

LUIGI DE ANNA: *Il mito del nord. Tradizioni classiche e medievali*. Nuovo Medioevo 43. Liguori Editore, Napoli 1994. ISBN 88-207-2214-3. 192 p. ITL 24.000.

Prof. Luigi De Anna has specialized in the study of the relations between Italy or the Mediterranean countries and the North, especially Finland. This year he has produced two relevant works, one of which is reviewed here. The theme is intriguing: the ideas which classical antiquity and the Middle Ages had of the Northern peoples, viz. the peoples who were living outside the Mediterranean civilization. The North was, however, more an anthropological than geographical concept. Besides the British Isles and Scandinavia, it also comprised the Russians and the peoples of the steppes of Asia, and underwent some changes in the course of time.

The author reviews the main differences which the "civilized" peoples perceived, or thought to perceive, between themselves and the Northerners. The ancient theory of the influence of climate not only upon the character but also the physique of people was of decisive significance. Cold and darkness rendered the Northern peoples hard and cruel, big- and strong-bodied, and hence fearful warriors. To the Greeks and Romans the peoples to the north of their own civilization were predominantly barbarians. These ideas were bequeathed to the Middle Ages. Despite the mitigating influence of Christianity and the conquests of new areas to civilization, the basic attitude persisted, with only minor modifications. The barbarities perpetrated by the Vikings and the horrors of the Mongol invasions added fresh fuel to the abhorrence felt for these strange peoples.

The author also surveys differences in daily life, which the Mediterraneans found, if not always barbaric, at least unfamiliar and repulsive, such as the habit of the Northern warriors to dress in skins and their diet, which consisted more of raw meat than of cereals, oil and wine, which the cultivated Mediterraneans preferred. The visitors to these peoples often described their disgusting gluttony and heavy drinking. The author argues that furs, hunting and meat diet later served as the status symbols of the medieval nobility.

De Anna is to be congratulated for this informative and well-written book. His conclusions are based upon original sources, which he amply, but not obtrusively, quotes, and upon the results of modern scholarship. Considering the vastness of his subject, his bibliography cannot be exhaustive, but in any case it is sufficiently comprehensive.

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