

# *Ultima Thule* in West European and Icelandic Traditions

Tatjana N. Jackson

PYTHEAS of Massilia, a Greek merchant and traveller, undertook in the second half of the 4th century B.C. his famous and memorable trip to the north, to the 'tin country', to the 'amber country', and to the legendary island of *Thule*.

Pytheas' original report has not been preserved (the only direct quotation from his treatise *On the Ocean* can be found in *Elementa astronomiae* (*Elements of Astronomy*) by Geminus of Rhodes, first century B.C.), however, through chance quotations in much later authors (chiefly Strabo and Pliny), one can put together the following picture: *Thule* 'is a six days' sail north of Britain, and is near the frozen sea' (Strabo: I, 4, 2)<sup>1</sup>; this is 'the most northerly of the Britannic Islands'; it 'is farthest north', and 'there the circle of the summer tropic is the same as the arctic circle' (Strabo: II, 5, 8); in the vicinity of *Thule* there is 'no longer either land properly so-called, or sea, or air, but a kind of substance concreated from all these elements, resembling a sea-lungs ... which you can neither walk nor sail upon' (Strabo, with reference to Polybius – Strabo: II, 4, 1); the night in these parts 'becomes extremely short, sometimes two, sometimes three hours long, so that the sun rises a short while after sunset' (Geminus: VI, 8, 9).

Scholars, taking into consideration information on the night's and day's duration in *Thule*, or that it was six days' sail to *Thule* from Britain, as well as discussing what 'a sea-lungs' could mean, tried to spot the island, placing it among the Hebrides and the Shetland

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1 My italics in quotations here and everywhere else.

Islands, or identifying it with Iceland, Norway and Greenland (see Nansen 1911; Hennig 1936; Elnitskij 1961; Ditmar 1980; Fedotov 1982). I am not sure if it is at all possible to state definitely which island Pytheas has given the name of *Thule* to.

More important, to my point of view, is to pay attention not to the topographic or astronomic details of Pytheas' account of *Thule*, but to the general background of his discovery, i.e. to the level of knowledge about the European North, to the very concept of 'the north' at his days<sup>2</sup> (see Podossinov 2002; cp. Chevallier 1984), on the one hand, and, no matter how paradoxical this might sound, to the stereotyped formulas used by him, on the other. After all, not by mere chance did Plutarch note that 'geographers ... crowd on to the outer edges of their maps the parts of the earth which elude their knowledge, with explanatory notes that What lies beyond is sandy desert without water and full of wild beasts, or blind marsh, or Scythian cold, or frozen sea ...' (Plut.: Thes. 1). I repeat again: no matter what island Pytheas had visited (if any), what matters is that he claimed to have reached *the northern edge of the world*.

Having once originated as a materialization of a human idea of an utmost northern edge of the habitable world, *Ultima Thule* continued inevitably, with the increase of geographical knowledge, 'moving' northwards. It has already been demonstrated in scholarly literature that 'textually, at least, the island was not firmly anchored' (Cassidy 1963).

'Since the days of Pytheas the search for the island of Thule was a continuing fascination for Classical and later geographers, yet the lack of actual knowledge in the north of Europe is quite striking'. As

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2 Ancient geographers and cartographers believed that in the north both Europe and Asia were washed by the ocean. Scandinavia as a peninsula was not familiar to them, few of them imagined it as an island. As a result, the Baltic Sea was usually identified with the Arctic Ocean. The analysis of geographical texts shows that the real proportions of Northern Eurasia were to a great degree underestimated by them. Northern borders of Eurasia imposed upon a modern map would run from the west in the eastbound direction along the Baltic coast, then turn southwards to the North Caspian region, then cross the lands of Baktria and Choresm in Middle Asia, and go straight southwards to the east of India. The idea of the Arctic Ocean washing in the north the shores of this 'minimized' Eurasia made people believe in the existence of a Northern sea route.

has been noted, 'the Classical authors from Aristotle and Plato to Tacitus had little to report' (Simek 1996: 67; cp. Brenner 1877: 25–61) on this matter. Isidore, Orosius and Bede had little to add to what had been said by the Classical authors (Wright 1925).

For instance, for Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500 – c. 560) the island of *Thule* is far to the north from Britain; the land there is mostly deserted; there are no nights for about 40 days round the summer solstice, and on the other hand no days round the winter solstice (*Bellum Gothicum*: 2, 15). According to the Spanish bishop Isidore of Seville (c. 570–636), *Thule* is the extreme island of the Ocean in the north-west; beyond the island there is no day; the surrounding sea is calm and frozen (Etym.: XIV, VI, 4). For the English monk Bede the Venerable (673–735) the island of *Thule* is 'six days by ship from Britain'; in 'a day's sailing from the island of Thule, up towards the north,' there is a 'frozen sea'; the longest day and the longest night here both last for 24 hours (*De temporum ratione*: 31, 34).

In the Middle Ages, mostly as a result of the Viking activity, the horizon 'moves' further in the northern and north-western directions. Beginning with 780s, immigrants from Scandinavia – *Norðmenn*, "the northern people" – begin their movement overseas and their attacks on the British Isles. Viking squads turn up not only in England, but also in Ireland and France, in Spain and Southern Italy, in Germany, in Rus and Byzantium, in the Arabic Califate, and even in Africa. Since the mid-ninth century a number of regions and countries are being colonized: the Norwegians and the Danes found Dublin kingdom (853) and the Duchy of Normandy (911). The Vikings conquer Northern and Eastern England (late ninth to mid-tenth centuries); gain control over the Orkneys and the Shetlands; colonize Iceland, the Faroes and part of Greenland. Around 1000, several centuries before Columbus, they reach the coast and islands of North America. The Dukes of Normandy, in their turn, conquer England (William the Conqueror, 1066), as well as Sicily and Southern Italy, founding in the early twelfth century the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Ancient geographers' data are supplemented by new information. The Anglo-Saxon King Alfred the Great (late ninth century) appends an account of Ohthere's voyage from northern

Norway round North Cape and into the White Sea (Two Voyagers: 18–22) to his Old English translation of *Historiarum adversum Paganos Libri Septem* by the Spanish churchman Paulus Orosius (*Seven Books of History against the Pagans*).

The Irish monk and scholar Dicuil (before 770 – after 825), the author of a geographical treatise *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* (*The Book on the Measurement of the Earth*), tells about the, unknown before, islands in the Atlantic Ocean. His story rests on the words of some Irish monks who had lived there (VII, 7–13). One of these islands was *Thule*. Having repeated the information of Pytheas (according to Plinius), Julius Solinus, Priscian and Isidore, Dicuil (following the words of the witnesses, the ‘clerics, who had lived on the island from the first of February to the first of August’) specifies ‘that not only at the summer solstice, but in the days round about it’, ‘there was no darkness’, and suggests ‘that at the winter solstice and for a few days about it dawn appears only for the smallest space at Thule’.

Although we cannot be sure of it, still it is very likely that Dicuil has in mind Iceland, since the first Icelandic historian Ari inn frófi, the Wise (1067/68–1148) tells in his *Íslendingabók* (*The Book of the Icelanders*, 1122–1133) that before Iceland was settled from Norway, there used to live ‘Christian men’ who ‘went away, because they did not wish to live here together with heathen men, and they left behind Irish books, bells and crooks. From this could be seen that they were Irishmen’ (*Íslendingabók*: ch. 1). Nevertheless, the *real* island of Dicuil still has a *conventional* name, that of *Thule*.

Seneca’s prophecy – ‘There will come an age in the far-off years when Ocean shall unclothe the bonds of things, when the whole broad earth shall be revealed, when Tethys shall disclose new worlds and Thule not be the limit of the lands’ (Seneca, *Medea*, 376–379) – comes true only in eight and a half centuries. *Ultima Thule*, so to say, ‘materialises’, turns from a mythical land into a real island with a discovery and settlement by the Norwegians c. 870 of an island of Iceland. What is worth mentioning is that this identification of *Iceland* and *Thule* can be found primarily in the works of Scandinavian authors.

Thus, Adam of Bremen who had had a Scandinavian informer (namely, the Danish king Sven Estridsen), writes in his *Gesta*

*Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen, c. 1070) (Adam: IV, XXXVI) that the island *Thule* is 'separated from the others by endless stretches'; with a reference to the 'Roman writers'<sup>3</sup> and 'barbarians', – that it is 'the farthest island of all', that 'there is no night at the summer solstice, when the sun crosses the sign of Cancer; and likewise, no day at the winter solstice'. Mentioning Bede, who had in his turn referred to Pytheas, he tells that Thule is 'six days' sail distant from Britain toward the north'<sup>4</sup>, and that in both islands 'at the solstice it is continuously day for six months'. '*This Thule is now called Iceland, from the ice which binds the ocean*' (and this ice is 'black and dry'). Here he also gives the dimensions of the island, tells about the life of the first settlers, about christianisation of Icelanders, about bishop Isleifr. The 'edge of the world' moves still further to the north, beyond the lands that have been discovered by the Norwegians by that time, namely beyond *Vinland* (North America).

Adam follows the words of the Danish king Sven Estridsen, but his description of the Ocean, locked by ice and therefore unsuitable for sailing, he gives after Martianus Capella (5th cent.), demonstrating both his erudition and lack of concrete knowledge in general: 'Beyond that island, he (the king. – T.J.) said, no habitable land is found in that ocean, but every place beyond it is full of impenetrable ice and intense darkness. Of this fact Martianus makes mention as follows: Beyond Thule, he says, the sea is congealed (*mare concretum est*) after one day's navigation. The very well-informed prince of the Norwegians, Harold, lately attempted this sea. After he had explored the expanse of the Northern Ocean in his ships, there lay before their eyes at length the darksome bounds of a failing world, and by retracting his steps he barely escaped in safety the vast pit of the abyss' (Adam: IV, XXXIX)<sup>5</sup>.

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3 Scolia 152 and 153 contain mentions of Martianus Capella and Solinus; further Pytheas is mentioned; chapter XXXIX includes a quotation from Martianus.

4 Cp. Schol. 154: 'Brittain is the largest of all the islands. From it Thule is reached by a voyage of nine days'; Schol. 155: 'On leaving the Danish headland Aalborg, they say it is a journey of thirty days to Iceland; less, however, if the wind is favorable'.

5 Cp. Schol. 154: 'Thence (from Thule. – T. J.) it is a day's voyage to the frozen sea (*mare congelatum*). And this sea is frozen for the reason that it is never warmed by the sun'; Schol. 158: 'By Iceland the ocean is frozen and seething and foggy'.

The anonymous *Historia Norwegiæ* (*A History of Norway*, c. 1170) contains a description of Iceland. We learn from it that the island is big; it is situated to the west of the Faroe islands; 'it was once a vast empty land and unknown to men until the time of Haraldr hárfagri' (second half of the ninth century); it 'had first been discovered by Garfarr and subsequently by Anbi'; the first settlers were, however, 'Ingólfr and Hjo'rlleifrHjörleifr, Norwegians who were fleeing their homeland on account of killings'. 'The Norwegians call this island Iceland, 'the land of ice' (*glaciei terra*), for the island contains countless mountains covered with uninterrupted sheets of ice and by their sheen mariners at sea and far from land customarily set their course for the haven best suited to them'; 'the Italians called' it 'Ultima Thule' (*A History of Norway*: 10–12). The identification of Iceland and Ultima Thule is straightforward, no motivation or explanation is suggested.

Monk Theodoricus in his *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (*The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, 1177–1180) tells of 'certain traders' who 'sailed to the islands which we call the Faroes, where they were caught in a storm and suffered a long and hard ordeal at sea. Finally they were driven to an exceedingly remote land' where they were followed by GarÄarr and Flóki, and somewhat later by Ingólfr and Hjo'rlleifrHjörleifr, who began to settle this land 'in about the tenth year of Haraldr's reign' (i.e. in the late 860s). Theodoricus is rather accurate in naming this 'remote land, which some believe was the island of Thule': 'since I do not know I neither affirm nor deny the truth of the matter'. He only states that 'it was then that the land which we now call Iceland began to be settled for the first time'. Telling further below how Iceland received the Christian faith, Theodoricus once again turns to this subject: 'Iceland is thought by some to be the island of Thule, because of certain similarities between the two places, in particular since daylight is continuous there around the summer solstice, as is night around the winter solstice' (Theodoricus: ch. 3, 12). Here Theodoricus, no doubt, follows Bede, although without mentioning the latter. He also has a description, parallel to the one in the *Íslendingabók* (ch. 1) by Ari the Wise, of the Irish hermits who used to live in the island before the advent of the Norwegians: 'a very few people from the island of

Ireland, that is Lesser Britain, are believed to have been there in ancient times because of certain pieces of evidence – namely books and several utensils of theirs which have been found’ (Theodoricus: ch. 3).

On the same grounds as in *Historia* by Theodoricus, *Thile* and *Iceland* are identified in *Sturlubók* redaction of *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*, going back to the early twelfth century, *Sturlubók* having been composed before 1284, preserved in a copy from the seventeenth century)<sup>6</sup> and in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (*The Greatest saga of Óláfr Tryggvason*, c. 1300 or somewhat later). But in both these works we find a direct reference to the book *On Times* (*De ratione temporum*) by the Venerable Priest Bede. *Landnámabók* also repeats Pytheas’ information that *Thile* lies six days sailing to the north of Britain, though it does not mention Pytheas as a source of information, claiming that it is said in other books (*Landnámabók*: ch. 1). *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, following word for word *Ari the Wise*, tells of the Irish Christians who used to live in the island before *Iceland* was settled from Norway (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*: I, 254–255; III, 69–70, 75–76).

It is likely that partially the entry *s.a.* 870 of the *Oddveriaannáll Annáll* (second half of the sixteenth century) goes back to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. It is mentioned in this entry, in the story of the settlement of *Iceland*, that ‘some people think that *Iceland* could have been settled earlier, as Bede the Venerable writes the following about

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6 ‘In the book of the Course of Ages [De sex hujus saeculi aetatibus, part of the book *De ratione temporum*] which priest Beda the holy made, there is spoken of an Island which is called *Thile* in books [in Latin], and it is said that it lies six days’ [24 hours’-day] sailing north of *Bretland* [Brittannia]. There, he said, there came not any day in the winter when the night is longest and no night in summer when the day is longest. The reason why wise men hold that *Iceland* is *Thile*, is because over much of the country the sun shines through the night when the day is longest or in the longest day, and the sun is not seen in the longest night. Now priest Beda died 735 years after the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as it is written, more than 100 years before *Iceland* was settled by Northmen. But before *Iceland* was settled by Northmen there were there those people whom the Northmen call *Papas*. They were Christian men, and people think that they must have been from the West of the Sea [the British Isles] because there were found after them Irish books and bells and crooks, and yet more things, by which it might be perceived that they were West-men. These things were found in East Papey and in Papyli. And it is also spoken of in English books that at that time men went between the lands [British group and *Iceland*]’ (*Origines Islandicae*: 13).

the island called Tile: it lies so far in the northern part of the world, that there comes no day in the winter when the night is the longest, and no night in the summer when the day is the longest. This is the reason why people hold that the island Thile is now called Iceland' (Oddverjaannáll: 103).

One can notice that while the identification of *Iceland* and *Thule* / *Thile* is preserved in Scandinavia in relatively late sources, for the rest of Europe it soon loses its significance.

Thus, Giraldus Cambrensis (1146–1223), the author of treatises on Ireland and Wales, writes that Iceland is three days' sail north from Ireland, that the power there is in the hands of a bishop, that there can happen convulsions of nature and lava flows. His Iceland has nothing in common with *Thule*. Moreover, having repeated the words of Solinus, Isidore and Orosius about the latter, Giraldus asserts that none of the islands known to people is like *Thule*. His conclusion is that this could either have been a fabulous island, famous as part of a myth, or an island hidden somewhere in the distant corners of the Arctic Ocean, near the North Pole (Top. Hib.: II. 13, 17).

Correspondingly, in medieval maps *Thule* and *Iceland* are often depicted as two different islands. Thus, the Anglo-Saxon map of the second quarter of the eleventh century contains both *Island* and *Tylen* (Chekin 1999: X.2); the Hereford map (c. 1290) has *Ysland* and *Ultima Tile* (Chekin 1999: X.12). In those cases when only *Thile* is placed in a map it is not clear whether Iceland or simply the 'edge of the world' is meant. The Oxford map c. 1100, for instance, places *Tile*, *Hibernia*, and *Britannia* outside the earth's round (Chekin 1999: III.2.2), while in the map from Berlin c. 1000 *Tile*, *Britannia* and *Hibernia* are presented as islands near the shores of Europe (Chekin 1999: VII.3.1; VII.3.2).

In some maps, however, we find two islands with alike names: in a copy of Saint-Victor's map of the twelfth century, for instance, we see in the Northern Ocean *Tile insula* and *Tilos insula* (Chekin 1999: X.4). The latter island deserves our special attention. As Vincent H. de P. Cassidy describes it,

at approximately the time Pytheas was reporting his Thule in the Northern Ocean, a lieutenant of Alexander named Archias (3rd cent.



BC), probing south in the Persian Gulf, had arrived at the island of Tylus. Tylus, Archias reported, was 'about a day and a night's sail' from the mouth of the Euphrates 'for a ship running before the wind'. The island 'was large, and it was neither rough nor wooded for the most part; but the sort which bore garden fruits and all things in due season' (Cassidy 1963: 597; quotations from *Arrian. Anabasis of Alexander*, VII, 20).

The Indian island of *Tylos*, a palm covered island, productive in oil, abundant in wines, where trees never loose their leaves, was mentioned since then by Pliny the Elder in the *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*, ca.c. 77 AD), by Solinus (third century) in his collection of marvels (*Collectanea rerum memorabilium*), by St Augustine in the *City of God* (*De civitate Dei*, 413–426), by Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae* (*Etymologies*, seventh century), by an anonymous geographer in Ravenna who described in his *Cosmographia* (*Cosmography*, ca.c. 700) even three (!) islands with similar names (*Thile* northeast of Britain, *Thyle* in the Western Ocean, and *Thilos* in the Persian Gulf), in *Tractatus Excerptionium* assigned to Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141) (two *Tyle*), by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *Vita Merlini* (*The Life of Merlin*, ca.c. 1149–1151) (*Ytilie*, *Atilis*).

The two islands are considered to have been brought together by the author of a very popular work entitled *De Imagine Mundi* (probably, Honorius Augustodunensis, c. 1080 – c. 1137) who described not the Indian, but the North Atlantic island called *Chile* where the trees never lose their foliage and where there is continuous day for six months of summer, and continuous night for six months of winter (see Cassidy 1963: 601; *De Imagine Mundi*: I. 31). This concept found its reflection in the encyclopaedic work of the late thirteenth century *Opus maius* (*Great work*) by the English Franciscan philosopher Roger Bacon (1214–1292), who described a wonderful island near Ireland where no man might die, and where there grow trees that keep their leaves green both in winter and in summer.

This confusion of *Thule* in the North Atlantic and *Tilos* (Bahrain island) in the Persian Gulf is likely to have been a result of the development of a concept of the world being a globe. In the thirteenth century more and more people realized that the world was

not shaped like a wheel but like a globe, that the habitable zone stretched around a spherical earth. Under the pressure of this knowledge it was quite possible to persist in seeking an eastern island in the west, like Vincent of Beauvais in his *Speculum Naturale* did around 1250 (XXII, 16, 17; see Cassidy 1963: 602).

‘The characteristics of the European and the Asian Thules had finally been attached to a single island. Once this happened, however, Iceland could no longer be Thule,’ – writes Vincent H. de P. Cassidy. – ‘Iceland was too well known to acquire unchallenged the marvels of the eastern island’ (Cassidy 1963: 600).

Indeed, even the Icelandic maps and geographical works, that to a greater degree followed the European, than the local, tradition, reflect this development of geographical thought: Iceland in their presentation is no longer an *Ultima Thule*. In the Icelandic map of the mid-thirteenth century *Thile* and *Iceland* are depicted as two different islands, and the Icelandic geographical treatise of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century *Hversu lo'nd lönd liggja í vero'ldenni veröldenni* and *Stjórn*, the Old Icelandic translation of the Bible, mention *Thile* only ‘in the sea near India’ (see Melnikova 1986: 103–112, 61/63, 145).

To sum up. In the late ninth century, with the discovery and settlement of Iceland by the Norwegians, the mythical land *Ultima Thule* coincided for some time with the real island. This identification, however, soon lost its validity in West European geographical literature, what was a result of the discovery of new lands lying still further to the north (such as Greenland), the development of a concept of the world being a globe, and a confusion, through the latter, of *Thule* in the North Atlantic with *Tilos* (Bahrain island) in the Persian Gulf. The only exception of this general tendency, no matter how inconceivable it might seem, one finds in the Icelandic sagas and other Old Norse sources (chronicles and annals) where *Island* and *Ultima Thule* were identified as long as till the fourteenth century. An explanation of this phenomenon lies in the traditional character of the Icelandic culture in general.

This, of course, is a big problem worth being discussed separately. Here, only in order to make my point clear, I would like to

quote from the work of a famous German scholar Kurt Schier (1994: 152) who writes:

In Iceland as in many other newly settled regions older traditions were conserved better than in the motherland. [...] The most vigorous impulse for the developing of new traditions and especially for their conservation and their being handed down I see as a consciousness of initiation among the Icelanders. [...] The awareness of standing at a beginning, of having created something entirely new, and the process of shaping new orders as well, evidently had considerable psychological and sociological consequences. The strengthened self-consciousness led to a new – and sometimes problematical – political conception and later on to idealizing the situation and the events of the beginning. For these reasons the traditions were considered extremely important, thus providing an essential supposition for their being passed on. In my view these are the most important factors concerning psychology and tradition in the Icelandic literary development (Schier 1994: 152).

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