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Living through Crisis: A new take on the lives of Johannes and Olaus Magnus

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The Swedish brothers Magnus (Johannes, 1488–1544, and Olaus, 1490–1557) are best known as the authors of two enormous works on Swedish/Scandinavian history. They did however also spend a great deal of their lives in the shadow of the advent of Lutheranism to Sweden. For the brothers, devout Catholics, this was a crisis of apocalyptic magnitude, on a political, religious, and personal level. This paper aims to investigate how the brothers represented this crisis in their works and writings.

Johannes arrived in Sweden in 1523 and shortly after saw himself elected archbishop, but only three years later, he left Sweden and never returned. The brothers spent the rest of their lives abroad, in Poland and in Italy. The entire time they kept fighting the Lutheran crisis in Sweden with every devisable means. They did great rhetorical feats in their attempts to convince the Pope and the cardinals to help them reinstate Catholicism in the northern countries – but also tried to make the Swedish king, Gustavus Vasa, listen to them and mend his Lutheran ways. These two persuasion campaigns required different strategies, and both involved framing the advent of Lutheranism as a crisis.

Finally, an illustrative example. In 1526, when Johannes left Sweden for good, he had been sent to Poland by King Gustavus Vasa to negotiate a marriage to a Polish princess. He probably left Sweden calmly and with every intention of returning. In Johannes' work of history, however, he claims to have saved himself by fleeing Sweden in great haste. In other words, he depicts a perfectly normal departure on a diplomatic mission as flight from a potentially life-threatening crisis.