Swedish Gothicism was centered on the idea that the Goths had in fact originated from Sweden. Support for this claim was found in the descriptions of the Getes and Scythians in the Roman historians Cassiodorus and Jordanes. Based on etymological reasoning, the idea was first proposed at the end of the 15th century and spread from Scandinavia to the universities of the Baltic region. Later, in the heyday of the Swedish empire, it was useful propaganda to bestow the relatively small military nation in the north with a glorious past. From Gothicism came, via the magisterial work of Olof Rudbeck the Elder – *The*

Atlantica –, Rudbeckianism, the notion that Sweden was in fact the Atlantis mentioned in Plato, the birthplace of civilization. Through Gothicism and Rudbeckianism, the latter referred to as “Sweden’s most vibrant academic paradigm of that time” by one of the volume’s authors, Sweden became part of the Classical past with all the benefits that this entailed ideologically [p. 47]. It proved to be a successful and multifaceted narrative that lingered well into the nineteenth century. Despite its prominence, however, the relevance and impact of Rudbeckianism seems understudied, something which the present volume admirably seeks to address (although it also more modestly states that it “will not be able to compensate for that lack”) [p.10].

On the whole, the volume shows how Rudbeck’s narrative interwove Classical literature and Norse mythology with natural, cultural and biblical history. Etymology, philology as well as geography and archeology provided tools in proving the links in this intricate chain. Classical knowledge and culture had, according to this remarkable idea, in fact originated in Scandinavia. Furthermore, as stated in the introduction and demonstrated by several of the authors, “Rudbeck’s scientific paradigm influenced a whole generation of scientists in Sweden” and became an important basis for academic careers [p.8]. Particularly interesting is the fact that, as convincingly shown by for instance Peter Sjökvist and Vera Johanterwage in their respective chapters, the history of these grand visions of a glorious Classical past, were interwoven with the editing, translating and publication of texts. Furthermore, academic dissertations played a key role in circulating and cementing these ideas.

The introduction surveys the historical origins and developments of Gothicism and Rudbeckianism (and sketches the way in which Antiquity became infused into these visions). Although the subject matter of Gothicism and/or Rudbeckianism have received a substantial amount of scholarly interest in Sweden, particularly from historians of ideas and science such as Gunnar Eriksson, Sten Lindroth and Tore Frängsmyr, the introduction to this volume presents a compelling case as to why there is still work to be done. Bernd Roling specifically argues that the traditional discussion has primarily been focused on Rudbeck himself and his work and furthermore that “there has hardly been any study of the Rudbeckianists and Gothicists as motors of academic controversies in later episodes in the eighteenth century” [p.9]. The conceptual idea of these clusters of ideas as “motors” of controversy seems particularly promising, and one would therefore have

liked to see it play a more accentuated role in the subsequent chapters. Furthermore, the general lack of “detailed surveys of Rudbeckianism in the Baltic area” is emphasized by Roling [p.9].

What is missing however, is a discussion of whether or not the topic of Classical receptions and appropriations have been dealt with in-depth by previous scholarship on Gothicism and Rudbeckianism and what the current volumes hopes to add in this regard. Developing this theoretical perspective more thoroughly with reference to recent efforts in the field of Classical Reception Studies would also, I believe, have given the reader a clearer idea of the limits and scope of the book. In fact, the edited volume does not reference this burgeoning scholarly field at all, which, given the overall subject matter, is unfortunate, not least because the way that antiquity informed contemporary culture and thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Sweden and its neighboring areas, are so striking (and complex) in the case of Rudbeckianism. Placing the volume within this vibrant field would only have served to give added value to the research effort.

The foreword states that the edited volume is the fruit of a workshop held in December of 2014 in the Finland Institute in Berlin. After the introduction, ten individual chapters delve more deeply into the broader subject matter (referred to as “the wide range of the Apotheosis of the North”, *Introduction*, p. 11). Curiously, the order that these individual contributions are presented in the introduction differs from the outline of the book itself. It should also be noted that one of the contributions is in German. A wide range of topics are dealt with, ranging from the appropriation of Classical myths such as the tears of the Heliades (by Christian Peters, pp. 137-173) for contemporary purposes, to an analysis of how the study of languages bridged Antiquity and the early modern period (by Annie Burman, pp. 77-93). The overall theme of Classical appropriation is more thoroughly discussed in Bernhard Schirg’s study of how Rudbeck’s attempt to transform the ancient myth of the Phoenix influenced later botanists like Carl Linnaeus (pp. 17-46), as well as in Sofia Guthrie’s key contribution analyzing how placing Sweden’s war effort in The Thirty Years’ War in Classical context could legitimize imperialism and forge military alliances (pp. 175-185). For scholars interested in the time period in general (rather than in Classical appropriations per se) or in the more specific areas of interest that are discussed (linguistics, natural history, book history etc.), there is much that is

of interest, such as the insightful chapter by Peter Sjökvist, on the role played by the academic dissertation (and their dedications) in Sweden for scholarly communication (pp. 63-75).

The strength of individual efforts aside however, the more general scholarly reader will at times wonder as to how chapters are connected to the overall topic stated in the book's subtitle, i.e. the Swedish appropriation of Classical Antiquity. Several lack explicit discussion of the impact and transformation of the Classical world on the Baltic region or lose sight of this question in favor of their topic of choice. This means that for those more specifically interested in the question of how Antiquity informed later periods and regions and how the Classical world was used, interpreted and transformed in this context, the book can be frustrating at times as it is repeatedly left to the reader to connect the dots. This could have been remedied with a stronger joint focus on the links between the Classical world and the North of the early modern period as well as a continuous dialogue with scholars engaged in similar enterprises.

Since it is easy to agree with the assessment that much remain to be done regarding Classical receptions in Sweden, one could perhaps look at the lack of focus of the volume as something of a missed opportunity. But at the same time, many of the authors still deal with subjects related to the question of what part the appropriation of Classical Antiquity played for Swedish and Scandinavian cultural and intellectual history. On a more positive note, then, one might also see it as a laudable first effort, bringing many different perspectives to bear on a subject sure to be further explored in the future.

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