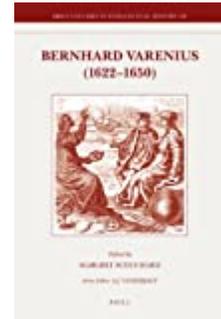




**Margret Schuchard, ed.** *Bernhard Varenius (1622-1650)*. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History. Leiden: Brill, 2007. xii + 345 pp. Illustrations. \$129.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-16363-8.



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## Only the Good Die Young

Several decades ago, Hanno Beck asserted that Bernhard Varenius (1622-50), originally from the duchy of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, was the “greatest geographer since antiquity.”[1] Most of the authors who contributed to Margret Schuchard’s collection of essays on Varenius would shy away from Beck’s rather exaggerated claim. Nonetheless, they all insist on the very important contributions that this seventeenth-century polymath made to the new “science” of geography. Influencing such figures as Isaac Newton (1643-1727), Peter the Great (1672-1727), Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), and even Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Varenius’s geographical insights reshaped the emerging discipline of geography, with a clear focus in its mathematical features. The articles in this volume originated in a symposium dedicated to Varenius at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel (2004). Schuchard, retired senior lecturer at Heidelberg University, edited the volume and supplied a few additional biographical chapters that help to hold the collection together. The book has been organized into three rather distinct sections: first, an overview of the early

life and career of Varenius; second, three essays on his first significant contribution to geography, the *Descriptio regni Iaponiae* (1649); and third, a fairly extensive assessment of his most important work, the *Geographia generalis* (1650). A few issues recur in each of these sections and seem to provide unique windows into the intellectual world of Varenius. One important consideration concerns the philosophical heritage of Varenius. Contributors attempt to assess his break with Aristotelian categories of knowing, his alignment with René Descartes, and even his willingness to represent new and distinct trends in the history of science. Another question that surfaces fairly frequently is the meaning of the terms Varenius employs—in particular, his understanding of the notion of *geographia generalis* (as opposed to *geographia specialis*). Finally, as noted above, the authors attempt to evaluate the influence of Varenius, primarily as a geographer, but also as a philosopher.

Varenius lived a very short life, even given the difficulties of seventeenth-century conditions, yet made important contributions during his brief twenty-eight years

of life. His family connections, which are noted in a diagram on one of the introductory pages (p. xv), point to the heritage and social status that aided him. Lutheran pastors and theologians in his family tree are especially noteworthy here, in particular Varenius's great-grandfather, David Chytraeus (1530-1600), who was a pupil of Phillip Melancthon (1497-1560), a professor of theology at Rostock and one of the principal architects of the Lutheran *Book of Concord* (1580). Varenius's maternal grandfather, Johannes Freder (1544-1604), was also a theology professor at Rostock, and his father, Heinrich Varenius, was the Lutheran superintendent at Uelzen, Varenius's birthplace. Johann Anselm Steiger's article on the elder Varenius, which focuses on the father's defense of Johann Arndt's *Vier Bucher vom Wahren Christentum* (1604) seems out of place in this volume. Since son Bernard chose to break with family tradition by abandoning an ecclesiastical calling, it would have been interesting to consider Varenius in that context. Overall, this section on family and educational heritage should have demonstrated some acquaintance with work such as that of Luise Schorn-Schötte, who has investigated the privilege and experience of the Lutheran *Pfarrhaus*, especially in the Braunschweig duchies.[2] Klaus Lehman traces Varenius to Hamburg, noting especially his studies with Joachim Jungius, who may have provided the organizational categories Varenius demonstrated in his basic texts on geography. Both Schuchard and Rienk Vermij follow the career of Varenius to the Netherlands, with particular attention to the difficulties he had in obtaining an academic position. His pursuit of a medical degree at Leiden after other positions had evaporated and his unsuccessful bid to secure a chair in mathematics at the Amsterdam Atheneum both illustrate a life marked by frustration and disappointment.

One break for Varenius was his first major publication, a geographical account of Japan, *Descriptio regni Iaponiae*, which appeared as the final installment of the Dutch Elzevier series on the so-called republics; these publications were essentially a series of regional geographies. Even though Varenius never traveled outside of Europe, he was able to create an important account of Japan from available sources. Folker Reichert's essay on the foundations of the *Descriptio* argues that Varenius effectively balanced "classical" sources (such as the accounts of Marco Polo) with more contemporary materials from Jesuit missionaries and Dutch agents of the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie. Reinhard Dächting and Horst Walther Blanke explore the literary contribution of the *Descriptio*, and consider the text

as an example of regional geography, or chorography. Blanke, in particular, contends that the *Descriptio* was not a good example of Varenius's own category of the *geographia specialis*, as it accommodated too often to the more popular elements that characterized the geography series of Elzevier.

The final section of the book considers the influence of Varenius's most widely regarded book, *Geographia generalis, in qua affectiones generales Telluris explicantur*. The first two essays in this section analyze the traditions that shaped Varenius's thought, especially the philosophical underpinnings. Frank Richter's contribution on Varenius, "Ein Geograph zwischen allen Stühlen," is the most detailed in this regard. Richter argues against William Warntz that Varenius essentially abandoned Aristotle for Descartes. Richter contends instead that a strong element of Francis Bacon's empiricism combined with his Cartesian tendencies, thus establishing his philosophical eclecticism. Both Richter and Ulrich Staffhorst discuss Varenius's nuanced use of the term *affectiones*, which appeared in the title of his general work on geography. Here again, although Varenius used the term, often pairing it with another typically Aristotelian term, *proprietates*, his understanding of the properties or *Eigenschaften* described in the world did not conform to typical usage in Aristotelian science. One key contribution Varenius made was his general contention that geography was best understood as a form of applied mathematics, or *mathematica mixta*.

The final few chapters in this collection trace the influence of Varenius, and the *Geographia generalis*, in various national contexts. Schuchard sketches the spread of Varenius's ideas and writings in England and in North America, where the text emerged as a standard geographical work in several colonial colleges. This influence was furthered by the various translations of the *Geographia*, from Newton's early Latin edition, completed in 1672, to the Shaw-Dugdale translation first published in 1733. Robert Mayhew contrasts this later version of the *Geographia*, which sought to provide a more technically accurate translation of the work, with the "spliced-together" edition of the work that was assembled earlier by Richard Blome as *Cosmography and Geography* (1682). Sandra Rebok attempts to argue for the influence of the text on Thomas Jefferson, without any direct evidence, yet makes a stronger case for the value of Varenius to Alexander von Humboldt, who praised the work. Varenius also shaped the development of the discipline of geography in Russia, beginning with the era of Peter the Great. Denis Shaw's final essay in the volume analyzes

the Russian translation completed by Fedor Polikarpov (1718), which provided new scientific terminology to students of geography in Russia.

The short-lived Varenius made contributions to our geographical understanding worth recalling. Generally, the essays in this collection are commendable for the insights they provide into his life. The appearance of a complete monograph or biography on his life is unlikely, given the somewhat limited range of materials available and the tendency to address subjects with more familiarity or a greater recognized importance. With these considerations in mind, it is fortunate that scholars now have this collection of current research about an important seventeenth-century figure like Varenius.

#### Notes

[1]. Hanno Beck, *Geographie: Europäische Entwicklung in Texten und Erläuterungen* (Freiburg: K. Alber, 1973).

[2]. See Luise Schorn-Schötte, *Evangelische Geistlichkeit in der Frühneuzeit: Deren Anteil an der Entfaltung frühmoderner Staatlichkeit und Gesellschaft dargestellt am Beispiel des Fürstentums Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, der Landgrafschaft Hessen-Kassel und der Stadt Braunschweig* (Gutersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996); and Scott Dixon and Luise Schorn-Schötte, eds., *The Protestant Clergy of Early Modern Europe* (London: Palgrave, 2003).

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