

# ICELAND'S GEOGRAPHICAL HISTORY: CONCEPTS OF ICELAND ITS NATURAL HISTORY AND RESEARCH BEFORE AND AFTER SETTLEMENT

THORVALDUR THORODDSEN

PUBLISHED IN ICELANDIC BY THE LITERARY SOCIETY, REYKJAVIK, 1892

TRANSLATION BY SUZANNE CARLSON

## Introduction

While surfing Google digital books for works in Icelandic, I stumbled on this book on the geographical history of Iceland. The title of the first chapter intrigued me, "History of Iceland before Settlement, the Account of Pytheas." The author, Thorvaldur Thoroddsen, was a late nineteenth century geologist who presented a review of geography woven seamlessly into the history of Iceland, beginning with an analysis of the mystical island of Thule in the unknown reaches of the northern sea. I hope you enjoy this northern voyage to the *mare congelatum*, which throbs like a "sea lung."

This translation presented many challenges and I am solely responsible for errors or misinterpretations. In the footnotes, Icelandic text was translated, but all other titles and quotes were left in the original language. For those interested in following the trail of Pytheas, I highly recommend *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek* by Barry Cunliffe, Walker & Company, New York 2001.

## CHAPTER I [EXCERPT]. HISTORY OF ICELAND BEFORE SETTLEMENT: THE ACCOUNT OF PYTHEAS

Few thought it likely that any people could have inhabited Iceland before the Irish in the eighth century, nor had they found man-made evidence or confirmation of earlier human contact. Throughout Europe and America, evidence has been found of Neolithic people in earlier cultural levels. Whether on islands or elsewhere, research certainly shows that savages had lived in Northern Europe, Iceland had, no doubt, been severed from the continent long before Northern Europe had been settled by human clans during the Stone Age and long after. Using small boats poorly suited for the open ocean, they were not able to endure heavy seas; they followed the coasts, and did not risk the open ocean. Later, even the Phoenicians were lost if they could not see land, and dared not venture far from the coast.

Later, Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans possessed large seagoing ships, and their sphere of action was largely to the south, which was not strange, although they knew little of the equally distant lands to the north. And at that time, the northerners were not the fine sailors they later became.

A great deal has been written in an attempt to prove whether or not early southerners had known about Iceland, yet all the scholars researching this hinted that the Greeks, but not the Romans, had known about Iceland, and at the least, one historian was certain of it. Although some authors have cited the name Thule, which appeared in so many ancient books concerning Iceland, it is very unlikely that Roman authors in general had themselves direct knowledge, for certain, of what the name Thule meant, or where it was situated, and thus have designated various places as yet unknown far to the north.

---

### **Few thought it likely that any people could have inhabited Iceland before the Irish in the eighth century.**

---

My intention is to discuss this subject, in which many scholars, including contemporary authors, have maintained in their studies that Thule must be Iceland. The Greek geographer Strabo spoke of Thule in his geography, but the content is not known: neither where that land was, nor if it was inhabited' Strabo referred to the work of another earlier man, who spoke of Thule; this man was Pytheas from Massilia who lived during the days of Alexander the Great when Massilia, now called Marseille, was a Greek city on the French coast, and was a great and wealthy city with lucrative trading widely along the coasts of the Mediterranean.

The Phoenicians and Carthaginians had established settlements earlier in existing colonies around the Medi-

---

i. Strabo was born in Amaseis on the Black Sea in 63 s.c., and went to Rome in 29 B.C., where he died at an old age, probably during the reign of Tiberius.

---

**"...on the place called Thule there was neither land nor sea nor sky out in front of him, but a blending of them all, like a sea lung."**

---

authors offered evidence for this word; some thought that he had seen frozen seas. Most likely it was referring here to some concept of an unknown natural event as men of old thought might exist at the limits of the earth, with all the prime elements jumbled together.

Yet, later Strabo said that Thule was probably somewhere along this route:

"Pytheas of Massila claimed that the outer edge of the world is around Thule, and was farthest from British lands; there the solstice ring (Tropic of Cancer) was the same distance to the Arctic Circle as the Arctic Circle was from the North Pole. I do not know whether Thule is an island, or something else forming a ring, that was settled between the tropic of cancer and the Arctic Circle, yet I think that the northern boundary limit of the settled earth was perhaps more southerly. Modern researchers are not able to name anything more to the north of Ireland, which lies near Britain, and to say that there might be places inhabited by men who lived badly because of the cold, but I maintain that no people were established within the boundaries." <sup>6</sup>

More from Strabo:

"The history of Thule is largely indistinct because of its remoteness and thus it was said it was the most northern of all named lands. All that Pytheas had said of Thule and other places is wrong and it is clear that it mostly concerned unknown places, and even though it was so remote, he had written more describing it, but

---

5. J Nilsson: "Nagra Commentarier till Pytheas' fragmenter om Thule". (Some comments on fragments from Pytheas). *Physiographiska salikapets tidskrift*. Lund 1837-38, I, pp 4453. "From earliest times down through the ages the most northerly sea was conceived as wondrous and called *mare pigum*, *mare concretum*, *mare congelatum*, *mare coagulatum* along with many other terms". K. Mallenhoff: *Deutsche Altertumskunde*. Berlin 1870, I, pp 410-416.

6. Strabo, Book 4, Chap., 5, sec.8

regarding astronomy and arithmetic, he spoke credibly. He had been lucky in his travels as he noted that, 'they, as lived near the cold belt, had practically no garden products nor domestic animals, partly due to the lack of these they lived sparingly on mullet and other vegetables and roots: they harvested grain and honey from which they made their drink. When they were without bright sunny days, the grain was threshed in large buildings because outdoor threshing floors became useless to them due to rain and the lack of sun: "

Since Iceland was not thought to be inhabited, it is evident from these deprivations that Thule must be some north laying land, but south of Iceland and Pytheas himself thought that Thule was one of the British Islands. He hardly could have said that it was likely named for an equally faraway island like Iceland.

Mullet, as it is called, had likely been oats and honey referred to by both Celts and Germans earlier in making mead. Pytheas had thought that there could have been some domestic or garden cultivation possible approaching the cold zone. Such deprivations are compatible with the conditions in northern part of Scotland and the islands north of it. Raising grain there always had been difficult, with few, intermittent sunny days, unremitting fog, and rain in a largely raw climate.

Earlier Greek geographers had known little of the northern lands, affirming that knowledge first came when the Roman Empire became powerful and widely dispersed. Before the days of Pytheas, Greek writers knew nothing of the west and north coasts of Europe, although much was written of the geography and history of Mediterranean lands. Herodotus and other of the older authors had not thought about land beyond and north of Gibraltar, except that there might have been tin and amber. Aristotle and his contemporaries to the east of Greece were little wiser. After the voyage of Pytheas it is evident in many manuscripts that his word was trusted and it was thought that Thule might be Britain and/or Ireland and that perhaps the voyage of Pytheas had been much more significant in increasing knowledge of man's history.

The great astronomer sage and geographer Claudius Ptolemaeus, from the middle of the second century A.D.,

---

7. Strabo, Book 4, Chap., 5 sec 5

referred to Thule and said that it was north of the Orkneys where the longest days were 20 hours; Ptolemaeus described the lay of the land with its breadth and length, and said the northern part was 63° is', the middle part, 63° and the southern, 62° 40'. Pomponius Mela referred to Thule once, writing at the time that Thule is placed opposite the coast of Belca and it is famous in Greek and Latin song and poetry, where the nights were brief when the summer sun rose to triumph far and wide, but in the winter the darkness was reversed from the bright summer, when at that time, the sun rose higher in the sky<sup>8</sup>. Although he had not seen it himself, he explained that it was due to the proximity of the sun's rays. On the solstice were no nights as such, but the sun was clear and did not cease to shine. In another place Mela said that Skydar was another name of Belcar, yet he himself thought that Thule was much more easterly. Finally, in those days knowledgeable men thought that the northern parts of Europe might veer to the east and that the Black Sea or the Caspian might overflow, connecting it with northern seas. Other early geographers surmised that Thule and other northern lands to be much more easterly.

Later came Pliny's history. He gave wide attention to Thule. In his *Natural History* he quoted Pytheas, "which there were days six months long and nights of equal length and from Britain was six days sailing north to Thule." <sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Pliny said that Thule was north of all those known lands and that on the solstice there was no night nor when the sun is in Cancer, but no days at the winter solstice.<sup>10</sup> Along with other scholars,<sup>11</sup> ancient and contemporary, he named other northern islands, for example, Scandia, Dumna, Bergos and Nerigon<sup>12</sup>, the biggest of all; from Nerigon he said it was a short way to Thule and one day's sail from Thule to the frozen sea, as some called the *Mare Cranium*. In the third century A.D., Solinus said that Thule was fur-

8. *Pomponii Melae, de situ Orbis*, Book III. Lipsix, 1831. Book 3, Chap.6. Pomponius Mela lived in the middle of the first century A.D. He had Spanish roots and wrote his geography in the days of Claudius or Caligula, but little is known about his life.

9. C. Plini secundus, *Naturalis Historia*, ed. J. Sillig. Hamburgi et Gothae 1851. Vol i. Book 2, Chap. 74, p 177.

10. *Ibid.* p. 32.0

11. *Ibid.* Vol I, Book 16, Chapter 74. pp320-321.

12. This name is much doubted and misunderstood in the manuscript. Some good copies have Vergos instead of Bergos and for Nerigan, sometimes Verigon, sometime Berrigon.

ther out from the British Isles, that there was nearly no night on the summer solstice and much shorter days at the winter solstice. He said that from the Orkneys it was five days and nights sailing to Thule. There was produce, and there they were sustained by cattle and sheep and from the latter's milk, Toward winter they collected fruit and nuts. He said also that on the other side of Thule was the frozen sea.<sup>13</sup> Solinus was an idolized scholar in the Middle Ages and most authors at that time took the early tales of Thule from his works. Likewise, the earlier writers had not generally been believed.

---

**He {Solinus} said that from the Orkneys it was five days and nights sailing to Thule.**

---

In the days of the Emperor Claudius (42.54 s.c.) the Romans gained a foothold in Britain and eventual possession through many years of unrelenting war. Julius Agricola (A.D. 4) took it upon himself to pacify a rebellion and won Britain and Scotland through many more battles. By this time southerners had more and better knowledge of Britain and the surrounding lands, although not much of it was recorded.

Tacitus, the learned historian who was the son-in-law of Agricola, had written his biography. Tacitus wrote variously on Britain. Among other things, he said that the first Roman fleet sailed around Britain and had first seen that it was an island.

Tacitus said, furthermore, that the Romans then found and subjugated the Orkneys" and that they had seen Thule in the distance, where snow and winter prevailed. Tacitus said that the sea there was heavy and very

13. "*Sed Thyle larga et diutina Pomona copiosa est. Qui illic habitant, principio veris inter pecudes pabulis vivunt, deinde lacte. In biemem compercutunt aborum fructus. Utunurfemini vulgo rertum inatynium xtrilli. Ulre Thyleo pigrum et concretum mare.*" C. Julii Solini, *Polybistor*. Biponti 1794, Vol 8, Chap. aa. Caius Julius Solinus lived in the third century A.D.; he wrote *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium* which book was condensed and compiled in the sixth century under the title *Polybistor*. The works of Solinus are the mostly derived from old authorities, especially Plini, Mommsen had published *Solin*, with annotations in Berlin, 1864.

14. It is likely that the Orkney Islands were already known; Pomponius Mela put it this way, "*Triginta sunt Orcades angustis inter se duct spatii.*" Eusebius (A.D. 264) and Orosius (A.D. 415) said that the Romans had taken the Orkneys during the reign of Emperor Claudius.

referred to Thule and said that it was north of the Orkneys where the longest days were 20 hours; Ptolemaeus described the lay of the land with its breadth and length, and said the northern part was 63° 15', the middle part, 63° and the southern, 62° Pomponius Mela referred to Thule once, writing at the time that Thule is placed opposite the coast of Belca and it is famous in Greek and Latin song and poetry, where the nights were brief when the summer sun rose to triumph far and wide, but in the winter the darkness was reversed from the bright summer, when at that time, the sun rose higher in the sky<sup>8</sup>. Although he had not seen it himself, he explained that it was due to the proximity of the sun's rays. On the solstice were no nights as such, but the sun was clear and did not cease to shine. In another place Mela said that Skydar was another name of Belcar, yet he himself thought that Thule was much more easterly. Finally, in those days knowledgeable men thought that the northern parts of Europe might veer to the east and that the Black Sea or the Caspian might overflow, connecting it with northern seas, Other early geographers surmised that Thule and other northern lands to be much more easterly.

Later came Pliny's history. He gave wide attention to Thule. In his *Natural History* he quoted Pytheas, "which there were days six months long and nights of equal length and from Britain was six days sailing north to Thule." <sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Pliny said that Thule was north of all those known lands and that on the solstice there was no night nor when the sun is in Cancer, but no days at the winter solstice.<sup>10</sup> Along with other scholars," ancient and contemporary, he named other northern islands, for example, Scandia, Dumna, Bergos and Nerigon<sup>12</sup>, the biggest of all; from Nerigon he said it was a short way to Thule and one day's sail from Thule to the frozen sea, as some called the *Mare Cronium*. In the third century A.D., Solinus said that Thule was fur-

8. *Pomponii Melae, de situ Orbis*, Book III. Lipsix, 1831. Book 3, Chap.6. Pomponius Mela lived in the middle of the first century A.D. He had Spanish roots and wrote his geography in the days of Claudius or Caligula, but little is known about his life.

9. C. Plini secundus, *Naturalis Historia*, ed. J. Sillig. Hamburgi et Gothz 1851. Vol 1. Book 2, Chap. 74, p 177.

10. Ibid. p. 320

Ibid. Vol I. Book 16, Chapter 74, pp320-321.

12. This name is much doubted and misunderstood in the manuscript. Some good copies have Vergos instead of Bergos and for Nerigan, sometimes Verigon, sometime Berrigon.

ther out from the British Isles, that there was nearly no night on the summer solstice and much shorter days at the winter solstice. He said that from the Orkneys it was five days and nights sailing to Thule. There was produce, and there they were sustained by cattle and sheep and from the latter's milk, Toward winter they collected fruit and nuts. He said also that on the other side of Thule was the frozen sea." Solinus was an idolized scholar in the Middle Ages and most authors at that time took the early tales of Thule from his works. Likewise, the earlier writers had not generally been believed.

---

### He [Solinus] said that from the Orkneys it was five days and nights sailing to Thule.

---

In the days of the Emperor Claudius (42-54 s.c.) the Romans gained a foothold in Britain and eventual possession through many years of unrelenting war. Julius Agricola (A.D. 4) took it upon himself to pacify a rebellion and won Britain and Scotland through many more battles. By this time southerners had more and better knowledge of Britain and the surrounding lands, although not much of it was recorded.

Tacitus, the learned historian who was the son-in-law of Agricola, had written his biography. Tacitus wrote variously on Britain. Among other things, he said that the first Roman fleet sailed around Britain and had first seen that it was an island.

Tacitus said, furthermore, that the Romans then found and subjugated the Orkneys" and that they had seen "Thule in the distance, where snow and winter prevailed. Tacitus said that the sea there was heavy and very

---

13. "*Sed Thyle larga et diutina Pomona copiosa est. Qui Mic habitant, principio veris inter pecudes pabulis vivunt, deinde lacte. In hiemem compercutunt aborum fructus. Utunurfeminis volgo tertkon no1rniom Uitre Thytan pigrum et (oneturn mare.*" C. Julii Solini, *Polyhistor*. Biponti 1794, Vol 8, Chap. 22. Cajun Julius SPii1)11s lived in the third century A.D.; he wrote *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium* which book was condensed and compiled in the sixth century under the title *Polyhistor*. The works of Solinus are the mostly derived from old authorities, especially Mini. Mommsen had published *Solinus*, with annotations in Berlin, 1864.

14. It is likely that the Orkney Islands were already known; Pomponius Mela put it this way, "*Triginta sunt Orcades angustis inter se duct spatibus.*" Eusebius (A.D. 264) and Orosius (A.D. 415) said that the Romans had taken the Orkneys during the reign of Emperor Claudius.

difficult to row and that the wind there scarcely raised a wave. This Thule which Tacitus spoke of could not have been other than the Shetlands. Ideas considering the heaviness and thickness, and the quiet dark sea in north, came from earlier old writers. They called this sea various names and spoke of it in their various tongues. Tacitus' description of sea voyaging is otherwise nothing different; it was expected that Romans thought it heavy to row north under Shetland, which they knew from experience "how heavy western fall is there in the sea," and even now we know how difficult life on the outer seas could have been before steamships. It is evident to him that various authors had alleged that his history, as well as those of his contemporaries, had been taken from older sources. Tacitus is the only one who based his history on these known sources. Most of the many other early writers named Thule both in prose discussion and in poetry and song.

Thule can be none other than the northern most end of the earth or something unknown, a far lying magical land, furthest out in the remotest ocean. It is not for us to enumerate all the authors. Yet I have presented the oldest and most important histories of Thule, rather than those who prevailed in older times when histories of Thule were all in a jumble. Of the later authors, Procopius is one of the most vocal about Thule. He said that Thule was to the north of Britain and by much more north. He said and noticed peculiarities from inhabitants and their customs, said that there lived 53 people who were thought to be Sibiriani and Gauthini, he thought especially characteristic of inhabitants of either Norway or other parts of Scandinavia.<sup>15</sup> Procopius was a distinguished historian from Caesarea in Palestine in the sixth century, and who wrote on conflicts with the Vandals, Goths, and many more.

The first to assert that Thule was Iceland is the Irish monk Dicuil, who wrote his geography in 835, and had access to Irish clerics who knew of a large island to the north and, given their description, it is apparent that this was Iceland. Dicuil called this island Thule and it seems he had seen Solinus' history and accounts of other ancient scholars. From this it appears that Iceland was inhabited earlier than the Norwegian settlement which was called Thule, although now and then one counts Thule

15. *De Bello Gothico*, Vol. 2, Chapter 15

as another place, for example Henricus Huntendunensis, who said that it was the farthest out of the Orkneys.<sup>16</sup>

After Iceland was settled by the Norse, Icelanders themselves believed that Iceland was the land that earlier scholars had called Thule, this because the Icelandic *Book of Settlement* begins,

"In the book the holy priest Bede made, it is said that Thule lies 6 days north from Britain, he also said the day did not come in winter and nor night in summer. It is the longest day and wise men think to this day that Iceland was called Tili and that it was abroad the land that the sun shone at night that when the day was longest and fax a od wide when the sunshine not, the night was the longest. Bede died in A.D. 735

and his words were written

more than a hundred years before Iceland was settled from Norway."

Scholars of this excerpt of the *Book of Settlement* had not likely thought of any other author or work on Thule, rather that

Bede has taken his written section from Solinus or Pliny. The last Greco-Roman writers and the oldest geographers of the Middle ages, for example Dioyios Perigetes, Gregorius Turunensis, Isadoras Hispalensis, Priscianus and many, took excerpts on Thule from older sources and did not add anything new. The name Thule was well known, but little or nothing of benefit had been written in the Middle ages.

In the eleventh century, Adam of Breman, spoke of Thule and described it, like Solinus, also citing Bede before other early histories. Adam knew a good deal about Iceland and added, "this island Thule is now called Iceland." With that we can adduce that among all authors, in the end, the greater number named Iceland as Thule, so it is not necessary to disagree anymore on the matter.

It is clear that learned men who were able to solve the

16. Henricus Huntendunensis was born at the end of the eleventh century and lived until the middle of the twelfth century; he enumerated the islands around Britain and said the following: "...habet autem a septentrione, unde oceano infinito pates, Orcades insulus novem, de quarum uttime Thule dictum est!..."*tibi serviant ultima Thule.*" *Monumenta Historica Britannica* 1848, folio I, p. 695.

location of Thule grasped the idea of Iceland, but were bothered by the contradictions in earlier works. Yet it crossed most minds to call into question that Iceland was Thule. Arngrimur Jonsson's study was one of the first to verify the descriptions of the early writers on Thule. In his \*10 W01\* *Crymoro*, he said that Thule could not be earlier than 874. Sometime later, Pontanus," the Danish historian, came along contradicting Arngrimur. In his book he uses mostly excerpts of from the old writers that passed the test that proves that no other land but Iceland could have been Thule. He made a point of place names of Pliny, especially where

he named Nerigon. He also felt that Iceland must have been settled before the Norse settled in 874 This is set out in a letter and an old papal bull, that had named Iceland, but it was considered without doubt false." Next Arngrim faced off against the particular authority of Pontanus and

shredded his arguments and clarified with great learning his reasons that Thule could not have been Iceland.' 9 Sometime later, another Icelander appeared who was in agreement with F'ontaus and wrote on this matter. He was Thordur Thorlaksson, who later became bishop of Skallholt (1697), and was the first to add up the many writers who said Iceland was Thule and those who were against it. He held firmly that Iceland was Thule because of the degree of latitude, the work of former authors on the voyages from Britain, and the length of day.<sup>20</sup> Later writers, including modern ones, had variously maintained that Island was Thule, yet, for example, Bessel and Burton<sup>21</sup> considered it well known that it was not. Karl Miillenhoff thought that Thule had been one of the

Shetlands as were other in his camp<sup>22</sup>.

Later *in* opposition Keyser, Sv. Nilson, and Brenner, believed that Thule was Norway or Sweden," while Make Brun felt that Thule was Jutland (Thy). Rudbeck thought that Thule might have been Sweden. Still later, Mullenhoff wrote one of the best works on Pytheas', treating the opinions of earlier people in northern Europe, including discourse and books by scholars concerning this affair who had opinions that were divided by the hundreds, Although now many of these works have been augmented through historical research and geography,

it remains unknown which was the land which Pytheas called Thule. In the end, we Icelanders must stand together to provide full verification that Iceland and Thule

swere the same. The majority of ancient writers all called *Thule* the unknown land in the north.

Later, the Romans thought that Shetland or one of the Orkneys might be Thule, and by sixth century set this name in Norway or another Scandinavian land. Probably no one could have solved the riddle of the travels of Pytheas to Thule. While some authors were enlightened and informed by the original text, others had doubts, and exhausting all other possibilities, put the cart before the horse.

---

**...Thordur Thorlaksson, who later became bishop of Skallholt (1697)...was the first to add up the many writers who said Iceland was Thule and those who were against it. He held firmly that Iceland was Thule because of the degree of latitude, the work of former authors on the voyages from Britain, and the length of day.**

---

17. I. I. Pontonus: Remit; *Danicarum Historie*. Amstelodami 1631, Folio, pp. 671, 682-85, 741-55.

is. See *islenzket Fornbrefasafn*, I, pp 14-18.

19. Arngrimur Jonsson: "Specimen Islandix Historicum et Magna ex Parte Chorographicum." *Amstelodami*. 1643• Vol. 4, pp 89-171.

20. Theodndorus ThOrlaCiUS: *Dissertatio Chorographico-Historica de Islandia*. 3rd edition, Wittebergx 1690. Vol. 4 Thesis I. Section 8-18 (first edition 1,666).

21. W. Bessel, *Pytheas von Massila*. Gottingen 1858. R. Burton: *Ultima Thule or a Summer in Iceland*. Londona 875, Vol. See Vivian de St. Martin. *Histoire de la Geographie*. Paris 1878.

2,2. K. iSeliillenhoff: *Deuti be Alterumshunke*. Berlin 1870, I. Ziegler: *Reise des Pytheas*. Dresden 1861.

2.3. Keyser: *N,orges Historie*. Krisriania 1866, I,p 33. S. Nilsson: *Skandinaviska Nordens Ur-immanare*. Book 3, "Broncealderen", Stockholm 8864-64. Oscar Brenner: *Nord and Mitteleuropa in den Schriften der Alten*. Muenchen 1877. pp. 2.9.34,1-101. G. L Redsllob, Thule, Leipzig 1855.