

Sea Monsters: Unveiling the Mysteries of the Norwegian Sea on the Carta Marina

Chang Ge

The Hill School, Pottstown, USA

Email: lolage070609@gmail.com

How to cite this paper: Ge, C. (2025). Sea Monsters: Unveiling the Mysteries of the Norwegian Sea on the Carta Marina. *Advances in Literary Study*, 13, 285-293. <https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2025.134020>

Received: September 28, 2025

Accepted: October 25, 2025

Published: October 28, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This paper examines Olaus Magnus's 1539 Carta Marina and the purpose of its vivid depictions of sea monsters in the Norwegian Sea, arguing that their mission extends beyond merely representing maritime dangers. While earlier scholarship, such as that of Chet Van Duzer, interprets these figures primarily as warnings about the perils of navigation, this study contends that Olaus employed monsters to promote awareness, curiosity, and appreciation of the northern seas. Through close analysis of the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555), Olaus Magnus' complementary text to the Carta Marina, the paper demonstrates that Olaus's monsters draw from three distinct traditions: Norse mythology, classical literature, and natural observation. The Sea Serpent embodies mythological fear of political upheaval, Caribdis exemplifies the overwhelming force of the sea in classical tradition, and the Sea Unicorn reflects Renaissance efforts to reconcile myth with observed natural history. Although originating from disparate contexts, these monsters enrich the cultural and historical significance of the Norwegian Sea. By integrating myth, history, and natural lore, Olaus presented the ocean as a space of both peril and marvel, inviting viewers to approach it with awe rather than solely with fear. Such interpretation underscores Olaus's broader agenda of elevating Northern Europe's maritime identity and encouraging deeper exploration of its surrounding oceans.

Keywords

Olaus Magnus, Carta Marina, Greek Mythology, Norse Mythology, Renaissance Cartography, Maritime Culture

1. Introduction

In the 16th century, Olaus Magnus crafted a monumental work that not only

mapped the Scandinavian peninsula but also the waters of the Norwegian Sea. In the preface of his complementary text *Historia*, Olaus makes clear that his intention of creating the *Carta Marina* was to “disseminate sounder information about northernmost Europe” (Olaus, 1996). While one might interpret Olaus’s reference to “northernmost Europe” as primarily concerning land, this perspective overlooks the vivid illustrations of the surrounding seas on the *Carta Marina*, which suggest that Olaus’s emphasis on the ocean is part of his promotion of the North as well. Furthermore, Olaus Magnus populated the sea’s depths with a remarkable array of sea monsters, drawing inspiration from Norse mythology, classical tales, and meticulous natural observations. The amalgamation of various monstrous beings of disparate origins prompts deep reflection: what message was Olaus Magnus conveying about the Norwegian Sea? This essay argues that despite the monsters’ diverse origins and different forms of monstrosity, they serve to collectively emphasize the sea’s rich cultural and historical significance as a way of promoting Northern Europe. Olaus draws his audience’s attention by redefining the Norwegian Sea as a region abundant with natural marvels, thereby encouraging appreciation and increased exploration of the sea.

Olaus’s purpose of placing monsters in the sea on the *Carta Marina* has always been a heated topic of discussion among scholars. One very widely accepted suggestion is that his inclusion of sea monsters serves to illustrate the prevalent concerns of the 16th century surrounding the perils of maritime voyages. According to Chet Van Duzer, cartographic historian and author of *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps*, Olaus intended to help the people of that time “grasp the dangers of the unknown” through depictions of fierce monsters in the sea on the *Carta Marina* (Brownstein, 2015). However, this paper contends that Olaus’s intention went beyond instilling fear; he also sought to heighten people’s awareness of the sea. In addition to depicting the ferocious aspects of the ocean, Olaus suggested in *Historia* that men and monsters could coexist peacefully, asking his readers to give consideration to the “renowned qualities” of some monsters who would “help men in the water when they are abandoned by their fellow-countrymen, or cruelly cast overboard to drown” (Olaus, 1996). Olaus’s unbiased depiction of sea monsters, highlighting both their positive and negative aspects, goes beyond mere warning. By demonstrating that these creatures are capable of benevolent acts, Olaus suggests that the sea is not solely a realm of danger. Instead, this balanced portrayal indicates he aimed to underscore the sea’s potential for discovery and beneficial interaction. This paper employs a combined method of textual comparison and iconographic analysis to conduct a close reading of Olaus Magnus’s portrayal of sea monsters on the *Carta Marina*. Textual comparison involves juxtaposing Olaus’s descriptions in *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555) with the corresponding visual depictions on the *Carta Marina* (1539), allowing for an in-depth assessment of how textual narratives and cartographic imagery reinforce or diverge from one another in meaning. Iconographic analysis focuses on the formal and symbolic features of the monsters: their poses, scale,

coloring, and spatial placement, to uncover how visual choices communicate underlying cultural and ideological messages. By integrating these approaches, the analysis moves beyond surface-level interpretation of the monsters as mere illustrations, instead situating them within a broader intellectual framework that links Olaus's visual imagination to Renaissance mythography, natural history, and political identity (Mirošević, 2025).

2. Olaus Magnus and the Carta Marina

Olaus Magnus (October 1490 - August 1557), a Swedish cartographer and Catholic clergyman, left his home country in 1524, undertaking numerous diplomatic missions that took him from Poland to the Netherlands and eventually from Lübeck to Rome (Mead, 1987). He invested eleven and a half years in working on the Carta Marina during his stay in Poland, eventually publishing it in Venice in 1539 with the support of an active school of cartographers and cosmographers. Olaus owes the creation of this map significantly to his host and patron in Venice, Hieronimo Quirini, to whom it was dedicated. Sixteen years later in 1555, Olaus released the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, a thorough description of the northern lands that also explains in detail what is depicted on the Carta Marina (Olaus, 2024) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Olaus Magnus, Carta Marina.

Spanning approximately 1.7 meters by 1.2 meters and consisting of nine sheets (Mead, 1987), the Carta Marina is one of the largest maps to have been printed in the mid-16th century (Sandmo, 2020). Olaus's choice of using wood rather than copper in its production limited the number of possible prints, and the necessity for assembling and mounting the sheets significantly reduced their longevity. Thus, the high expenses involved in producing such a work indicate that it was

likely exhibited to an audience rather than kept in storage. The Carta Marina exemplifies the resurgence of Ptolemaic geography, where all geographic locations could be systematically mapped using a grid of longitudes and latitudes. Yet unlike its contemporaries, which separated history from geography, the Carta Marina adorned its space with informative visuals and texts, frequently infused with strong political ideologies.

The Carta Marina is renowned for not only its physical size and meticulous creation process but also the wealth of visual information it presents to its audience. Olaus structured the map with a central focus on the Scandinavian Peninsula, stretching from the rugged shores of Norway and Sweden down to Denmark and the Baltic States (Olaus, 1539). The map also includes sections of northern Germany and the British Isles. The author identified and labeled these regions in Latin using big, bolded letters, which stand out amid the colorful backdrop of yellow, red, and green hues delineating coastlines and political boundaries. Coats of arms embellished with gold leaf and figures of kings and rulers in regal attire are placed on the map where they correspond to their respective regions, making clear the noble lineages and royal power of each nation. The author scattered depictions of conflicts and military engagements sparsely across the map, as exemplified by men in full armor charging forward or against each other while brandishing their spears.

The Carta Marina depicts natural features of Northern Europe with meticulous detail, vividly capturing the region's diverse landscapes. Mountain ranges dominate the central expanse of the map, stretching vertically across the Scandinavian peninsula. Rivers wind through the vast terrains, tracing their paths delicately through forests, plains, and mountains, connecting the seas to numerous lakes dotted throughout the map. Trees of different species, each represented with its own unique symbol, line up to form forests, with diverse tones of shading underneath to convey contrasting types of terrain.

Olaus Magnus vividly portrays the dispersal of Northern European settlement, spreading symbols of towns, cities, towers, and religious centers evenly across the land regions. The map further visualizes the daily habits and practices of inhabitants during the Renaissance through vibrant illustrations of everyday activities. Some figures are engaged in fishing, boatbuilding, and tending to agricultural labor in the fields, while others are occupied in scenes of trade, education, and religious devotion. Olaus underscores the interaction between men and nature in his map with various depictions of both peaceful exchanges and adventurous encounters with wild animals. To exemplify, some sections of the map feature a lone man courageously confronting two coiled snakes with bats in his hands or hunters poising their spears at fleeing beasts, while others illustrate a traveler calmly leading his horse across rugged mountain ranges.

The Carta Marina places significant emphasis on the surrounding seas and oceans, dedicating nearly half of its expansive layout to vividly illustrating maritime environments. Against a light blue backdrop, wavy lines and clusters of tiny

dots fill the water bodies, distinctly marking each sea and ocean on the map. Islands and archipelagos dot these maritime expanses, mostly lining the coastlines and varying in size, shape, and placement. A distinctive aspect of this map is the symbolic representation of winter ice within the Baltic Sea in the top left corner, which is rarely located in other maps produced during the same time period (Mead, 1987).

The Carta Marina's scale, expense, and production context suggest that Olaus Magnus designed it for an elite, international audience whose perceptions of Northern Europe he sought to reshape. Produced in Venice, a major cartographic hub, and dedicated to the Venetian noble Hieronimo Quirini, the map was not intended for navigational use but for scholarly and diplomatic display, likely exhibited in courts and ecclesiastical settings across Europe. Its monumental size, hand-applied coloring, and gilded heraldic emblems indicate that it was a luxury object aimed at educated viewers: princes, patrons, and humanists, who would appreciate its visual sophistication and symbolic messages. By portraying the North as a region of marvels, knowledge, and divine order rather than barbaric remoteness, Olaus sought to elevate the cultural prestige of Scandinavia and assert its parity with the Mediterranean world. The map's circulation among European elites thus functioned as a form of cultural diplomacy, using its imagery to promote Northern Europe as a center of wonder, learning, and maritime importance (Vognsen, 2024).

One of the most captivating aspects of this map lies in its depictions of numerous monsters and mythical creatures believed to populate these bodies of water. As Van Duzer made clear in his comprehensive analysis, there is a widespread fascination with monsters among 16th-century maps (Sandmo, 2020). The monsters on the Carta Marina symbolize the height of this attention. Scattered densely across the wastes of seas and oceans, they range from fearsome krakens with dozens of outstretched limbs to bright red water snakes entwined in battle with great ships. Olaus pictures each creature with intricate scales, bright, fierce eyes, expressive poses, and menacing interactions with the land and men that convey their power and unworldly nature. The use of bright and clashing colors enhances this dramatic effect, drawing viewers into a realm where reality blends seamlessly with the imagination (Olaus, 1539).

3. Sea Monsters on the Carta Marina

The monsters on the Carta Marina are far more than arbitrary embellishments but rather deliberately designed conveyers of a deeper message. Olaus Magnus devoted Books XX 'De piscibus' ('On fishes') and XXI 'De piscibus monstrosis' ('On Monstrous Fishes') of *Historia* to detailing 'fishes' (Sandmo, 2020). Although he does not explicitly differentiate between regular fishes and sea monsters, nearly all of the sea creatures depicted on the Carta Marina are covered in his book with only a few exceptions. Olaus's detailed descriptions in his book suggest that each monster was intentionally chosen to impart specific messages to the audience rather than being

random decorative elements, reflecting their etymological roots in ‘monstrum’ – meaning to demonstrate or warn (Sandmo, 2020). This deliberate linkage between textual descriptions and cartographic depictions implies that the monsters serve as symbolic or practical representations integral to Olaus’s broader historical and cultural narrative. To uncover the meanings behind the monsters illustrated on the Carta Marina, it is important to explore their origins. This paper focuses on the Sea Serpent, Caribdis, and the Sea Unicorn because they represent the three primary traditions: Norse mythology, classical literature, and natural observation, from which Olaus Magnus drew inspiration. Each of these monsters exemplifies a distinct mode of interpreting the sea, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of Olaus’s synthesis of myth, history, and natural knowledge. Other prominent creatures, such as the kraken or sea cow, were excluded because their symbolic roles overlap with those already represented by the selected trio and including them would have risked diluting the clarity of the paper’s tripartite analytical framework.

3.1. Norse Mythology

The Sea Serpent is the most well-known and feared of all the marine monsters depicted on the Carta Marina (Nigg, 2013). In Book XXI of *Historia*, Olaus portrays it as “a serpent of gigantic bulk, at least two hundred feet long, and twenty feet thick” with “hairs eighteen inches long hanging from its neck, sharp, clack scales, and flaming-red eyes” (Olaus, 1996). On the Carta Marina, the giant serpent is entwined around a merchant ship, its sinuous body writhing and jaws agape as if poised to strike (Olaus, 1539). Indeed, Olaus informs us that this creature is rumored to frequent “the cliffs and hollows of the seacoast near Bergen”, where it “assaults ships, rearing itself on high like a pillar, seizes men, and devours them” (Olaus, 1996). Its monstrosity is shown particularly through its ability to arouse political instability and military turmoil, for its appearance would always be ensued by “the death of princes” or the breakout of “violent war.”

Olaus Magnus potentially drew his inspiration for the Sea Serpent from Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent derived from Norse mythology that also embodies the fearsome qualities attributed to the creature on the Carta Marina (Nigg, 2013). In the tale, Jörmungandr, growing to such lengths in the depths of the sea that it encircled the earth, would bring about Ragnarök, the prophesized end of the world. Thus, the Sea Serpent’s ability to induce political and military upheaval in the Carta Marina aligns with the mythological notion of serpents as the cause of profound and catastrophic change. By incorporating such elements of destruction derived from mythological tales, Olaus not only amplifies the Sea Serpent’s role as a portent of disaster but also situates it in a broader cultural context, helping his audience grasp the extent of its monstrosity through both vivid imagery and rich narrative.

3.2. Classical Tradition

“Hic est horrenda caribdis.” (Olaus, 1539) (This is the horrible Caribdis). These

are the words printed next to a monstrous whirlpool among the Lofoten Islands (Nigg, 2013). The illustration on the Carta Marina shows a massive vortex of water, swirling violently amidst ships in which men are desperately rowing for their lives (Olaus, 1539). A wooden ship is inexorably swirled into the monster's wide, gaping mouth along with the huge gusts of salt water, where the churning waves and bottomless abyss are about to devour it entirely. As Olaus Magnus described, the gulf was so great that "the Mariners that come thither unawares, are in a moment sucked in by its sudden circumvolution, all force and industry of the Pilot being taken away" (Nigg, 2013). Caribdis' monstrosity is highlighted in its absolute force and dominance over men, as even the most skilled sailors would find themselves helpless and their efforts futile in the face of this immense force.

The monster Caribdis on Olaus's Carta Marina was likely sourced from Greek mythology, notably from the terrifying whirlpool mentioned in Homer's "Odyssey". In this epic tale, Odysseus, Homer's wandering hero, describes Caribdis as a monster that "suck[s] up the salt water", and when she spews it up, "it was like the water in a cauldron when it is boiling over upon a great fire, and the spray reached the top of the rocks on either side" (Nigg, 2013). The portrayal of Caribdis on Olaus's Carta Marina resonates deeply with its origin in Greek mythology, highlighting its monstrous nature as an irresistible force of peril and destruction. It is the representation of not merely a natural hazard but the epitome of the unpredictable and overwhelming power of the sea.

3.3. Natural Observations

Near the left edge of the Carta Marina, the waters part to reveal a straight, pointed horn rising from the rippling waves, followed by the head of a sea monster with a horse-shaped snout (Olaus, 1539). Compared to other creatures on the map, both the graphic and the description of the Sea Unicorn are relatively less complex. Olaus Magnus merely describes it as a sea monster with "a huge horn on its forehead," with which it can "pierce and wreck oncoming ships and kill a large body of men" (Olaus, 1996). Yet while this fearsome creature commands fear and respect for its destructive potential, "it is singularly slow-moving, and this, once its approach has been anticipated, grants the fearful mariners opportunity to get away." The Sea Unicorn's paradoxical nature illustrates an unexpected aspect of monstrosity: although its horn can cause devastating damage, its slow speed allows sailors to escape its attack with strategy and skill. This interaction serves as a representation of a nuanced relationship between humanity and nature, symbolizing not only the challenges of navigation but also the hope for harmonious coexistence between human endeavors and marine environments.

Similar to many other monstrous creatures depicted on the Carta Marina, the Sea Unicorn was intended to portray a real animal that men observed during their maritime navigations. Despite its minuscule size on the map and the absence of a map legend in its key, scholars suggest that it might be one of the earliest printed depictions of a narwhal, inferring from the horn protruding from its forehead

(Nigg, 2013). Other scholars argue that Olaus's Sea Unicorn should be viewed as the marine equivalent of the terrestrial unicorn, which is known for its long, spiraled horn and valued for its mythical healing qualities. The roots of the unicorn trace back to ancient descriptions, such as Ctesias the Cynidian's portrayal of a wild ass from India with a single, crimson-tipped horn on its forehead in his *Indica*, a creature most often equated with the rhinoceros. Regardless of which animal Olaus was referring to, the monstrosity of the Sea Unicorn reflects the blending of natural history and cartographical elements in Renaissance understanding.

4. Conclusion

The Sea Serpent, the Whirlpool Caribdis, and the Sea Unicorn are just three representative examples of sea monsters derived from a diverse array of sources (Olaus, 1996). They carry with them not only bright colors and menacing features as depicted on the *Carta Marina*, but also significant historical, cultural, and natural insights. These monsters demonstrate completely different forms of monstrosity: The Sea Serpent, inspired by Norse mythology, embodies the fear of political turmoil and catastrophic potential; Caribdis, from Greek mythology, symbolizes the relentless power of the sea against men; while the Sea Unicorn, drawn from natural observations of realistic animals, represents men's wishes of coexisting with nature in harmony through skill and wit.

These various sea monsters with completely disparate forms of monstrosity, each rooted in distinct cultural and natural narratives and conveying different messages, might seem incongruous on the same map at first glance. However, the beauty of the *Carta Marina* lies precisely in its ability to unite monsters from varied origins within the same ocean. It is these diverse forms of monstrosity that complement and enhance each other, thereby contributing to the overall cultural and historical significance of the Norwegian Sea. Just as Olaus Magnus wrote in the preface of Book XXI of *Historia*, the "conglomeration of monsters" may be found within "this broad expanse of fluid Ocean, which admits the seeds of life with fertile growth, as sublime Nature ceaselessly gives birth" (Olaus, 1996). Ultimately, Olaus's focus on the sea monsters draws attention to the ocean. He emphasizes that these monsters from diverse origins were creatures under the sea, thus highlighting the richness and importance of maritime realms, encouraging a deeper exploration and appreciation of the Norwegian Sea's diverse and captivating mysteries (Netten, 2025).

This paper's interpretation of Olaus Magnus's intention of promoting awareness of the seas by integrating sea monsters on the *Carta Marina* challenges the conventional understanding that Olaus solely intended to instill fear about maritime travels in his audience. By blending natural observations with mythological tales to create these various sea monsters, Magnus captures a nuanced perspective on humanity's relationship with the sea during the 16th century. His approach invites a deeper exploration into how people in that era perceived the ocean. Did Magnus intend to evoke a sense of wonder as well as fear through his depiction of

sea monsters? Did society hold a more positive view of the oceans? These questions open avenues for further study of the significance of the sea in the 16th century.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Brownstein, D. (2015). Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps. Chet Van Duzer. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 68, 1028-1030. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683897>
- Mead, W. (1987). Scandinavian Renaissance Cartography. In J. B. Harley, & D. Woodward (Eds.), *The History of Cartography* (Vol. III, pp. 1781-1805). The University of Chicago Press.
- Mirošević, L. (2025). Symbolism of Artistic Elements on Nautical Charts of the Adriatic Sea. In J. Faričić, & T. Marelić (Eds.), *Early Modern Nautical Charts of the Adriatic Sea* (pp. 123-146). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-8046-7_5
- Nigg, J. (2013). *Sea Monsters*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226925189.001.0001>
- Olaus Magnus (1996). *Description of the Northern Peoples, Rome 1555*. Hakluyt Society.
- Olaus Magnus (2024). *Carta Marina. Woodcut Print, Hand-Applied Color*. Wikipedia. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ea/Carta_Marina.jpeg
- Sandmo, E. (2020). Dwellers of the Waves: Sea Monsters, Classical History, and Religion in Olaus Magnus's *Carta marina*. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift-Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 74, 237-249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00291951.2020.1810114>
- van Netten, D. (2025). Known Unknowns in the North. Uncertain Maps of the Arctic in Early Modern Times. *International Journal of Cartography*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23729333.2025.2478270>
- Vognsen, F. L. (2024). Sea Monsters, Navigation and Politics at Edge of the World: An Interpretation of a Olaus Magnus' "Carta Marina" (1539). *Scandia Journal of Medieval Norse Studies*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.22478/ufpb.2595-9107.2024v7n07.70529>