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# “QU’ASSI SAXO LE NOMBRA”:



## Reappropriating the *theatrum historiae Danorum* in Rebolledo’s First *Selva Dánica*

Af Sofie Kluge

*In 1655, the Spanish soldier and diplomat Bernardino de Rebolledo (1597–1676), ambassador to Philip IV in Denmark from 1648 to 1661, published his versified history of Denmark, the first Selva dánica [Danish Wilderniss] with Peter Morsing in Copenhagen. In this poem, a Catholic reappropriation of Danish history vis-à-vis the more factual, protomodern and, above all, Protestant accounts proposed by Christian IV’s royal Dutch historiographers, Johannes Meursius and Johannes Pontanus, the Spanish poet-historiographer can be seen to enter into a more or less conscious elective affinity with the father of Danish historiography: the great – Catholic – Saxo Grammaticus.*

In 1655, the Spanish soldier and diplomat Bernardino de Rebolledo (1597–1676. Fig. 1),<sup>1</sup> ambassador to Philip IV in Denmark from 1648 to 1661, published his *Selvas dánicas* [Danish Wildernisses] with Peter Morsing in Copenhagen (Fig. 2 & 3). This article concerns the first of the two poems: Rebolledo’s history of Denmark versified in a fashionable Southern metre and artfully wrought in his homeland’s most sophisticated poetic style. A hybrid of poetry and historiography; Scandinavian in content and Hispanic in style; addressing a Northern Protestant context yet deeply impregnated by Counterreformation theology, this strange and uneven work has – as I have discussed elsewhere<sup>2</sup> – fallen between two stools and remains to this day

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<sup>1</sup> Rebolledo began his military carrier in Italy in 1611. In 1628, he became a knight of the Order of Santiago and, in 1630, he was honoured with the title of *gentilhombre* del Cardinal Infante Don Fernando. His achievements as a diplomat include: the negotiation with Hungary carried out in 1636, on the part of the German Emperor, earning him the title of Count of the Holy Roman Empire; the negotiation, on the part of the Spanish Crown, of the Treaty of Westphalia (1647); and his negotiation, on the part of Frederik III, of the Treaty of Roskilde (1654). The latter came into place because of Rebolledo’s personal friendship with Christina of Sweden whose conversion to Catholicism he instigated (Sáez 2014, Mortensen 1999 and Corredera Nilsson 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Kluge 2016.

largely neglected by both Spanish and Danish scholars, literary specialists and historians.<sup>3</sup>

However, even though Rebolledo's mediocre Culteranist *silvas*<sup>4</sup> may impress literary scholars just about as little as his schematic and repetitive historiographical narrative (neither characterized by antiquarian erudition nor by the elegant flow of the narration)<sup>5</sup> will excite scholars of Renaissance historiography, the poem is in fact a highly interesting cultural historical document. It can be seen as a Catholic reappropriation of Danish history vis-à-vis Johannes Meursius' *Historia Danica* (1630) and Johannes Pontanus' *Rerum Danicarum Historia* (1631), both commissioned by Christian IV as part of his ambitious cultural political programme.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1. Anonymous artist: Bernardino de Rebolledo. *Retratos de españoles ilustres* (1791).

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<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, the most comprehensive studies date from the 19th century (Bendixen 1859 and Giga 1883(a)) and the Sankt Andreas Bibliotek in Copenhagen, main Catholic library in Denmark, holds only three Rebolledo-related materials: a first edition of the *Selvas dánicas*; Giga 1883(a); and the *Ælnoth* issue containing Mortensen's article.

<sup>4</sup> The *silva* is a Spanish Renaissance verse form consisting of an "asymmetric combination of hendecasyllables, or of hendecasyllables and heptasyllables, with freely disposed consonant rhyme" (Domínguez Caparrós 1999, 390) and especially associated with "the Spanish Homer", Luis de Góngora (1567–1621) who used it in his *Soledades* [Solitudes], scandalously combining heroic and bucolic styles. *Culteranismo*, a contraction of *culto* [cultured] and *luteranismo* [Lutheranism], was the pejorative term used to describe the ornamental and ostentatious poetic style associated with Góngora.

<sup>5</sup> The poles of classical historiography as described by Momigliano 1990, 29–50.

<sup>6</sup> Skovgaard-Petersen 2001.

In his endeavour to eclipse the Dutch historiographers' more factual, proto-modern and, above all, Protestant accounts, Rebolledo can be seen to enter into a more or less conscious elective affinity with the father of Danish historiography: the great – Catholic – Saxo Grammaticus. Indeed, the first *Selva dánica* presents itself as a polemical reappropriation of the transcendental and eschatological medieval *theatrum mundi* that was not only the inevitable backdrop of the *Gesta danorum* and the determinating lens through which Spanish Golden Age writers (literary authors as well as historiographers) approached the historical world; it had also recently been Protestantised in the so-called *Carion's Chronicle* which exercised a huge influence on Danish Renaissance historiography.<sup>7</sup> Put simply, the first *Selva dánica* sets out to counter the Melanchton-inspired presentation of the Reformation as the zenith toward which Danish History was moving from the beginning of time found in Meursius' and Pontanus' histories of Denmark.

This interweaving of eschatological and confessional perspectives becomes manifest in the conspicuous frame narrative established in chapter I recounting a theological debate that took place at the University of Copenhagen the year before the publication of Rebolledo's poem. On this occasion, the Copenhagen-based Jesuit Gottfried Francken reportedly refuted the "error libertino" of the Protestant philosopher and royal physician Henning Arnisæus (1570–1636) in the presence of the king and all the "Doctas Caueças del Senado" [Learned Heads of the Senate],<sup>8</sup> an event which is interpreted in the text as a divine sign bringing "esperanças/De no remoto fin de tantos males" [hopes/Of a no remote end to so many evils].<sup>9</sup>

These hopefully soon ending evils are then explicated in the following seventy pages which describe all the violent deaths, brutal wars, incest, vicious tyrants, fratricides and patricides marring Dania through the centuries from the time of Dan: the stories of the tyrant Lothar who dethroned his brother Humble and "En sangre se baño de la Nobleza" [Bathed himself in the blood of the Nobility, 12]; Hadding who, banished by his father Suibdager, returned to kill his begetter and his other offspring along with two of his grandchildren; Helge who "Tubo vn Hijo en su Hija" [Had a Son by his own Daughter, 18], eventually killing himself; and much more of the same kind. As Rebolledo duly notes on various occasions, these stories are largely drawn from Saxo ("Qu'assi Saxo le nombra", 30, et al.); yet they are at the same time clearly impregnated by the confessional perspective of the frame narrative polemically casting Danish history as a pagan-heretic horror

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<sup>7</sup> Skovgaard-Petersen 1998, 158–167.

<sup>8</sup> In Rebolledo's account, Arnisæus argued that the soul came from human material ("de materia humana procedida", Rebolledo 1655, 8–9.

<sup>9</sup> Rebolledo 1655, 11.

scenario only briefly interrupted by short periods of peace during Catholic dominion (e.g., during the reign of Queen Margrethe I, 1388–1412).

Though implicit throughout the narrative in the narrator's interspersed commentaries,<sup>10</sup> the confessional-cum-eschatological perspective explicitly reappears in the final exhortation to Frederik III to return to Catholicism, bringing the poem full circle.

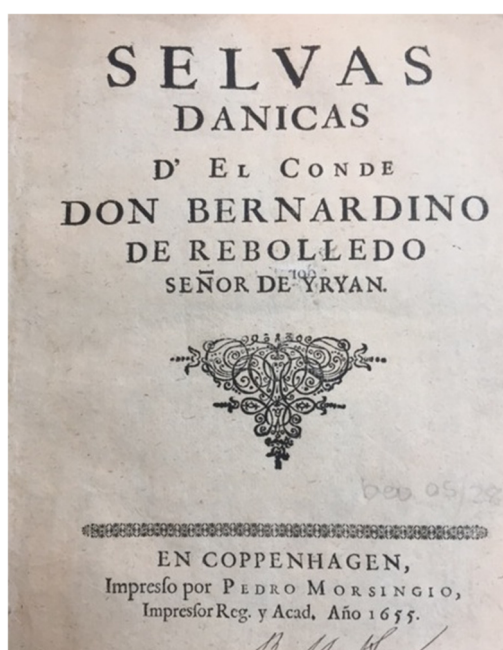


Fig. 2. Title page of the 1st edition.

Fig. 3. Frontispiece of the 1st edition.  
The Royal Library, Copenhagen.

Narratological speaking, the framework of the first *Selva dánica* thus creates two separate if interrelated levels of representation: the here-and-now of the narrator, steeped in confessional controversy; and the retrospective historiographical narrative unfolding in the virtual *θέατρον* that is created in between the opening polemic and the closing supplication to the King to amend past horrors by returning to the old faith. In visual terms, we have first a *tableau vivant*, suggesting the advent of something new and good (7–11); then a long flashback which illuminates this *tableau* in the manner of a negative backdrop: the horrendous past which luckily appears to be over soon (11–78); and, finally, a close-up in which the narrator addresses the king

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the commentary on page 75, where the narrator interprets the Lutheran church arsons as “Señas/D'amaņas del Cielo no pequeñas” [Signs/Of no small threats from Heaven].

underscoring his role on the world's great stage (78–80). I quote from what may be termed the prologue and the epilogue of the poem:

I

Si Dania vez alguna Juzgar pudo  
Que condolido el Cielo  
De tantas procelosas tempestades,  
Y riesgos interiores,  
Como fatigan Incessablemente  
Las conçiencias de sus habitantes;  
En la tranquilidad d'el Sacro Puerto  
Libre de peligrosas Inquietudes,  
Les de paz conueniente;  
Es en tiempo d'vn Rey cuyas Virtudes  
Mereceràn de la Piedad diuina,  
La luz de la Catolica Doctrina.  
(1655: 8)

(If Dania could ever Understand  
How the Heavens, moved  
By so many stormy tempests,  
And interior threats,  
As do Incessantly exhaust  
The conscience of her inhabitants,  
In the tranquility of the Sacred Port  
Free of dangerous worries,  
Would give her fair peace;  
Then it must be in the time of a King  
whose Virtues  
Are deserving of divine Piety,  
The light of Catholic Doctrine.)

XII

Tal de los Tiempos el progreso ha sido  
(Como la Erudicion tiene por cierto)  
Señor, con que ha traydo  
Estos Reynos el Hado  
De vuestro Imperio al Puerto  
De vuestro Cetro al yugo deseado

(...)

Goce Señor entre Virtudes tantas  
La Religion de sus primicias Santas:  
Gocen los Templos como ya goçaron  
Las Escuelas por voz de la Doctrina  
A cuya deuocion se consagraron:  
Oygan los Pueblos la Verdad Diuina,  
Que tanto Tiempo en vano desearon.  
Logren la Disciplina  
Que sus Antecessores veneraron:  
Sereis en lo profano y lo sagrado  
Ygualmente de todos celebrado.  
Vozes da la Razon, voces da el Cielo,

(Such has been the progress of the  
Times  
(As Erudition assures us),  
Sir, by which Fate has brought  
These kingdoms of your reign to the  
Port,  
Your sceptre to the desired yoke  
(...)

Enjoy, Sir, among so many Virtues  
Religion in its Holy original form:  
Let the Temples savour, as once did  
The Schools, the voice of the Doctrine  
To whose devotion they were first  
consecrated:  
Let the People hear the Divine Truth,  
that they longed for so long in vain.  
Let them have the Discipline  
That their Forefathers venerated:  
Then you will yourself be equally

Vozes os da de la Piedad el zelo.  
Milagros s'han obra en este Tiempo  
De que yo soy el testigo,  
Que no puede negarlos  
El mayor Enemigo,  
Ni la calumnia desacreditar los:  
Agradeced propicio  
A Dios tan no esperado beneficio;  
(1655: 78–79)

Celebrated by all in profane and sacred  
matters.  
Reason tells you, Heaven tells you,  
The zeal of Piety tells you.  
Miracles have been worked in our Time  
Of which I am the witness,  
And which cannot be denied  
By the greatest Enemy,  
Nor discredited by calumny:  
Give thanks to God  
For this favourable unexpected  
benefit;)

At the end of the poem, it is thus emphasized that, although the events of the preceding narrative may be what Danish history has been in the past, it is not necessarily what it must be in the future. The glorious victory of Rebolledo's Jesuit friend over the royal physician at the university disputation is presented as the divine sign of an imminent turning point. As another Baptist crying in the wilderness (*selva*), the narrator has borne witness to this sign. Now it is up to the monarch to use this premonition to draw the right conclusion. The eschatological perspective could hardly be any clearer, nor could its intricate intertwinement with confessional matters be more evident.

Here, for my conclusion, I would like to return briefly to the form through which Rebolledo attempted to outdo Meursius' and Pontanus' contemporaneous histories and to reappropriate the *theorum historiae Danorum* for the Catholic cause. Considering the Protestant reformers' notorious suspicion of sensual appeal, it is indeed highly interesting that this reappropriation is effectuated precisely through aesthetics. Whether or not we like its Culteranist style or admire the author's poetic skills, the aesthetic form of the text performatively suggests the ideological message communicated through the text. In contradistinction to the works of the Dutch historians, the first *Selva dánica* mimes the prosperity and beauty of the Catholic world theatre with its typical appeal to the senses and emotions. As readers, we are thus not only brought to understand, with our minds, the fundamental difference between the prosaic and sterile pagan-Protestant *theatrum mundi* and the musical universal poetry of the great Catholic pageant; we are simultaneously led to perceive it with our senses. In this respect, too, Rebolledo can be seen as an heir of Saxo Grammaticus, another historiographer who understood the power of poetry.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Friis-Jensen 1987, 179, underscoring Saxo as a "creative writer".

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