

DALE KEDWARDS

Iceland, Thule, and the Tilensian Precedent in Medieval Historiography

Iceland and Thule in *Landnámabók*

In a well-known passage from the prologue to *Landnámabók*, a history of the Icelandic settlement written in the twelfth century, Iceland is identified with an island named *Thule*, which had been mentioned in the works of Bede.

Í aldarfarsbók þeirri er Beda prestur heilagur gerði er getit eylands þess er Thile heitir ok á bókum er sagt at liggi sex dægra sigling í norðr frá Bretlandi; þar sagði hann eigi koma dag á vetur og eigi nótt á sumar, þá er dagr er sem lengstr. Til þess ætla vitrir menn þat haft at Ísland sé Thile kallat at þat er víða á landinu, er sól skín um nætr, þá er dagr er sem lengstr, en þat er víða um daga, er sól sér eigi, þá er nótt er sem lengst. (*Landnámabók*, 31)

(In his book on the passage of time, the Venerable Priest Bede mentions an island called *Thule*, which in books is said to lie six days' sail north of Britain. There, he said, day does not come in winter or night in summer, when the day is at its longest. For this reason, wise men hold that Iceland is this Thule, because throughout the land the sun shines at night when the day is at its longest, and the sun is not seen by day when night is longest). (Own translation)

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Abstract: This article brings into focus the convention of calling Iceland by the name *Thule*, best known to scholars of Old Norse literature from the prologue to *Landnámabók*. I review the occurrences of this convention in Icelandic and other European literatures in order to characterise its contemporary historiographical usage. I show that medieval historians used the antique name *Thule* (and demonym *Tilenses*) to extend Icelandic history into classical antiquity, and show the relatedness of their native historiographical endeavours to pan-European written traditions. This article then examines the appearance of the names *Iceland* and *Thule* on contemporary world maps, and asks whether or not an Icelandic map, which charts both names, could be a visual manifestation of the convention encountered elsewhere in the Icelandic *Landnámabók* and *Breta sögur*.

Keywords: medieval historiography, medieval maps, *Landnámabók*, *Breta sögur*.

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The name *Thule* (*Thyle*, *Tyle*, *Tile*, etc.) has its origins in Classical European literature that relates the discovery of an island in the North Atlantic by the Greek navigator Pytheas Massiliensis (of Marseille) in the fourth century BC. The prologue to *Landnámabók* paraphrases a description of Thule found both in Bede's *De temporibus* and his *De temporum ratione*.¹ Bede situates this island six days' sail from Britain, and notes that the sun does not rise there at the height of winter or set at the height of summer.

Of course, Bede did not number among those 'wise men' who had identified Iceland with Thule: Iceland would not be discovered and settled by the Norse until some 140 years after Bede described Thule in these works. However, as its anonymous author acknowledges, the convention of calling Iceland by the name *Thule* was not original to *Landnámabók*. This historiographical motif traversed Northern Europe, and appears in at least six other histories and pseudohistories written between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. The works that explicitly associate Iceland with Thule are Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (c. 1075–1081), the anonymous *Historia Norwegiae* (1160–1175), Theodoricus Monachus's *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (c. 1180), William of Newburgh's *Historia rerum Anglicarum* (c. 1190s), Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200), and *Breta sögur*, the Icelandic translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*.

Although the association between Iceland and Thule in *Landnámabók* is well known to students of Old Icelandic literature, the history of this convention has seldom been brought into focus.² The aim of this present study is to characterise this historiographical motif and contextualise its appearance in *Landnámabók*. I will proceed in two phases. First, I will locate and analyse its occurrences in Old Icelandic and other medieval literatures in order to characterise its contemporary historiographical

¹ Bede, *On Times* 7, trans. Calvin B. Kendall and Faith Wallis (2010), 111; Bede, *The Reckoning of Time* 31, trans. Faith Wallis (1999), 91. Bede in turn derives his information from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* 2.77, ed. and trans. H. Rackham (1958), 318–19; and 4.16, ed. H. Rackham (1961), 198–99; and Solinus's *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* 22.9, ed. Th Mommsen (1895), 101–02.

² The history of the name *Thule*, from its origins in classical antiquity to our own times, is the subject of a detailed study by Monique Mund-Dopchie (2009), who examines the case for an Icelandic Thule with reference to all the texts examined in this article with the exception of *Breta sögur* and the Icelandic world map, whose evidence is examined here for the first time. Thule has also received detailed treatment in an important study on antique conceptions of geographical extremity by James Romm (1992), and Cassidy 1963. The literature that has engaged with Thule from the Icelandic perspective includes Burton 1875; Thoroddsen 1892–1904, 1:2–6; and Nansen 1917.

usage. Second, I will consider the relationship between the names *Iceland* and *Thule* on contemporary world maps, with a particular emphasis on a little-known Icelandic world map (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, GkS 1812 4to, ff. 5v–6r, c. 1225–50) that appears to show both islands in its depiction of the North Atlantic. These two lines of enquiry will enrich our understanding of an important act of self-definition in the opening lines of *Landnámabók*, and the connections between Icelandic and other European literary cultures that it implies.

The origins of Thule

The name *Thule* originates in a now-lost treatise written by the Greek navigator Pytheas of Marseille, who claimed to have circumnavigated Britain between 325 and 320 BC. At this time, the dominant power in the Western Mediterranean was Carthage, and it has been suggested that a Punic blockade restricted access to the Atlantic Ocean so that its waters were largely unknown to Greco-Roman seafarers (Cassidy 1963, 595; Whitaker 1982, 148). Pytheas asserted that he had entered the Atlantic Ocean and traversed the British coast as far as Orkney, where he sighted an island he named *Thule*. Although Pytheas's treatise *On the Ocean* no longer survives, his description of the British Isles and Thule was quoted and paraphrased in later works, most notably the *Geographica* of the Greek historian and geographer Strabo (64/63 BC–c. 24 AD) and the *Naturalis Historia* of Pliny the Elder (23 AD–79 AD), and canonised for late antiquity and the Middle Ages by Solinus's *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (22.9) and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiæ* (XIV.vi.4).³

Pytheas recorded geographical and astronomical information about the lands he visited, and was the earliest known author to relate systematically the length of the solstitial day to a place's latitude. What is important about Pytheas's description of Thule is that his observations place it on or near the formerly hypothetical Arctic Circle, an astronomically defined parallel north of which there is at least one day per solar year when the sun does not set in summer (at the summer solstice), and one

³ The extant paraphrases of Pytheas's voyage are the subject of a detailed analysis in Whitaker 1982. Our most important source for Pytheas's voyage, Strabo's *Geographica*, would not be translated into Latin from its original Greek until the fifteenth century, and it is not clear whether or not Strabo himself had direct access to Pytheas's treatise. On the classical reception of Pytheas's northern claims see Mund-Dopchie 2009, 29.

day when it does not rise in winter (at the winter solstice).⁴ Strabo doubted the truthfulness of Pytheas's account, and cautions that Pytheas, as an experienced navigator and competent astronomer, would have been able to falsify his observations on the far north through the 'science of celestial phenomena and by mathematical theory'.⁵ That is to say, Pytheas would have been able to theorise about the occurrence of the midnight sun at high latitudes, having travelled only as far north as the British Isles.

While it is often remarked that it is impossible to know how far north Pytheas sailed or which lands he saw, there remains a substantial literature on the identity of his Thule, with Shetland, Iceland, and Norway usually put forward as the most likely contenders (Whitaker 1982, 159–60; Mund-Dopchie 2009, 24; 35–38). It is by no means certain that the discovery of Iceland in the ninth century was also the rediscovery of Pytheas's Thule, and the medieval works that associate these islands are not, as they might sometimes appear, attempts to identify an island referred to in Roman literature with a newly discovered territory in the North Atlantic.

In its geographical sense, Thule was a putative landmass in the North Atlantic; however, as James Romm (1992) and Monique Mund-Dopchie (2009) both demonstrate, the name was used in literature primarily as a *non plus ultra*, or synonym for the ends of the earth. Its symbolic resonances are exemplified in a passage from Virgil's *Georgics* (c. 29 BC), which, as we shall see, was well-known to medieval authors. Virgil couples the name *Thule* with its companion adjective *ultima* (outermost or farthest) when he extols the Emperor Augustus as a god, and wonders whether he will take the earth, sea, or sky as his domain in death.⁶

An deus immensi venias maris ac tua nautae
 Numina sola colant, tibi seruiat ultima Thule,
 Teque sibi generum Tethys emat omnibus undis. (1.29–31)

(Or whether you come as a god of the wide sea, and sailors pay homage to your divine presence alone, Ultima Thule obey you, and Tethys bequeath all her waters to you, as her daughter's new bridegroom). (*Georgics*, pp. 2–4)

⁴ The theoretical basis for the observation that the winter nights grow longer, and summer nights shorter at higher latitudes had arisen in the Hellenistic world out of the study of geometry. See Anjac 1987, 136–42.

⁵ Strabo, *Geographica* IV.5, ed. H. L. Jones (1924), 253.

⁶ Cf. Burton 1875, 2; and Romm 1992, 158

Thule's symbolic resonances are also foregrounded in a similar passage in Seneca's *Medea*, which presents Thule as the limit of the lands, but foresees a time when it will no longer be so.

Venient annis saecula seris,
quibus Oceanus vincula rerum
laxet, et ingens pateat tellus
Tethysque novos detegat orbis
nec sit terris ultima Thule. (ll.375–379)

(There will come an age in far-off years when the Ocean shall unloose the bonds of things, when the whole broad earth shall be revealed, when Tethys shall disclose new worlds and Ultima Thule not be the limit of the lands.) (*Tragedies*, p. 375).

In its literary usage, the name *Thule* did not signify a known European polity, or any clearly defined geographical space; on the contrary, it was a region that lay beyond European political influence, and the last place that would be assimilated into the Roman *Imperium* (Romm 1992, 157; Mund-Dopchie 2009, 67–82). In the analyses that follow, we will see that medieval historians who used the name *Thule* to refer to Iceland capitalised on both its geographical and imaginative resonances.

Iceland and Thule in medieval historiography

It is commonly suggested that the earliest writer to use the name *Thule* to refer to Iceland was the Irish monk Dicuil in his geographical treatise *De mensura orbis terrae* (c. 825).⁷ Dicuil describes a community of Irish monks who had informed him of an island in the North Atlantic where they spent the lighter months of the year. These monks claimed that on this island the sun did not set on the summer solstice, leading Dicuil to theorise that it would not rise on the winter solstice either. He names this island *Thule ultima*.⁸ This is widely interpreted as an early reference to Iceland, some scholars identifying Dicuil's monks (*clerici*) as the hermits (*papar*) mentioned in *Íslendingabók*, the Sturlubók redaction of *Landnámabók*, and Theodoricus's *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagien-*

⁷ This claim has been made by Thoroddsen 1892–1904, 10; Nansen 1911, 59–60; Cassidy 1963, 599; and Mund-Dopchie 2009, 114.

⁸ Dicuil, *De mensura Orbis terrae* 7, ed. Car. Athan. Walckenaer (1807), 38–39. On this passage see Richter 2010, 160–61.

sium, whose presence was known to early Icelanders from the Irish books, bells, and crosiers that they purportedly left behind.⁹

It is important to remember, however, that Dicuil wrote his treatise several decades before the discovery and settlement of Iceland by the Norse in c. 870, and that the territory seasonally visited by these hermits was not at that time properly Iceland. Later writers who used the name *Thule* to refer to Iceland did not use the antique name to describe a remote island with no permanent inhabitants, but a contemporary European polity in its own right. As we shall see, to interpret Dicuil's use of the name *Thule* in the same light as later appropriations of the antique name is to overlook the nationalistic purposes to which this motif was sometimes put by later writers.

The earliest writer to associate Iceland, as an established European polity, with Thule is Adam of Bremen in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (c. 1075–81). Adam presents *Thule* as an earlier name for Iceland in the fourth book of his history, which is devoted to a study of the geography of the North Atlantic.

‘Insula Thyle, quae per infinitum a ceteris secreta longe in medio sita est oceano, vix,’ inquit, ‘nota habetur.’ De qua tam a Romanis scriptoribus quam a barbaris multa referuntur digna praedicari. ‘Ultima,’ inquit, ‘omnium Thyle, in qua aestivo solsticio, sole cancri signum transeunte, nox nulla, brumali solsticio perinde nullus dies; hoc quidam senis mensibus fieri arbitrantur.’ Item Beda scribit in Britannia aestate lucidas noctes haut dubie repromittere, ut in solstitio continui dies habeantur senis mensibus, noctesque e diverso ad brumam sole remoto. Quod fieri in insula Thyle, Pytheas Massiliensis scribit sex dierum navigatione in septentrionem a Britannia distante. Haec itaque Thyle nunc Island appellatur, a glacie quae oceanum astringit. (*Gesta Hamm.* IV. 36, pp. 271–72)

“The island Thule, which, separated from the others by endless stretches, is situated far off in the midst of the ocean, is,” they say, “barely known.” About it Roman writers as well as barbarians report much that is worth repeating. “The farthest island of all,” they say, “is Thule, in which there is no night at the summer solstice, when the sun crosses the sign of Cancer; and likewise, no day at the winter solstice. This, they think, takes place every six months.” Bede also writes that the bright summer nights in Britain indicate without a doubt that at the solstice it is continuously

⁹ *Íslendingabók* 1, trans. Siân Grønlie (2006), p. 4; *Landnámabók* 1, 32–33; and Theodoricus, *The Ancient History of the Northern Kings* 3.18–24, trans. David McDougall and Ian McDougall (1998), 6. On these hermits see Gautier Dalché 1986, 225. Margaret Clunies Ross suggests that reference to these artefacts in pre-settlement Iceland was intended to demonstrate that Iceland was from earliest times Christian (1998, 174).

day for six months and, on the contrary, night in the wintertime, when the sun is withdrawn. And Pytheas of Marseilles writes that this happens on the island of Thule, six days' sail distant from Britain towards the north. This Thule is now called Iceland, from the ice which binds the ocean.) (*History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, p. 217)¹⁰

Like the anonymous author of *Landnámabók*, Adam ostensibly associates the two islands on the basis of their high latitudes and similar geographical positions north from Britain. Adam mentions Iceland and its inhabitants four other times earlier in the *Gesta*. In these other instances, he refers to the island simply as *Island*, without any reference to Thule.¹¹ The significance of Adam's appropriation of the name *Thule* in the fourth book of his *Gesta* emerges when we examine the rationale Adam provides for his description of the North Atlantic islands, which he says are 'not to be overlooked by us because they also belong to the diocese of Hamburg'.¹² Adam was keen to credit the Hamburg diocese with the Christianisation of the far north (Mund-Dopchie 2009, 117) and so capitalises on Thule's sense as an imaginative *non plus ultra* in order to exaggerate the scale of his diocese's achievement. When Adam uses the name *Thule* he identifies Iceland as the most distant region to which Christian evangelism could aspire, and credits his diocese with having took Christianity to the very ends of the earth.¹³ We might detect a similar impulse in Adam's false claim that King Haraldr Hardradi had extended his empire as far as Iceland (III.37): he evokes the distant territory in order to exaggerate the scale of his narrative and the actions of its protagonists.

Two further historical works from medieval Scandinavia equate Iceland with Thule: the anonymous history of Norway conventionally

¹⁰ As the *Gesta*'s translators note, Adam obtained his information about Thule from Paulus Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* I.2.79, ed. Carolus Zangemeister (1882), 29; and Bede, *De temporum ratione* 31, which he cites verbatim.

¹¹ Firstly, Adam describes how the people of Iceland ('populis Islandorum') provide military aid to the royal St Óláfr (II.61, *Gesta Hamm.*, 121); secondly, he exaggeratedly claims that King Haraldr Hardradi extended his empire as far as Iceland ('ille cruentum imperium usque ad Island extendit') (III.17, *Gesta Hamm.*, 159); thirdly, he mentions Icelanders alongside legates from the Orkney Islands and Greenland who had travelled to Bremen ('inter quos extreme venerant Islani') (III.24, *Gesta Hamm.*, 167); and fourthly, he mentions Iceland in reference to its Christianisation (III.72, *Gesta Hamm.*, 220).

¹² *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* IV.34, 215. *Gesta Hamm.* IV.34, 271–72: 'non praetereundae sunt a nobis, quoniam Hammaburgensem parrochiam et ipsae respiciunt.'

¹³ Cf. Romm 1992, 157. Christ's injunctions to his apostles to spread Christianity to the ends of the earth in *Matthew* 28:19 and *Mark* 16:15.

known as the *Historia Norwegiae* (1160–75), and the *Gesta Danorum* composed by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1200). The *Historia Norwegiae* mentions Iceland in the course of its description of the regions that had belonged to the Trondheim (Niðaróss) archdiocese from its establishment in 1153/54.¹⁴

Que ab Italis *ultima Tile* dicta est, nunc quam magna frequentia colonum culta, quondam uasta solitudine et usque ad tempus Haraldi Comati hominibus incognita.

(That large island called by the Romans *Ultima Thule*, which today is inhabited by a great host of settlers, but which was once a vast wilderness and unknown to mankind right up to the days of Harald Fairhair). (*Historia Norwegiae*, pp. 68–69)

This suggestion that *Thule* is an earlier name for Iceland appears in chapter 8 of the *Historia*. It is interesting to note, however, that a demonym derived from the name *Thule* appears earlier in chapter 1, when the Icelanders are mentioned in relation to their discovery of Greenland.

Que patria a Telensibus reperta et inhabitata ac fide catholica roborata terminus est ad occasum Europa.

(This country [Greenland], discovered, settled, and confirmed in the Catholic faith by *Tilenses* [Icelanders] marks the western boundary of Europe). (*Historia Norwegiae*, pp. 54–55)

The demonym *Tilenses*, derived from the name *Thule*, is used without a protracted explanation or commentary; the *Historia Norwegiae*'s readers appear to be expected to know who the *Tilenses* are.¹⁵ Iceland and the Icelanders are similarly named with the terms *Tylen* and the *Tylenses* in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200), and it is likewise the case that the *Tylenses*, the Icelanders, are mentioned before *Tylen*, as Saxo praises them for their literary-historical achievement ('*Tylensium industria*') in the poetry and sagas included among his sources.¹⁶ Neither the

¹⁴ The anonymous author of the *Historia Norwegiae* knew Adam's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, and would have encountered the argument for an Icelandic Thule in this work. As Lars Boje Mortensen notes, the *Historia Norwegiae*'s geographical introduction is an extension of Adam's 'missionary map of the North,' updated to serve the missionary mandate of the archdiocese at Trondheim (2003, 17).

¹⁵ A number of terms for the inhabitants of Thule have been used in the scholarship. Nansen 1911 uses *Telensias* (*passim*), McDougall and McDougall refer in a note to the *Tilenses* (1998, 55, n. 3), while Mund-Dopchie (2009) uses *Thulites* (*passim*). *Tilenses* (or *Tylenses*) has the authority of being a loan from the Latin, and so has been used here.

¹⁶ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 0.1.4, ed. J. Olrik and H. Ræder (1931), 5.

author of the *Historia Norwegiae* nor Saxo attempt to explain the demonym *Tilenses*, implying that the motif had become widespread among Scandinavian writers.

Not all writers accepted the convention of using the name Thule for Iceland uncritically, however. The Norwegian monk Theodoricus, in his brief history of Norway the *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiesium* (c. 1180), acknowledges that the name *Thule* had sometimes been used to name Iceland when he describes its discovery and settlement by Norwegian seafarers. Theodoricus tells us that some believed the island of their discovery to be Thule, but then equivocates: ‘but since I do not know I neither affirm nor deny the truth of this matter’.¹⁷ While Theodoricus ostensibly refrains from making his own assessment of this claim, he perhaps makes his position known when he, like Saxo, names the Icelanders among his informants in the prologue to his *Historia*, tellingly referring to them as the *Islendinga*, not the *Tilenses*.¹⁸

We come at last to the Icelandic works that associate Iceland with Thule. The most well-known Icelandic attestation of this motif appears, as we have seen, in the prologue to *Landnámabók*, which cites Bede’s ‘aldarfarsbók’ (either *De temporibus* 7; or *De temporum ratione* 31) for its information about Thule. While Bede, like Dicuil, could not have associated Thule with Iceland, the author of the prologue appears keen to associate the history of the Icelandic settlement with a greater authority, and thereby establish common ground between his historical endeavour and the wider historiographical output of medieval Europe.¹⁹

The second Icelandic manifestation of this motif appears in *Breta sögur*, the Old Norse translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*. *Breta sögur* might have been translated from as early as 1200, but its earliest witness is preserved in a section of the manuscript known as *Hauksbók* (c. 1302–10), compiled by the Icelandic statesman Haukr Erlendsson (Kalinke 2015, 9). Iceland is associated with Thule in a description of the fictional king of the Icelanders named Maluasius, who provides men to serve in the military campaigns of the British King Arthur. In Geoffrey’s Latin original, Maluasius is described as ‘Maluasius rex Islandiae.’ However, its Icelandic translator elaborates: ‘Malvasius Tile konvngur. þat heitir nu Island’ (‘King Maluasius of Thule, which is

¹⁷ *The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, 6; *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae* 4–7, 8: ‘sed nos quia nescimus rei veritatem nec affirmamus nec negamus’.

¹⁸ *The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, 1; 55, n. 3.

¹⁹ On Bede’s reputation and the influence of his works in Iceland see Fry 1993, 36–37; and Phelpstead 2006, 54–57.

now called Iceland’).²⁰ Iceland is not associated with Thule in Geoffrey’s *Historia*, which uses the name *Islandia* in all four of its references to Iceland, where it is evoked in fictionalised contexts to emphasise the reputation and power of the British kings.²¹ The Hauksbók redaction of *Breta sögur* retains two of these references: when Iceland is mentioned for the second time, it numbers among the territories conquered by King Malgo (cf. *Historia regum Britanniae* 183.119), and is not associated with the name *Thule* as it had been earlier in the saga (*Hauksbók*, 295).

The occurrence of this motif in *Breta sögur* is not isolated. A version of *Landnámabók* based on the *Sturlubók* redaction and a lost version written by the lawspeaker and prior Styrmir Kárason is also preserved in Hauksbók and, like *Breta sögur*, is written in Haukr’s own hand. It might be the case, therefore, that the incorporation of the name *Thule* into *Breta sögur* was motivated by the appearance of the same motif in *Landnámabók* earlier in the Hauksbók compilation. This suggestion perhaps finds support in Marianne Kalinke’s observation that the reference to an Icelandic Thule ruled by King Maluasius does not appear in the longer redaction of *Breta sögur* preserved in the manuscript AM 573 4to, which does not contain a text of *Landnámabók* (2015, 29, n. 18). I suggest that in writing the motif into *Breta sögur*, Haukr intended corroborate the association between these islands in *Landnámabók*, and establish further connections between Icelandic and mainstream European historical traditions.

The elaboration on Geoffrey’s *Islandia* in the Icelandic *Breta sögur* can be compared with a similar passage in the *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, a history of post-conquest England written by the English historian William of Newburgh in the 1190s. In the proem to his *Historia*, William strives to undermine the credibility of Geoffrey’s *Historia regum Britanniae*, and denounce its unfounded tales of the British past. William mentions the conquest of *Islandia* among the extravagant triumphs that Geoffrey attributed to King Arthur.

His quoque addit Islandiam, quae ultima Tile secundum quosdam dicitur, ut ad Britonem illum in veritate spectare videatur, quod Augusto Romano a poeta nobili adulatorie dicitur: tibi serviet ultima Thule.

²⁰ *Hauksbók*, 291.

²¹ See *The History of the Kings of Britain*: Arthur takes his fleet to *Islandia*, and conquers the land (153.219); King Maluasius of *Islandia* pays homage to Arthur at Caerleon (156.345); Arthur leads an army made up of men from various lands including *Islandia* (162.524); and Malgo rules *Islandia* and other territories (183.119). Reeve’s edition does not supply any variant readings (e.g. *Thule* instead of *Islandia*) in any of these passages.

(To these he [Geoffrey] adds as well Iceland, which some call furthest Thule, so that the flattering words addressed to the Roman Augustus by the celebrated poet [Virgil] seem in truth to refer to that Briton: 'Furthest Thule will be your slave.') (*The History of English Affairs*, pp. 32–33)

William shows that he is aware of the historiographical motif when he supplements his commentary on Geoffrey's *Islandia* with a reference to Thule, in much the same way as the Icelandic translator of the *Breta sögur*. He does not do so, however, to argue for their equivalence; rather, drawing on the name *Thule* as a synonym for the ends of the earth exemplified in his citation from the *Georgics* (1.30), he ridicules the extravagance of Geoffrey's claim that British political influence extended beyond the Roman *Imperium*, or indeed the limits of possibility.

The Tilensian precedent

Having reviewed the occurrences of this motif in medieval historiography, we are in a position to characterise its contemporary usage, and contextualise its appearance in *Landnámabók*. The name *Thule* was used by medieval historians to show the relatedness of their writings to Roman historiography. In the *Historia Norwegiae* and *Gesta Danorum*, the appropriation of the antique name *Thule* demonstrated that their national histories were contiguous with – and could enrich – Roman writings about the far north. As exemplified by Virgil's *Georgics* and Seneca's *Medea*, Roman authors could only imagine a time when *ultima Thule* would be assimilated into the Roman *Imperium*. However, in these Norwegian and Danish national histories, Thule figures as a stable part of the northern world. When the *Historia Norwegiae* records that Thule was unknown until the time of Harald Fairhair ('usque ad tempus Haraldi Comati hominibus incognita'), its author implies that the Norwegians have, in bringing civilization and culture to Thule and incorporating it into their writings, surpassed the Roman achievement.

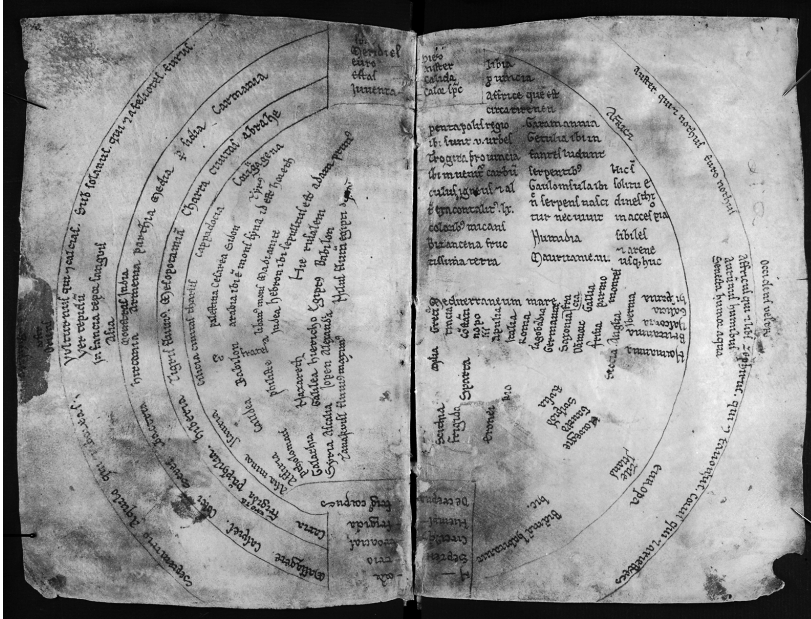
In *Landnámabók*, the desire to associate native intellectual culture with the European mainstream might have been more immediate. *Landnámabók* co-opts the names *Thule* and *Iceland* to formalise a connection between Icelandic and mainstream European historical literatures, a manoeuvre that is amplified in *Hauksbók* by the repetition of the motif in *Breta sögur*. Since Iceland had only recently (c. 870) been settled and

welcomed into the commonwealth of Christianity and Latin learning, it had an uncommonly short and ‘temporally finite history’ (Whaley 2000, 163). The Tilensian precedent cultivated in the prologue to *Landnámabók* enabled its compiler to claim for Iceland two things it sorely lacked: a human prehistory, and a presence in Roman historical literature. Through their use of the traditional name *Thule*, medieval historians were able to write themselves into fellowship with the historical keynotes of the High Middle Ages, such as Pliny, Isidore, and Bede. It was therefore important that the name *Iceland* did not replace the antique *Thule* altogether, even in Iceland: this would have the undesirable effect of erasing the connections between their writings and antique literature on the northern regions. The cultivation of a Tilensian precedent in *Landnámabók* and *Breta sögur* recalls the false etymologising in the *Prose Edda* and ‘Ynglingasaga’ in the *Heimskringla* cycle, whose authors, sometimes assumed to be the literary magnate Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), attempted to show that Icelandic vernacular poetics and culture were derived from Roman cultural artefacts that originated in Troy.²² The Tilensian precedent was likewise a mechanism through which medieval historians were able to negotiate Icelandic anxieties about the island as a *terra nova* by extending Icelandic history into Classical antiquity, and demonstrating their culture’s centralist origins.

Iceland and Thule in medieval cartography

We have seen that a Tilensian precedent is evoked twice in Old Icelandic literature, in *Landnámabók* and *Breta sögur*. It remains in this article to consider a possible third appearance of this motif: an Icelandic world map (c. 1225–50) that appears to show both Iceland and Thule in its depiction of the North Atlantic. This map, preserved in the encyclopaedic compilation held in Reykjavík’s Stofnun Árna Magnússonar with the shelf mark GkS 1812 4to, ff. 5v–6r, is the only map to survive from medieval Iceland that contains an extensive geographical nomenclature, and

²² The Norse divinities, the *Æsir* (singular *Ás*), were connected to Asia (*Ásia*) by means of a false etymology. Likewise, the *Vanir*, a sub-group of the gods, were said to have had their ancestral home near the Tanakvísl or *Vanakvísl*, the Tanais estuary. On euhemerism and other mechanisms for a *translatio imperii* in Icelandic literature see Whaley 2000, 178; Sverrir Jakobsson 2007, 27, and Wellendorf 2013, 143–70. On the myth of Trojan origins in other European literatures see Federico 2003.



The Icelandic world map in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, GkS 1812 4to, ff. 5v–6r (c. 1225–50). Reproduced with permission.

the only one to show the location of Iceland.²³ Iceland and Thule are positioned on this map at the *caput Europae*, immediately beneath the inscription *Europa* on the map's outline.

The double appearance of these names on the Icelandic map presents an interpretative crux that has not hitherto been acknowledged. As we saw above, medieval historical writings sometimes presented *Thule* as an alternative name for Iceland, and with this historiographical context in mind the Icelandic map might be interpreted as a visual statement of these names' equivalence. However, Iceland appears on four other medieval maps that are broadly contemporary with the prose histories that equate the names *Thule* and *Iceland*. The medieval maps that include the name Iceland, as identified by Leonid S. Chekin (2006, 309), are: the Anglo-Saxon or Cotton map (c. 1025–50); the Sawley map (c. 1190);

²³ A slender bibliography surrounds this important map. For recent scholarship, see Simek 1990, 419–23; and Chekin 2006, 69–71. This map, and the four others that survive in Icelandic manuscripts, are the subject of a fuller enquiry in Kedwards 2014, a brief précis of which can be seen in Kedwards 2015. A recent overview of the Icelandic maps and the genres to which they belong can be seen in Simek 2000, 537–38.

Gerald of Wales's map of Europe (c. 1200); the Hereford map (c. 1290s); and the Icelandic map (c. 1225–50) under consideration here.²⁴ Contrary to the prevalence of narrative statements that associate *Iceland* with *Thule*, two of these maps (the Anglo-Saxon or Cotton and Hereford maps) show both islands separately, while another two (Gerald of Wales's map of Europe and the Sawley map) show Iceland but no Thule. Since the Icelandic map makes sparse use of outlines, it is not clear whether the inscriptions *Tile* and *Island* adhere to one island or two, and whether we analyse the map in light of its historiographical or cartographic parallels can present different implications for its interpretation. A review of the Icelandic map's cartographic analogues will demonstrate that it is not unique in its double placement of the names *Iceland* and *Thule*, and might cause us to rethink the assumption that it is a statement of these names' equivalence along the same lines as *Landnámabók*.

Two medieval maps other than the Icelandic example show both Iceland and Thule in their depictions of the North Atlantic. The earliest of these, the Anglo-Saxon or Cotton map (British Library, MS. Cotton Tiberius B.V., f. 56v, c. 1025–50) has the dual distinction of being the earliest map to show Iceland, and the earliest written attestation of the name *Iceland*. The Cotton map is an exceptionally detailed map of the world produced in England, possibly at Canterbury. Seventy-five of its 146 place-names are found in Orosius's *Cosmographia*, and others might derive from now-lost Roman administrative records and itineraries.²⁵ The map supplements the antique tradition with additions derived from tenth-century explorations of northern waters, and is particularly notable for the accuracy of its depiction of the British Isles and the North Atlantic islands.²⁶ While histories of Icelandic cartography have noted that the Cotton map contains the earliest appearance of the name *Iceland*, they seldom mention that it also includes the name *Tylen*.²⁷ Iceland appears near the Norwegian Peninsula, while Thule is shown separately, west of the British Isles, in the map's bottom left corner. The second medieval map to show both Iceland and Thule is the monumental English Hereford map (c. 1290s), which shows three islands at the head of the

²⁴ Haraldur Sigurðsson counts a further twenty-one maps and charts that show Iceland from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (1971, 44–45).

²⁵ Harvey 1996, 389. See also Miller 1895–98, 3:29–37; and McGurk 1983, 86.

²⁶ McGurk 1983, 81. Some of the islands depicted on this map also feature on the map prepared by the Arabic scholar Muhammad al-Idrisi at the court of the Norman king Roger II of Sicily in 1154. See Maqbul 1992, 156–172.

²⁷ McGurk observes their double placement on the map (1983, 85).

Norwegian Peninsula: *Farerie* (the Faroe Islands), *Ysland* (Iceland) and *Ultima Tile* (Westrem 2001, 194–95). On this map, Iceland and Thule are not plotted remotely, as they are on the Cotton map, but side by side.

The two other medieval maps that show Iceland do not include Thule. The English Sawley Map (c. 1190) shows a peninsular Iceland connected to the European mainland by a narrow isthmus (McGurk 1983, 81). A map of Europe preserved in Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 700, f. 48r (c. 1200), possibly produced at Lincoln, also prominently depicts *Yslandia* but not Thule.²⁸ This map is preserved between texts of Gerald of Wales's *Topographia Hibernica* and *Expugnatio Hibernica*. The *Topographia Hibernica* describes both Iceland and Thule in its survey of the North Atlantic islands.²⁹ Gerald derives his information about Thule from Orosius and Solinus, as well as Virgil's *Georgics*. Although he, like the compiler of *Landnámabók*, describes the length of Thule's solstitial day, he does not connect this with any comparable observations from Iceland.³⁰

Iceland and Thule on a map from medieval Iceland

These cartographic analogues complicate our understanding of the placement of these two islands on the Icelandic map. Maps do not appear to argue for the equivalence of these names, but show both *Thule* and *Iceland* as separate cartographic entities. There appears, therefore, to be two contexts in which the map is intelligible: one historiographical, in which the names *Thule* and *Iceland* were sometimes presented as synonyms; and the other cartographic, in which these islands were shown separately. Although it is not clear on the Icelandic map whether these apparently twinned inscriptions describe one island or two, we are able to elaborate on the likelihood of these two interpretations through consideration of its written and cartographic parallels.

It is possible that the double placement of these islands on the Icelan-

²⁸ See Delano Smith and Kain 1999, 15–16; and Chekin 2006, 139. This map is examined in relation to its accompanying texts in O'Loughlin 1999, 24–39.

²⁹ Gerald of Wales, *Topography of Ireland* II.13, trans. John J. O'Meara (1982), 67; II.17, 68.

³⁰ Thule and Iceland are also described separately in the Franciscan scholar Bartholomeus Anglicus's encyclopaedia *De proprietatibus rerum* (c. 1240). See Mund-Dopchie 2009, 120, n. 36.

dic map stems from the uncertainty with which some authors, such as Theodoricus, wrote about them. This appears to have been the case on the map that accompanies Gerald of Wales's *Topographia Hibernica* and *Expugnatio Hibernica*. While the mapmaker had access to both names in the *Topographia*, he only plotted *Iceland*, for which more certain information would have been available. Further, presented with speculation but no certain information about *Thule*, a mapmaker might have preferred to combine but not reconcile his sources. The proximity of Iceland and Ultima Thule on the Hereford map might indicate that the mapmaker had some knowledge of a connection between them but was unwilling to pronounce on their precise relationship, as Theodoricus in his *Historia*.

In the case of the Icelandic map, it has proved tempting to wonder whether *Thule* could represent a land other than Iceland. Indeed, modern identifications of Pytheas's Thule are numerous, and it is plausible that medieval Icelanders might also have given consideration to its identity. The Icelandic map's *Thule* attracted the attention of its first commentator, Carl Christian Rafn, who remarks:

Il est bien remarquable que ce géographe islandais qui adopte presque partout les dénominations de lieu créées par les anciens géographes latins, se souvenant de leur 'Ultima Thule' a donné ce nom aux contrées situées dans l'Amérique et découvertes par ses compatriotes. On se rappelle que ces pays qui sont le Groenland, le Helluland, le Markland, le Vinland, ont par les géographes du Nord été rapportés à notre partie du monde. En employant le nom de Tile pour des pays situés au-delà de l'Islande, l'auteur du planisphère révèle sa connaissance d'un pays plus éloigné. (Rafn 1852, p. 393)

(It is remarkable that this Icelandic geographer, who adopts almost all the place-names created by the old Latin geographers, remembered 'Ultima Thule' and gave that name to the lands situated in America and discovered by his countrymen. We remember that these lands, Greenland, Helluland, Markland, and Vinland, had been reported by northern geographers to our part of our world. By using the name of Tile for lands located beyond Iceland, the author of the planisphere reveals his knowledge of a more distant land.) (Own translation)

This appears to me a rather remarkable but indefensible suggestion. If this *Thule* did represent either Greenland or North America, then it would be the earliest known cartographic representation of these regions by more than two hundred years: Greenland would not otherwise find cartographic expression until the publication of Claudius Clavus's *tabula moderna* in a Latin translation of Claudius Ptolemy's *Geographia* in

around 1424–27 (Mead 2007, 1781–86). Even if we accept that these regions were known to the mapmaker, there is no reason to think that he would give the name *Thule* to either of them: as *Landnámabók* and *Breta sögur* indicate, there is no evidence, so far as I am aware, that Icelanders meant anything but Iceland when they wrote *Thule*.

It seems unlikely that the Icelandic map discloses any information about the Norse discovery of North America; the map is generally silent on the Norse explorations of northern waters, and does not show the locations of the Faroe or Orkney islands, which would certainly have been known to its maker. As we have seen, the double placement of these islands on maps is traditional and, as their early appearance on the Cotton map suggests, it is entirely possible that the exemplar from which the Icelandic map was copied already incorporated the names *Iceland*, *Thule* or both before it was imported into Iceland.

Given the complex historiographical and cartographic traditions from which the Icelandic mapmaker might have drawn, it is difficult to pronounce on what he understood the relationship between these two names to be. The map might be a visual statement of their equivalence; the strength of this interpretation lies in the fact that other examples of this motif can be found in Icelandic literature (i.e. in *Landnámabók* and *Breta sögur*). However, this is the only map that survives from medieval Iceland that shows Iceland, and we do not know what forms other examples of Icelandic cartographic self-portraiture might have taken. On consideration of the cartographic evidence, we might suggest that the double statement of these names is not a statement of their equivalence, but an attempt by the mapmaker to preserve the distinctiveness of his sources. The mapmaker has taken information from multiple sources – some traditional and some contemporary – and, making no effort to harmonise them, has left them unassembled.

An alternative interpretation emerges from consideration of *Thule*'s imaginative resonances. As we saw from the historiographical evidence outlined above, *Thule* and *Iceland* were not perfect synonyms. *Thule* was primarily a *non plus ultra*, carrying connotations of geographical extremism that could be capitalised upon by medieval historians who sought to aggrandise their territorial claims in the far north, or else to ridicule those who had used the name *Iceland* to do so, as we saw in William's *Historia rerum Anglicarum*. *Thule* did not bear connotations of polity or civilisation, but lay beyond their limits. In contrast, *Iceland* was a European political entity belonging to western Christendom. Perhaps in writing both *Thule* and *Iceland* on his map, the Icelandic mapmaker

was able to separate these two sets of connotations. Iceland was different from Thule: Iceland was civilised, it belonged to western Christendom, and it was European; Thule, which the mapmaker plots further from the map's centre, was separate, and its connotations of inaccessibility, disconnectedness, and geographical extremism did not characterise Iceland. It is conceivable that rather than a Tilensian precedent the map creates a Tilensian other against which Icelandic European identity is constructed; it evokes Thule in order to excise its connotations from its characterisation of Iceland. The mapmaker appears to present these interpretations as alternatives, but does not resolve the tensions between them; maps live by their reception, and multiple interpretations are available, despite a mapmaker's single-minded intentions.

Conclusion

An examination of the historical texts that associate Iceland with Thule reveals that medieval historians were little concerned with the historical reality of Pytheas's voyage or the factual identity of his Thule. Rather, this infamous name borrowed from antiquity was used by medieval historians to extend Scandinavian history into Classical antiquity and show the relatedness of their historical traditions. An understanding of this motif, therefore, has broader implications for how we understand the relationships between Scandinavian and other European textual and intellectual cultures. Specifically, it illuminates how Icelandic historians sought to position their own writings in relation to the wider European historiographical endeavour. On maps the relationship between these names remains uncertain. It is possible that the Icelandic map is a visual attestation of a motif that was widely used in medieval Scandinavian historiography. However, the collective historiographical and cartographic evidence urges us to articulate subtler positions on the relationships between these names in the works in which they appear. As the relevant passages in *Landnámabók* and *Breta sögur* demonstrate, Icelandic historians evoked a Tilensian precedent in order to harmonise their native, vernacular historiographical endeavours with pan-European written traditions. Identification with Thule was above all an important act of self-definition that aligned Icelandic textual culture with the European mainstream.

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