



## Ekphrases of Place in the Preface of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*

### *As ékfrases de lugar no Prefácio da Gesta Danorum de Saxo Gramático*

Henrique Verri Fiebig

Universidade de São Paulo (USP), São Paulo, São Paulo / Brasil

henrique.fiebig@alumni.usp.br

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3195-0626>

**Abstract:** This article examines the topographies, or place-descriptions, of Denmark and Scandinavia in the preface of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, focusing on their composition, function within the narrative, and ideological implications. By employing commonplaces typical of this type of description, these topographies construct the setting for the narrated events – the *res gestae* proper – in a ‘periegematic’ manner, while simultaneously assigning specific qualities to different territories in alignment with the Danish and regional political context. Furthermore, the article explores the role of these place descriptions within the scope of Christian historiography, demonstrating how their inclusion symbolically represents the incorporation of Denmark’s territory into the expanse of the Christian *orbis*.

**Keywords:** ekphrasis; topography; Saxo Grammaticus; Christian historiography.

**Resumo:** Este artigo examina as topografias, ou descrições de lugar, da Dinamarca e da Escandinávia no prefácio da *Gesta Danorum* de Saxo Gramático, com foco em sua constituição, função dentro da narrativa e implicações ideológicas. Ao empregar lugares-comuns típicos desse tipo de descrição, essas topografias constroem o cenário dos eventos narrados – as *res gestae* propriamente ditas – de maneira “periegemática”, enquanto simultaneamente atribuem qualidades específicas a diferentes territórios, em alinhamento com o contexto político dinamarquês e regional. Além disso, o artigo explora o papel dessas descrições de lugar no âmbito da historiografia cristã, demonstrando como sua inclusão representa simbolicamente a incorporação do território dinamarquês à extensão do *orbis* cristão.

**Palavras-chave:** ékfrase; topografia; Saxo Gramático; historiografia cristã.

## 1 Introduction

Saxo Grammaticus, who is believed to have been a canon of the Chapter of Lund Cathedral and a *magister* at the Cathedral's school, wrote a history of Denmark between approximately 1188 and 1208 at the request of Absalon, Archbishop of Lund, of whom he was a secretary. Titled *Gesta Danorum* and composed in the form of *prosimetrum* – a combination of prose and verse –, it narrates the deeds of Danish kings, from the legendary Dan I to the contemporary Cnut VI, in a preface and sixteen books. The *editio princeps*, published in Paris by Christiern Pedersen in 1514, serves as the basis for all modern editions, as only scant fragments of any manuscripts have survived.

The epithet *grammaticus* was attributed to Saxo due to his remarkable erudition, which was the result of the education he received in northern France, possibly in Paris, Orléans, or Reims (Friis-Jensen, 1987, p. 18). There, he likely studied the disciplines of the *trivium* – grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric – as was typical in European schools of the time. Students were taught grammar and rhetoric through the reading, listening, and memorization of excerpts from Latin masterpieces, as well as the commentaries on them. Additionally, they engaged in classroom exercises known as *praeexercitamina* (Kelly, 2004, p. 13-14).

The *praeexercitamina* consisted of exercises through which students were trained in various rhetorical devices. One of the most widely used textbooks at the time was Priscian's Latin translation of the *προγυμνάσματα* of Ps.-Hermogenes, dating from the sixth century. This work was fundamental for teaching the rudiments of literary style and poetic ornaments throughout the Middle Ages (Zanoni, 1980, p. 410).<sup>1</sup>

Among the various definitions and examples of rhetorical procedures found in Priscian's *praeexercitamina*, one in particular is of interest here, which he names *descriptio* and defines as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Friis-Jensen (Saxo Grammaticus, 2015, p. 1692) identifies an allusion to Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae* in Book VII of *Gesta Danorum*. Zanoni (1980, p. 410-411) also notes that during the Middle Ages, the *praeexercitamina* were often annexed to manuscripts of the *Institutiones* and studied sequentially in medieval schools.

*Descriptio est oratio colligens et praesentans oculis quod demonstrat. Fiunt autem descriptiones tam personarum quam rerum et temporum et status et locorum e multorum aliorum. [...] Oportet enim elocutionem paene per aures oculis praesentiam facere ipsius rei et exaequare dignitati rerum stilum elocutionis (De praeexercit. rhet. 10. 29-30).*

Description is a speech that gathers and presents to the eyes what is being demonstrated. Descriptions are, indeed, of persons as well as of things, time, manner, places, and many others. [...] It is necessary, then, for the enunciation to almost make present to the eyes the very thing through the ears and to match the style of the enunciation to the dignity of the things.<sup>2</sup>

*Descriptio* translates the Greek term ἔκφρασις, which can be explained as an extensive and detailed description that aims to spark mental images of the subjects it places before the listener's (or reader's) mind's eye through its quality of ἐνάργεια, "the vividness that makes absent things seem present by its appeal to the imagination" (Webb, 2009, p. 313). Both ἔκφρασις and ἐνάργεια are related to the concept of *evidentia*, as it appears in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* and which Lausberg (1998, p. 359) defines as "the vividly detailed depiction of a broadly conceived whole object through the enumeration of (real or invented) observable details".

Ekphrasis<sup>3</sup> is not limited to the description of works of art, as taken by the modern and, one might say, restrictive definition of the term. It also extends to descriptions of people, objects, places, and more, as noted in Priscian's passage above. Consequently, there are different types of ekphrases, determined by the nature of their described referents, such as:<sup>4</sup> *chronographies* (descriptions of time), *topographies* (descriptions of landscapes and places), *prosopographies* (descriptions of the external appearance of characters), *ethopoeiae* (moral descriptions of characters),

<sup>2</sup> All translations of Priscian are the author's own. The Latin text is based on the edition by Halm (1863).

<sup>3</sup> From this point forward, the English form of the name will be used.

<sup>4</sup> The following examples are found in Hamon (1981, p. 3) and are based on the ancient treatises. There are also other typologies, such as the one proposed by Hansen (2006, p. 89).

*prosopopoeiae* (descriptions of imaginary or allegorical beings), and *portraits* (physical and moral descriptions of characters), among others.

With regard specifically to topographies, Quintilian associates them with ὑποτύπωσις, a concept related to *evidentia*, which he defines as “a certain form of things presented so clearly through words that they seem to be seen rather than heard” (*Inst. orat.* VI. 2. 29). He states:

*Locorum quoque dilucida et significans descriptio eidem virtuti adsignatur a quibusdam; alii τοπογραφίαν dicunt* (*Inst. orat.* IX. 2. 44).

The clear and vivid description of places is also attributed by some to the same virtue; others call it τοπογραφία.<sup>5</sup>

Given Saxo’s educational background and his knowledge of rhetoric and Latin authorial models, it is reasonable to assume that he was familiar with the basic functions of *descriptio* or ekphrasis. As a skilled writer, he likely employed this device in *Gesta Danorum*, particularly in the topographies found in his descriptions of Danish territories, their Scandinavian neighbors, and Iceland in the preface of the text.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to identify these topographies in the prefatory text of the *Gesta Danorum* and to examine both how they are constructed and what their functions are within the context of the history written by Saxo. By doing so, this study aims not only to contribute to the reflection on the use of the ekphrastic device by Saxo but also to enhance the broader understanding of his narrative strategies and their role in shaping political and religious perceptions.

## 2 Topographies as Digression (*Gest. Dan. Pr.* 1. 6)

In modern editions, the *Gesta Danorum*’s preface is divided into two sections. The first encompasses commonplaces typical of exordia, such as the topoi of dedication and modesty, while the second contains geographical descriptions of Denmark, Scandinavia, and Iceland, preceded by a type of preamble in which Saxo writes:

<sup>5</sup> The Latin text is from Quintilian (1920-1922). The translation is by the author.

[...] *quo cetera liquidius exsequar; initium a patrie nostre situ descriptuque petere statui, speciosius singula perstricturus, si narrationis procursus competentia rebus loca permetiens ab eorum positione dicendorum inchoamenta deduxerit* (Gest. Dan. Pr. 1. 6).

[...] I have decided to begin, in order to accomplish the rest more smoothly, with the position and description of our fatherland; my details will be more lucid if, when I progress through this narrative, I have started by traversing the places to which the events belong, and stated their location.<sup>6</sup>

This passage is particularly noteworthy as it offers insights not only into the function of the topographies that follow in the text and their connection to the content of Book I but also into the very nature of *descriptiones* and their relationship to *narratio*. Saxo mentions that he decided to begin “by situating and describing” his homeland, where “describing” translates the ablative supine form of the verb *describere*, from which the noun *descriptio* is derived. The technical precision of this term is unlikely to be coincidental, especially as it is contrasted with *narrationis procursus*, literally “the advance of the narrative” – another technical term, as elucidated in Priscian’s *praeexercitamina: narratio est expositio rei factae vel quasi factae* (*De praeexercit. rhet.* 2. 5), “narration is the exposition of things that were done or almost done”.

The placement of the geographical *descriptiones* before the first book where the account of the deeds of the Danish kings truly begins is thus not arbitrary. By positioning them in such a manner, Saxo aims to proceed with the rest (*cetera*) – that is, with the *narratio historica*, which Priscian defines as the narration that concerns *ad res gestas exponendas*, “to the deeds that shall be exposed” (*De praeexercit. rhet.* 2. 5) – more fluidly (*liquidius*). Here, Saxo suggests less an opposition between narration and description – a dichotomy more relevant to modern discourse theories than to ancient or medieval rhetoric – and more the

<sup>6</sup> All translations of *Gesta Danorum* are by Peter Fisher, in Saxo Grammaticus (2015). The Latin text referenced is from Friis-Jensen’s edition, which accompanies Fisher’s translation.

suspensory role that descriptive procedures can sometimes assume in relation to the main narrative.

He highlights the very nature of what Elsner (2002) describes as *interventive ekphrasis*, with its paradigmatic model in the later tradition being Homer's Shield of Achilles. This type of ekphrasis is, "in narratological terms", "a pause in the narrative that allows other kinds of narratives to figure both within the main text and bracketed apart from it" (Elsner, 2002, p. 4). As a suspension of the narrative's progression, it may anticipate events or structure the narrative, closely aligning with the concept of *digressio* or *egressio* according to Cicero and Quintilian (Martins, 2016, p. 169).

Lausberg (1998, p. 158-159), drawing on Quintilian, defines *digressio* as "an optional component of all parts of the speech, especially the *narratio*", which may occur "at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the narration", with its main content often being a *descriptio* or other forms of *narratio* such as *fabula* and *argumentum*. Regarding its specific position within the discourse, Martins (2021, p. 87) notes that, according to Sopater of Apamea, both *digressio* and *ekphrasis* "occupy a prominent place either at the end of the oration or near the conclusion of a section".

Therefore, it is no coincidence that these topographies hold a significant position at the end of the preface – an epideictic piece in itself, as it shall be seen – and anticipate, if not the action *per se*, the places where the deeds to be narrated are performed. The topographies structure and foreshadow the geographical space, or the setting, in which the *res gestae* or *res factae* – the *narratio historica* properly – unfold.

### **3 The Description of Denmark and the 'Periegetic' Nature of Topographies in *Gesta Danorum***

It is unusual to find a reflection on the function of descriptive or ekphrastic techniques within historiographical works. On the other hand, topographies or geographical descriptions are a common feature in such texts, both medieval and ancient. The practice of incorporating them in historiography is often traced back to the ethno-geographical λόγοι in

Herodotus of Halicarnassus's Ἱστορίαι and even earlier, to the periegetic texts that laid the foundation for ancient historiography as a literary genre.<sup>7</sup>

When examining the geographical descriptions in both Greek and Latin historiographical precedents, Trüdinger (1918) demonstrated conclusively that their composition is far from arbitrary and follows a set of well-established commonplaces. Typically, they begin with a general description of the territory – its shape and borders, natural features, rivers, climate, and fauna. They then proceed to detail the inhabitants – their numbers, ancestors, monuments, and material remnants of antiquity, as well as their lifestyle and customs. Finally, they address the *mirabilia*, the wonders or remarkable features of the place that inspire awe.<sup>8</sup>

Saxo Grammaticus's familiarity with these commonplaces is evident upon close examination of his text. The description begins with an outline of the Danish territory as a whole, establishing its borders and form:

*Huius itaque regionis extima partim soli alterius confinio limitantur, partim propinqui maris fluctibus includuntur. Interna uero circumfusus ambit Oceanus, qui sinuosis interstitiorum anfractibus nunc in angustias freti contractionis euadens, nunc in latitudinem sinu diffusiore procurrens complures insulas creat. Quo fit, ut Dania mediis pelagi fluctibus intercisa paucas solidi continuique tractus partes habeat, quas tanta undarum interruptio pro uaria freti reflexioris obliquitate discriminat (Gest. Dan. Pr. 2. 1).*

The edges of this region, then, are partly bounded by another land frontier, partly enclosed by the waves of the adjacent sea. The interior is washed and encircled by the Ocean, which sometimes through winding interspaces runs into the straits of a narrow fjord, in other places flows into a wider expanse to form a large number of islands within a spreading bay. This is why Denmark, cut through and through by the surrounding sea waters, has few unbroken stretches of solid ground; so much do the waves intervene to mark off different shapes, according to the angles made by the turning channels.

<sup>7</sup> The groundbreaking and still most important work for this discussion is Jacoby (1909).

<sup>8</sup> For a thorough analysis of these topoi in both Greek and Latin historical literature, see Trüdinger (1918).

Following this overview of the Danish kingdom, the description turns to the seven regions that comprise it: Jutland, North Friesland, Funen, Zealand, Scania, Halland, and Blekinge. Additional topical details are provided about the territory, such as the River Eider, which serves as a natural border between Jutland and Germany, flowing north into the Norwegian Channel;<sup>9</sup> the weather of North Friesland, prone to storms that often flood its fields, destroying both crops and houses;<sup>10</sup> and the abundance of marine fauna in the Øresund strait between Zealand and Scania, offering rich catches for fishermen.<sup>11</sup> In Blekinge, there is also a rock carved with strange signs – a material remnant of the past – significant enough to attract the attention of King Valdemar himself.<sup>12</sup>

Denmark is depicted as a resourceful and ancient country, with fertile lands cultivated by crops, seas rich with fish, and wondrous

<sup>9</sup> “Of these regions Jutland holds first place because of its greater size and superior position, for it begins the Danish kingdom and stretches farthest, right to the boundaries of Germany. From the River Eider, whose stream separates these two countries, it runs north, extending somewhat in width to the shore of the Norwegian Channel” (*Gest. Dan. Pr.* 2. 1).

<sup>10</sup> “Next, tapering in below the Jutland peninsula, lies North Friesland, forming a curve of low-lying plains, which slope down towards the centre, and here the overflowing Ocean assists in the production of bumper crops. But it is questionable whether the inhabitants experience more profit or danger from the violence of these floods. For when a mighty tempest breaks down the dykes erected to intercept the sea’s tides, such a weight of waters invades the fields that not only agricultural land but occasionally even men and their homes are engulfed” (*Gest. Dan. Pr.* 2. 2).

<sup>11</sup> “An arm of the sea pushes through to part its eastern side from the west coast of Scania, and this brings a magnificent catch into the fishermen’s nets every year; the whole sound contains such plentiful shoals that sometimes boats striking them have difficulty in rowing clear and no fishing gear but the bare hands is needed to take them” (*Gest. Dan. Pr.* 2. 4).

<sup>12</sup> “Travellers can see a rock in Blekinge chequered with strange symbols. There stretches from the sea in the south into the wastes of Värend a lane of rock bounded by two lines a little way apart and extending a great distance; carved everywhere in the flat space between them appear figures, meant to be read. Although its level is so uneven that sometimes it cuts through the mountain tops, sometimes follows the valley bottoms, the continuity of the letter marks is discernible. King Valdemar, prosperous son of the venerable Cnut, fascinated by this and curious as to its meaning, sent men to pace the rock, make a closer investigation of the rows of characters there, and then copy the twiggly outlines of the letters” (*Gest. Dan. Pr.* 2. 5).



monuments that suggest it was once home to an ancient civilization of giants.<sup>13</sup> In this context of a country so prosperous, the island of Zealand is said to have a central position:

*Post Iutiam insula ad orientem uersus Fionia reperitur, quam a continenti angusti admodum equoris interiectus abrumpit. Hec sicut ab occasu Iutiam, ita ab ortu Sialandiam prospectat, conspicua necessariorum rerum ubertate laudandam. Que insula amoenitate cunctas nostre regionis prouincias antecedens medium Danie locum obtinere putatur, ab extime remotionis limite pari spaciorum intercapedine disparata (Gest. Dan. Pr. 2. 3).*

East of Jutland you find the island of Funen, cleft from the mainland by a fairly narrow strip of water. Eastward again lies Zealand, worthy of praise for its exceptional richness in the resources of life. This island is the most lovely of all our provinces and is considered to be the centre of Denmark, since the farthest limits of the region's circumference are equidistant from it.

The literal centrality of Zealand within the Danish territory – *medium Danie locum obtinere putatur* – is mirrored in its central position within the country's *descriptio*. The topography of Denmark and its seven regions is detailed across five paragraphs, with Zealand being the fourth region mentioned, precisely at the end of the third – and central – paragraph in this sequence.

The order of the regions is not arbitrary: the *descriptio* follows a deliberate spatial orientation. After outlining Denmark as a whole in the first paragraph, the text begins with the Jutland peninsula, the westernmost region of the kingdom, tracing its southern border at the

<sup>13</sup> “That the Danish area was once cultivated by a civilization of giants is testified by the immense stones planted upon ancestral barrows and caves. If anyone is doubtful whether or not this was executed by superhuman force, let him gaze at the heights of certain mounds and then say, if he has the wit, who carried such enormous boulders to their summits. A person assessing this marvel must find it inconceivable that ordinary human effort or strength could raise such a bulk to that point of altitude; even on level ground it would be difficult, possibly beyond anyone's power, to budge it” (*Gest. Dan. Pr. 3. 1*).

River Eider to its northern frontier at the Norwegian Channel. From Jutland, the description moves eastward, sequentially covering North Friesland, Funen, Zealand, Scania, Halland, and Blekinge, as if guiding the reader on a journey through Danish lands.

At this point, it is worth recalling what is stated in *Gest. Dan. Pr.* 1.6: “my details will be more lucid if, when I progress through this narrative, I have started by traversing the places to which the events belong, and stated their location”. ‘Traversing’ translates *permetiens*, the present participle of the verb *permetiri*, meaning ‘to measure through’, but also ‘to travel through, traverse’ (Lewis; Short, 1879).

Once again, this particular choice of words seems deliberate: Saxo emphasizes the ‘periegetic’ nature of ekphrasis, as described by Martins (2016) and Lauxtermann (2019, p. 57). Theon, Aphthonios, and ps.-Hermogenes define ekphrasis in their προγυμνάσματα as λόγος περιηγηματικὸς – literally, a ‘speech that leads around’ (Webb, 2009, p. 51). In this sense, ekphrasis is characterized not by stasis but by movement, akin to the ancient περιηγήσεις, the travel accounts considered the origin of historiographical discourse and its topographical, ethno-geographical descriptions. Indeed, Lauxtermann (2019, p. 67) refers to περιήγησις as “the ultimate form of ekphrasis”.

When Saxo employs the verb *permetiri*, he is consciously alluding to the specific quality of *descriptio* as a discourse marked by the movement of ‘travelling through’ as well as to this type of ekphrasis that is composed of a series of commonplaces, well-established within periegetic and historiographical literature, which he follows accordingly.

#### 4 The Descriptions of Norway, Iceland, and Sweden

In his description of Denmark’s northern neighbors, Saxo follows a similar approach. He begins with a general account of the region – particularly Norway – where he discusses its location, climate, natural features, and overall harshness:

*At quoniam regio hec Suetiam Noruagiamque tam uocis quam situs affinitate complectitur, earum quoque, sicut et Danie, partes ac climata memorabo. Que prouincie*

*septentrionali polo subiecte Bootemque et Arcton respicientes ipsum frigentis zone paralellum ultima sui porrectione contingunt. Post quas humanis sedibus locum inusitata algoris seuitia non relinquit. Ex quibus Noruagia saxei situs deformitatem nature sortita discrimine rupibus infoecunda ac scopulis undique secus obsita glebarum uastitate tristes locorum salebras representat. In cuius parte extima ne noctu quidem diurnum sydus occultitur, ita ut continui solis presentia alternos horarum dedignata successus utrique tempori pari luminis adminis- tratione deseruiat (Gest. Dan. Pr. 2. 6).*

I shall record, besides the areas and climate of Denmark, those of Sweden and Norway, since the same geographic area embraces them, and because of their kindred languages. This region, lying beneath the northern heavens, faces Bootes and the Great and Lesser Bear; beyond its highest latitude, where it touches the Arctic zone, the extraordinary brutality of the temperature allows no human beings to settle. Of these countries Nature decided to give Norway an unpleasant, craggy terrain; it reveals nothing but a grim, barren, rock-strewn desert. In its farthest part the sun never withdraws its presence; not even at night; scorning alternate periods of day and night it apportions equal light to each.

He then transitions to a more detailed *descriptio*, starting again from the west, with an extended report on the island of Iceland, which he describes as “worthy of being proclaimed for mysterious happenings beyond credibility” – *ueri fidem excedentium et insolitorum euentuum miraculis predicanda* (Gest. Dan. Pr. 2. 7) – highlighting its *mirabilia*, or wonders: geysers, thermal springs, volcanoes, glaciers, and icebergs.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> “There is a spring here which by the virulence of its gaseous waters destroys the original nature of any object. Certainly anything tinged by the vapour it emits is petrified. This phenomenon might well be more dangerous than wonderful, for such hardening properties are inherent in the gentle fluidity of the water that anything brought to steep in its fumes instantly assumes the qualities of stone, merely retaining its shape. There are reports of a great many other springs in the same locality, whose water at times swells to enormous volume, overflows the basins, and frequently spouts jets high into the air; at other times their flow subsides till it is sucked into pits deep down in the

Moving eastward, the description reaches Norway. Similar to the earlier account of Jutland, Saxo's narrative progresses from south to north, delineating its borders: the Ocean, Sweden, Götaland, and a "nameless territory, lacking civilization":

*Et ut paulo altius Noruagie descriptio replicetur, sciendum, quod ab ortu Suetie Gothyeque contermina aquis utrinque secus Oceani uicinantis includitur. Eadem a septentrione regionem ignoti situs ac nominis intuetur, humani cultus expertem, sed monstruose nouitatis populis abundantem, quam ab aduersis Noruagie partibus interflua pelagi separauit immensitas (Gest. Dan. Pr. 2. 8).*

Now to describe Norway rather more thoroughly I must tell you that it shares its eastern frontier with Sweden and Götaland and is bounded on each side by the neighbouring Ocean. To the north it faces an undefined and nameless territory, lacking civilization and swarming with strange unhuman races, but a vast stretch of sea has separated this from the opposite shores of Norway.

Norway and Sweden are depicted as the boundaries of the known world: to the north lies this nameless, uncivilized land inhabited by a

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earth, scarcely penetrable to the eye. Thus in full activity they splash everything near with bright spray, but when they drain away the sharpest sight cannot perceive them. Again there is a mountain in this island which, acting like the rock in Sicily with ever-blazing fires, ceaselessly belches forth its perpetual flames [...]. At certain definite times, too, an immense mass of ice drifts upon the island; immediately on its arrival, when it dashes into the rough coast, the cliffs can be heard re-echoing, as though a din of voices were roaring in weird cacophony from the deep. Hence a belief that wicked souls condemned to a torture of intense cold are paying their penalty there. If a piece is severed from this mass and fastened with the most bulging knots, it slips its ties as soon as the main body of ice breaks away from the land [...]. Another kind of ice is well known there, interspersed among rocky mountain ridges; this periodically turns upside down, with its surface sinking below and the under parts moving to the top [...]. The bubbling water of other springs is said to have the quality of ale. There are kinds of fire too which, though unable to harm wood, consume a fluid such as water. There is also a rock which flies over the mountain steeps by its own natural movement rather than through any external propulsion" (*Gest. Dan. Pr. 2. 7*).

non-human race; to the east, one encounters the Skritfinns, a hunting people who use animal skins instead of money for trading:

*Harum ortiuas partes Skritfinni incolunt. Que gens inusitatis assueta uehicularum montium inaccessa uenationis ardore sectatur locorumque complacitas sedes dispendio lubricae flexionis assequitur. Neque enim ulla adeo rupes prominet, quin ad eius fastigium callida cursus ambage perueniat. Primo siquidem uallium profunda relinquens scopulorum radices tortuosa giratione perlabitur sicque meatum crebre declinationis obliquitate perflectit, donec per sinuosos callium anfractus destinatum loci cacumen exsuperet. Eadem apud finitimos mercium loco quorundam animalium pellibus uti consuevit (Gest. Dan. Pr. 2. 8).*

Within the eastern area of these countries live the Skritfinns. In their passion for hunting, these people habitually transport themselves in an unusual manner, having to trace slippery roundabout routes to reach the desired haunts in remote parts of the mountains. No cliff stands too high for them to surmount by some skilfully twisting run. For first they glide out of the deep valleys by the feet of precipices, circling this way and that, frequently swerving in their course from a direct line until by these tortuous paths they achieve the destined summit. They normally use certain animal skins instead of money to trade with their neighbours.

Interestingly, the Skritfinns receive more attention from Saxo than the Swedes, whose territory is mentioned only briefly:

*Suetia uero Daniam ab occasu Noruagiamque respiciens, a meridie et multa orientis parte uicino preteritur Oceano. Post quam ab ortu quoque multiplex diuersitatis barbarice consortio reperitur (Gest. Dan. Pr. 2. 9).*

Western Sweden looks towards Denmark and Norway, but to the south and along much of its eastern side the Ocean adjoins it. Beyond, to the east, can be found a motley conglomeration of savage tribes.

In any case, as in the topography of Denmark, the description of its neighboring countries retains a ‘periegetic’ character, following a certain spatial orientation that guides the reader from west to east, and from south to north. These descriptions are also rooted in *topoi* specific to this type of discourse: they address the general aspect of the land, climate, borders, and *mirabilia*. They even include details about the customs of a people, introducing a significant theme commonly found in such historiographical topographies: barbarism.

In Greek and Roman historical writing, the description of *mores* was typically reserved for barbarian peoples, who lacked their own form of historiography and were considered to have a primitive cultural level (Trüdinger, 1918, p. 5). The absence of *humanitas* is evident in Saxo’s report on the nameless northern people – they lack *humani cultus*, meaning ‘civilization’ or more precisely ‘cultivation of what is human’ – as well as in his account of the Skritfinns, where the use of animal skins instead of money for trading is a sign of their perceived barbarism.

This is likely the reason for not including an account of the habits of the Norwegians, Swedes, and the Danes themselves: as Christianized peoples, they were now members of *latinitas* and capable of writing their own history.

## 5 The Epideictic Character of the Topographies and Their Political Nature

There is a noticeable difference in tone between the account of the Danish regions and those of other Scandinavian countries. Denmark, particularly Zealand, is portrayed as mild and resourceful, abundant in both land and sea. In contrast, Norway is depicted as a grim, barren territory prone to extreme climates, while Sweden receives only a few lines, emphasizing its borders and proximity to a *multiplex diuersitatis barbarice consortio*, or “a numerous gathering of barbarous diversity”, implying it is literally on the edge of barbarism. In this context, it seems appropriate to suggest that the *descriptio* of Denmark is positive and praiseworthy, whereas the depictions of Norway and Sweden are negative and unflattering.

When discussing the principles of description, Priscian states:

*Sin vero loca vel tempora vel personas describamus, habebimus aliquam et a narratione, de qua supra docuimus, et a bono vel utili vel laudabili rationem (De praeexercit. rhet. 10. 30).*

If, however, we describe places, times, or persons, we shall have some regard for the narration, which we have explained above, as well as for what is good, useful, or praiseworthy.

The description of places should respect, then, not only the narration, but what is “good, useful, or praiseworthy”. The discourse concerning praise, and censure for that matter, is proper of the epideictic or demonstrative genre of rhetoric, as it is learned, for example, from *Rhetorica ad Herennium*:

*Nunc ad demonstrativum genus causae transeamus. Quoniam haec causa dividitur in laudem et vituperationem, quibus ex rebus laudem constituerimus, ex contrariis rebus erit vituperatio comparata (Rhet. Her. III. 10).*

Now, let us turn to the demonstrative type of cause. Since this cause is divided into praise and censure, the elements from which we construct praise will be contrasted with their opposites to form censure.<sup>15</sup>

By employing a series of rhetorical topics typical of exordia<sup>16</sup> – such as those of affected modesty and novelty of what is being said,<sup>17</sup> and that dedication, as seen in the encomia to Archbishop Anders Sunesen of

<sup>15</sup> Latin text from Cicero (1964). Translation by the author.

<sup>16</sup> For definitions and examples of these topics, see Curtius (1953, p. 79-105).

<sup>17</sup> Both topics can be seen in the following passage: “Because other nations are in the habit of vaunting the fame of their achievements, and joy in recollecting their ancestors, Absalon, archbishop of Denmark, had always been fired with a passionate zeal to glorify our fatherland; he would not allow it to go without some noble document of this kind and, since everyone else refused the task, the work of compiling a history of the Danes was thrown upon me, the least of his entourage; his powerful insistence forced my weak intellect to embark on a project too huge for my abilities [...]. So it came about that my small talent, though aware of its inadequacy for this massive assignment, preferred to strive beyond its powers rather than refuse the bidding [...]” (*Gest. Dan. Pr. 1. 1*).

Lund<sup>18</sup> and King Valdemar II of Denmark<sup>19</sup> – as well as topoi common to the description of geographical places, Saxo Grammaticus composes his preface as an epideictic piece. Through this, he praises the Danish kingdom by extolling its two major representatives – Archbishop Anders and King Valdemar II – and its territories, while censuring its neighbors, particularly through his topographical descriptions.

The praise or censure of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish lands in the topographies of *Gesta Danorum* carries political implications. It is likely that the positive *descriptio* of Zealand, along with its central position within the description of Denmark, serves an ideological and political purpose. Zealand was the homeland of the Hvide clan, which served as the power base for the Valdemarian kings. After assisting Valdemar I of Denmark in securing the Danish throne in 1157, following nearly 25 years of civil war, the family came to control the most prominent ecclesiastical and royal offices in the realm (Sawyer, 1985, p. 688; Orning, 2013, p. 38). Not coincidentally, two notable members of this clan were Archbishop Anders Sunesen and his late uncle, Archbishop Absalon – the latter, according to Saxo himself, who commissioned the writing of a history of Denmark.<sup>20</sup>

Norway and Sweden, as Denmark's closest neighbors and culturally similar, were its principal political adversaries. Although the early formation of the three kingdoms is not clearly documented, conflicts and alliances between them – such as the killing of Norwegian King Olav Tryggvason by Danish and Swedish forces at the Battle of Svolder, or

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<sup>18</sup> “But since his death outstripped my attempt before it reached its goal, I ask you especially, Anders, you whom a beneficial consensus voted to become successor to his rank, the head of our Church, to be the guide and inspiration of my theme; I can disappoint the spleen of critics, who jeer at whatever is most remarkable, with your strong protection and advocacy; for men must consider your mind a shrine of heavenly treasures, prolific as it is in knowledge, furnished with a wealth of sacred scholarship” (*Gest. Dan. Pr.* 1. 2).

<sup>19</sup> “So, my gracious lord and father of us all, brilliant light of our country, Valdemar, whose illustrious descent from early times I shall be describing, I beg you to look kindly on the wavering course of this labour; for I fear that I shall be shackled by the weight of my subject and, far from properly depicting your lineage, I shall sooner reveal my lack of aptitude and meagre talents” (*Gest. Dan. Pr.* 1. 6).

<sup>20</sup> See note 18.



the alliance between the Norwegian Viking chieftain Olav Haraldsson and the Swedes against Cnut the Great of Denmark – are well-known.<sup>21</sup>

These disputes impacted the borders and continuity of power in each country. Saxo's awareness of these relationships between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden is evident in his account of the legendary King Gram in Book I of *Gesta Danorum*. Gram, the son of King Skiold of Denmark, waged war against King Sigtrygg of Sweden after learning that the Swedish king's daughter, Gro, was betrothed to a giant. After winning Gro's affection and killing both her father and the governor of Götaland, who was vying for the Swedish throne, Gram seized power in Sweden and ascended to the Danish throne by quelling a revolt. Ultimately, he was slain by Svipdag, King of Norway, with whom he had been at war "for debauching his sister and daughter" (*Gest. Dan.* I. 4. 15). Svipdag retained control over the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish thrones until Hadding, the son Gram, succeeded to avenge his father by killing Svipdag and regaining the Danish kingdom.

## 6 The Topographies Within the Christian *Orbis*

At this point, it is possible to assert that the topographies in *Gesta Danorum* are multilayered. They function as digressions, pausing the narrative to construct the spatial foundation where the deeds take place. Through these descriptions, Saxo guides the reader's mind's eye across the lands that constitute Denmark and the Scandinavian region, employing commonplaces typically found in geographical descriptions in ancient historical works. Furthermore, these topographies possess characteristics inherent to the epideictic genre of rhetoric, and their praise or censure carries political undertones.

However, there is yet another ideological dimension to these topographies that demands consideration: the Christian one.

Skovgaard-Petersen (1991, p. 335) suggests that, following a principle of book division chronologically linking Saxo's text to church

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion on the origins and constitution of the Scandinavian kingdoms, see Bagge (2013).

history,<sup>22</sup> the *Gesta Danorum* can be classified within the medieval genre of *Historia Universalis*. According to Grundmann (1978, p. 17-19), this genre synchronizes secular and biblical history, with its forerunner being Eusebius of Caesarea's Παντοδαπὴ Ἱστορία, whose Latin translation by Saint Jerome served as the main model for medieval historiography in the Latin West.

Roest (1999, p. 48-49) and Goffart (2005, p. xiii) emphasize that typologies of medieval historiographical genres, such as Grundmann's, should be taken *cum grano salis*, as they often lack methodological foundations and were typically developed for heuristic purposes. Nevertheless, even if *Gesta Danorum* is considered *historia* or *res gestae* in a broader sense, the book-division proposed by Skovgaard-Petersen remains plausible, and the text's connection to Christian historiography is unmistakable: Saxo opens his preface stating that his task is "compiling a history of the Danes" and blest Denmark with a "literary monument", as "only lately had it entered the Christian community" – in year 975, after the conversion of King Harald Bluetooth – and was thus introduced to Latin language and *latinitas*:

*Cum ceterae nationes rerum suarum titulis gloriari uoluptatem- que ex maiorum recordatione percipere soleant, Danorum maximus pontifex Absalon patriam nostram, cuius illustrande maxima semper cupiditate flagrabat, eo claritatis et monumenti genere fraudari non passus mihi comitum suorum extremo ceteris operam abnuentibus res Danicas in historiam conferendi negotium intorsit, inopemque sensum maius uiribus opus ingredi crebre exhortationis imperio compulit. Quis enim res Danie gestas literis prosequeretur; que nuper publicis initiata sacris ut religionis, ita Latine quoque uocis aliena torpebat? At ubi cum sacrorum ritu Latialis etiam facultas accessit, segnicies*

<sup>22</sup> "It's not only a question of mathematics, but builds on the basic subject matter: the first four books cover the time before Christ, whereas the fifth book tells about the presence of the *auctor temporum*, so that the books five to eight deal with the period from the birth of Christ until Christianity came to Denmark. Books nine to twelve tell about the introduction and the establishment of the Danish Church, while the last four books deal with the era of the Nordic archbishopric" (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1991, p. 334).

*par imperitie fuit, nec desidiæ minora quam antea poenurie uitia extitere. Quo euenit, ut paruitas mea, quamuis se predictæ moli imparem animaduerneret, supra uires niti quam iubenti resistere preoptaret, ne finitimis factorum traditione gaudentibus huius gentis opinio potius uetustatis obliuisci respersa quam literarum monumentis predicta uideretur (Gest. Dan. Pr. 1. 1).*

Because other nations are in the habit of vaunting the fame of their achievements, and joy in recollecting their ancestors, Absalon, archbishop of Denmark, had always been fired with a passionate zeal to glorify our fatherland; he would not allow it to go without some noble document of this kind and, since everyone else refused the task, the work of compiling a history of the Danes was thrown upon me, the least of his entourage; his powerful insistence forced my weak intellect to embark on a project too huge for my abilities. What man could have committed Denmark's history to writing? Only lately had it entered the Christian community, and still lay listlessly averse to religion as much as to the Latin tongue. Even when church worship brought Latinity, the Danes' sluggishness matched their former ignorance and they were as wretchedly slothful now as they were ill-educated before. So it came about that my small talent, though aware of its inadequacy for this massive assignment, preferred to strive beyond its powers rather than refuse the bidding; if our neighbours exulted in the records of their past exploits, the reputation of our people should not lie forgotten under ancient mould, but be blest with a literary memorial.

Writing a history of Denmark in Latin was a crucial step in the context of the country's integration into the Christian community. Through this work, the *res gestæ* of the Danish people were incorporated into the broader chronology of Christian historiography, as established by Eusebius of Caesarea, and thus became part of Christian history as a whole. In this context, topographies once again assume an important ideological role.

Another significant model for medieval historiographers was the work of Paulus Orosius, a disciple of Augustine of Hippo. Around 417 AD, he composed the *Historiarum libri adversus paganos*, a work

widely read throughout the Middle Ages and even by Saxo himself – Friis-Jensen identifies parallels and quotations from Orosius' work in *Gesta Danorum*. Orosius is particularly important for geographical descriptions in historical writing. From the second century onwards, for various reasons, the practice of incorporating such descriptions into historiography had gradually declined, a trend that Orosius reversed in his *Historiarum libri adversus paganos* (Hen, 2019, p. 12-13).

Orosius drew upon Sallust's description of Africa in the *Bellum Jugurthinum*, but unlike the precise topographies of Sallust, which serve as the spatial framework for his narratives – similar to the role they play in *Gesta Danorum* –, Orosius' descriptions of places have a different function within his historical narrative. Their primary purpose is now to delineate the boundaries of the Christian world (Merrills, 2005, p. 67-69).

The topographies provided by Orosius thus define the extent of the Christian world: the description of a particular place represents its inclusion in a new *Weltbild*, in which Roman history – and more broadly, *latinitas* itself – merges with a universal history grounded in biblical foundations. Given this, and considering that his work established a new model for subsequent historiographers, writing a history of a people in Latin and providing a topography of their territory during the medieval period can be seen as equivalent to adding that people and their land to the history and expanse of the Christian world.

Therefore, when Saxo narrates the history of the deeds of the Danes, he is incorporating the Danish people and their actions into the *temporal* history of Christianity. By meticulously describing the regions of Denmark, he is also integrating Danish territory into the *spatial* framework of Christendom – or, as one might argue, into its *spatial* history.

## 7 Conclusion

During the 19th century, Saxo Grammaticus was often seen as a prototype of the naïve genius, whose love for the tales and songs of his people led him to compile them into a work lacking in rational order or artistic composition (Johannesson, 1981, p. 95). However, from the second half of the 20th century onwards, scholars such as Johannesson (1978), Friis-Jensen (1987), and Skovgaard-Petersen (1987) in Scandinavia, as

well as Brugnoli (1992) and Stok (1994) in Italy, dramatically shifted this view by demonstrating the existence of complex organizational and compositional structures within *Gesta Danorum*.

The study of the topographies in the preface of *Gesta Danorum* supports this reevaluation: they reveal an author well aware of the function of *descriptio* or ekphrasis as a rhetorical device in general, and of place descriptions in particular, within the narrative. Saxo constructs these topographies using exemplary topoi associated with this type of procedure, emphasizing both their ‘periegetic’ and epideictic character, while alluding to the Danish and Scandinavian political context as well as a topographic tradition rooted in Christian historiography, thus justifying the epithet he eventually earned – *grammaticus*.

In the past, scholars such as Mommsen (1905) viewed geographical descriptions in historiographical works as digressions with little relevance to the main *narratio*. Similarly, Jacoby (1909) seemed to regard the descriptive, ethno-geographical λόγοι as discourses detachable from the narration, reflecting the modern opposition between description and narration.

An examination of the place descriptions in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* reveals otherwise: despite their digressive and suspensory nature, they play a significant role within the *contextus narrationis*, whether in constructing the spatial setting where the narrated deeds unfold or in reinforcing the political and religious framework that underpins the work as a whole. These characteristics position *Gesta Danorum* as a valuable text for theoretical discussions on the nature of ekphrases not only in historiography but also in ancient and medieval literature more broadly.

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