

"SAXO GRAMMATICUS.

**Saxonis Grammatici Danorum Historiae libri XVI, tre centis
abhinc annis conscripta, tanta dictionis elegantia, rerum
gestarum varietate, ut cum omni vetustate contendere optimo
iure videri possint. Accessit rerum memorabilium Index
locupletissimus. ... - [THE FIRST NARRATIVE OF HAMLET]**

Reference: 51683

Basel, Io. Bebelium, 1534. Folio. Later full vellum. (18th cent.). Some minor cracks to hinge. A few brownspots to title-page and last leaf. Title-label with gilt lettering. Fol. (16), 189, (1, verso with printers woodcut device). First leaf of text with a broad woodcut frame, made after Holbein. Many woodcut initials. Small stamp on titlepage and in one margin. A large exceptionally clean copy.

Comment: Second edition, also often referred to as the Basel-edition, of this monumental landmark work constituting the first full history of Denmark for posterity and to this day the most important of all Danish historical publications. This magnificent work preserves a wealth of Nordic legends, royal genealogies and mythic material otherwise lost - among them the earliest written account of the legend of Amleth, which later inspired Shakespeare to write Hamlet. This second edition (known as the Basel-edition) is considered even scarcer than the editio princeps printed in Paris in 1514. "Hamlet" is based on a Norse legend composed by Saxo Grammaticus in Latin around 1200 AD. The sixteen books that comprise Saxo Grammaticus' "Gesta Danorum", or "History of the Danes", tell of the rise and fall of the great rulers of Denmark, and the tale of Amleth, Saxo's Hamlet, is recounted in books three and four. In Saxo's version, King Rorik of the Danes places his trust in two brothers, Orvendil and Fengi. The brothers are appointed to rule over Jutland, and Orvendil weds the king's beautiful daughter, Geruth. They have a son, Amleth. But Fengi, lusting after Orvendil's new bride and longing to become the sole ruler of Jutland, kills his brother, marries Geruth, and declares himself king over the land. Amleth is desperately afraid, and feigns madness to keep from getting murdered. He plans revenge against his uncle and becomes the new and rightful king of Jutland. ([own translation] Carl S. Petersen). No complete manuscript of Saxo's work has survived, merely a few loose leaves have been preserved. Saxo Grammaticus (ab. 1150-1220) was probably a secular clerk or secretary to Absalon, Archbishop of Lund, the great Danish churchman, statesman and warrior. Saxo is remembered today as the author of the first full history of Denmark, in which he modelled himself on the classical authors (e.g. Virgil, Plato, Cicero) in order to glorify his fatherland. The work dates from the end of the 12th century and was edited by Christiern Pedersen, a Canon of Lund, and printed by Jodocus Badius Ascendius in Paris in 1514 (the present copy) with 16th century re-issues following in 1534 (Basel) and 1576 (Frankfurt). Only with the first printing of this seminal work did the work become known throughout academic circles. The work soon received international fame and is to this day renowned as not only being immensely important historically, but also being extremely well written (Saxo is praised by Erasmus, for instance, for possessing great power of eloquence). The work consists of sixteen books that cover the time from the founders of the Danish people (Dan I of Denmark) till Saxo's own time, ending around 1185 (with the submission of Pomerania), when the last part is supposedly written. The work thus covers the entire history of Denmark until Saxo's own time, seen under a somewhat glorified perspective, from heathen times with tales of Odin and the gods of Valhalla to the times of Absalon, who probably directly influenced the sections on the history of his own time, working closely with Saxo himself. The work also contains the first known written narration of the legend of Hamlet (Amleth, the son who took revenge for his murdered father). It is this narrative of Saxo's, which he based on an oral tale, that forms the basis for Shakespeare's "Hamlet", which takes place in Helsingør in Denmark. There is

fairly certain evidence that Shakespeare knew Saxo's work on the History of Denmark and thus the legend of Amleth. ""This is the old, Norse folk-tale of Amleth, a literary ancestor of Shakespeare's ""Hamlet"". The Scandinavian legend was recorded in Latin around 1200 by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus (...). It is part of the collection of tales known as Gesta Danorum - a partly mythical history of the Danes. Saxo's Amleth story - a summary King Rørik of Denmark appoints two brothers, Horwendil and Fengo, as the rulers of Jutland. Horwendil slays the King of Norway, marries King Rørik's daughter Gerutha, and they have a son named Amleth. Consumed by envy of his brother, Fengo murders Horwendil and marries his wife Gerutha. Amleth then feigns madness, clothing himself in rags and spouting nonsense, to shield himself from his uncle's violence. In fact, the name 'Amleth' itself means 'stupid'. Yet Amleth's behaviour attracts suspicion, and the King attempts to trap him into admitting he has plans for revenge. First, a beautiful woman is used to lure him into betraying himself, but she proves loyal to Amleth. Then a spy is planted to eavesdrop on Amleth's conversation with his mother, in which she repents and he confesses his plans for revenge. Amleth detects the spy, kills him in a mad frenzy, throws his mutilated body in a sewer, and leaves it to be eaten by pigs. Fengo then deports Amleth to England with two escorts carrying a letter directing the King there to execute him. Amleth switches the letter with another one, which orders the death of the escorts and asks for the hand of the English Princess in marriage. Returning to Denmark, Amleth arrives disguised, in the midst of his own funeral, burns down the hall and hunts down his sleeping uncle. Because Amleth had wounded himself on his sword, attendants had made it harmless by nailing it to the scabbard (the sheath used to hold it). Amleth swaps this useless sword with Fengo's, succeeds in killing his uncle and next day is hailed as the King. ... Saxo's account has many of the defining features of Shakespeare's drama: a villain who kills his brother, takes over the throne and then marries his brother's wife a cunning young hero, the King's son, who pretends to be mad to shield himself from his uncle three plots used by the King to uncover the young man's secrets: a young woman, a spy planted in the Queen's bedroom (who is uncovered and killed), and two escorts who take the prince to England (also outwitted and killed) a hero who returns home during a funeral and finally achieves his revenge through an exchange of swords. There are equivalents for Shakespeare's central characters - old and young Hamlet, old and young Fortinbras, Claudius and Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But Saxo has no ghost demanding vengeance, and the identity of the murderous uncle is known from the start. There is no Osric, no gravediggers or play within a play. The legend lacks a Laertes character and the young woman does not go mad or kill herself. Perhaps most crucially, Amleth lacks Hamlet's melancholy disposition and long self-reflexive soliloquies, and he survives after becoming king."" (""Saxo's legend of Amleth in the Gesta Danorum"" - The British Library.mht). Adams S,631. Lauritz Nielsen, 241.

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1534

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