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A New Dispute about Thule and Agricola's Last Campaign*

In a recent paper Breeze and Wilkins cast doubt on Wolfson's arguments about the location of Thule and on the operations of the Roman navy in Agricola's last campaign¹. It is not surprising that they, like no doubt many others, remain sceptical about Wolfson's discussion of the endlessly debated question of Pytheas and Thule. Be this as it may, as must be pointed out below, the two critics have mistakenly attributed to Wolfson a claim which is the exact opposite of what he actually wrote. It also needs to be stressed that, as Wolfson writes, 'the contents of [his] book are primarily of a philological nature'². Although the two critics do take issue with Wolfson's interpretation of *dispecta est Thule* (Tac. *Agr.* 10,4) and assert that *fama trux*, in Wolfson's conjectured reading of *Agr.* 38.4 «is not idiomatic Latin», their arguments seem to be weak, as will be seen.

Wolfson's work was published in a series, *British Archaeological Reports*, of which the individual volumes are seldom sent out for review. But in 2010 it was at least reviewed in one academic journal. The reviewer, Dr Jorit Wintjes of Würzburg, a specialist in ancient military, especially naval, history, regards Wolfson's identification of Thule with the Shetland islands from Pytheas onwards as very convincing³. In the same year, a specialist in the history of sea travel, Professor Detlev Ellmers, emeritus director of the Deutsches Schifffahrts-Museum in Bremerhaven, in an article on the famous Vix crater, devoted a section to Pytheas' voyage to Thule. Ellmers also treats Wolfson's identification as correct⁴. Wolfson's case has meanwhile been approved by others⁵. The present writer would willingly abstain from tackling Pytheas, but is obliged to devote a little space to the arguments of Breeze and Wilkins. However, it is important to note in advance that, irrespective of where Pytheas' Thule was, for Agricola, Tacitus and their contemporaries, as later for Ptolemy, Thule was Shetland. This means that Wolfson's detailed analysis of the occurrence of Thule in Silver Age Latin poetry, ignored by Breeze and Wilkins, requires attention.

* Acknowledgements: helpful comments and criticisms were offered by D.B. Campbell, F. Santangelo, J.P. Wild and A.J. Woodman, and were very gratefully received, even if not always acted upon. Any remaining mistakes are the sole responsibility of the author, who also benefited from the constructive advice offered by an anonymous referee for this journal. Stan Wolfson kindly gave his blessing to this attempt to defend his views.

¹ Breeze – Wilkins 2018, discussing Wolfson 2008. It may be noted that Wolfson originally published his treatise online: Wolfson 2002, not referred to by Breeze and Wilkins, but cited by several writers who approved Wolfson's case, notably his treatment of Tac. *Agr.* 10.4 and 38.2-4. However, the online version has now been taken down.

² Wolfson 2008, 13.

³ Wintjes 2010, 484: «Im ersten Kapitel setzt sich W(olfson) einleitend mit der Frage auseinander, womit die in den antiken Quellen auftauchende Bezeichnung *Thule* zu identifizieren sei. Dabei argumentiert er sehr überzeugend für eine konsequente Identifizierung von *Thule* mit den Shetland-Inseln seit Pytheas und weist alternative Identifikationsversuche (etwa mit Norwegen) zurück».

⁴ Ellmers 2010, 376 f. He cites Wolfson 2002 and 2008 at his n. 57.

⁵ Wolfson 2002 was approved by Birley 2004, 104-7 and Birley 2005, 90-2; Wolfson 2008 by Birley 2009, 52-7 and Campbell 2010, 85-6.

Before going any further, the first two items in the Introduction to their article need to be looked at. They cite Tac. *Agr.* 10.4:

hanc oram novissimi maris tunc primum Romana classis circumvecta insulam esse Britanniam affirmavit, ac simul incognitas ad id tempus insulas, quas Orcadas vocant, invenit domuitque. dispecta est et Thule, quia hactenus iussum et hiems appetebat.

It was then that a Roman fleet for the first time circumnavigated this shore of the remotest sea and proved that Britain is an island. At the same time it discovered and conquered the islands called the Orcades which were unknown up to that time. Also a clear sighting was obtained of Thule because that was the limit of their orders and winter was approaching⁶.

They maintain that of the three basic facts in these two sentences the first two are incorrect: that «for the first time Britain was found to be an island» and that «the Orcades were previously unknown». Regarding the first and second, they note that «Caesar had stated that Britain was an island while Pomponius Mela c. 40 years before Agricola's maritime expedition and Pliny the Elder, who died in the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79, knew of Orkney». One must reply that Tacitus referred to the first time that a *Roman* fleet had sailed round Britain⁷ and *proved* it to be an island. After all, Cassius Dio twice credits this proof to Agricola. First, beginning his account of Caesar's crossing to Britain, Dio comments that people had long been unsure whether Britain was a continent or an island, 'but as time went on, it has been clearly proved to be an island, first under the governor Agricola and now under the Emperor Severus' (39.50.4). Then in his account (in the epitome of Xiphilinus) of Agricola's governorship he writes that 'Gnaeus Julius Agricola overran the whole of the enemy's territory there; and he was the first of the Romans whom we know of to have discovered that Britain is surrounded by water' (66.20.2). After a reference to the mutiny of the Usipi (described in Tac. *Agr.* 28) he adds that 'Agricola therefore sent others to test the voyage around Britain and learned from them that it is an island' (66.20.3). So Tacitus' first statement at *Agr.* 10.4 cannot be called «incorrect». As for the Orkneys, it is quite true that they are mentioned by Mela (3.64) and the Elder Pliny (Plin. *nat.* 4.103). But the emphasis needs to be placed on *invenit domuitque*: the fleet 'discovered and conquered' the Orkneys. They were not indeed totally unheard of before then but not directly experienced, which is perhaps what Tacitus was thinking of when he wrote *incognitas ad id tempus insulas*⁸.

⁶ As Breeze and Wilkins mention, all their quotations from the ancient sources are based on the translations by Roseman 1993. Other translations in this paper are by the present writer, except where otherwise stated.

⁷ As Wolfson 2008, 29 n. 91 points out, *hanc oram novissimi maris tunc primum Romana classis circumvecta* «was [n]ot a complete circumnavigation of the island... It simply means *sailed round*». To spell this out: the word *insulam* that follows *circumvecta* goes with *esse Britanniam affirmavit*. Agricola's fleet, 'having sailed around this coast of the remotest sea, proved that Britannia is in fact an island'. Woodman 2014, 283, in his commentary on *Agr.* 38.3, misquotes 10.4 by omitting *hanc oram novissimi maris*.

⁸ Here it is worth drawing attention to Wolfson 2008, "Appendix 2, A Problem of Identification or *Pie in the Sky*", 75-7, in which he argues persuasively that Eutropius' claim (7.13.3) that Claudius 'added the Orkneys to the Roman empire' was based on a confusion between the Isle of

The third statement in *Agr.* 10.4 is the main subject of the paper by Breeze and Wilkins. In their summary of the evidence in Strabo and the Elder Pliny for Pytheas' account their first item is: «(a) Thule is the furthest north of all named islands», for which their note refers to «Strabo, *Geography* 2.5.8; 4.5.5». This quotation, «the furthest north of all named islands», is taken from Strab. 4.5.5. The other passage, 2.5.8, which they do not quote, attributes to Pytheas the statement that Thule is 'the most distant of all the Britannic islands'. The second quotation cited by Breeze and Wilkins is the one stating that Thule «is six days sailing north from *Brettanike*», deriving from Strab. 1.4.2 and Plin. *nat.* 2.187. Further statements attributed to Pytheas are then cited and the authors draw from them the conclusions that «Thule lay on the Arctic Circle and that it lay close to the ice cap, or at least seas containing ice floes». They quote Cunliffe for the view that «the evidence that Thule is Iceland "seems unassailable"» and add: «Scholars may not agree whether Thule was Iceland or Norway, but the consensus is that it was not Shetland»⁹. Special pleading has always been required to explain away Strab. 2.5.8: it may well be asked how Iceland, let alone Norway, can possibly have been described as «Britannic». At any rate, Wolfson has provided a strong case against Iceland: «[a]llowing for twelve hours of continuous rowing or paddling (in Atlantic conditions) at 2.5 knots, it would take nearly three weeks to reach Iceland, which no more fits the description of Thule as 'the most northerly of the British isles', or 'the furthest of the islands around Britain' than it does today»¹⁰.

A short reply may scarcely be adequate, not least concerning Thule, about the location of which there has been so much dispute for centuries. A few comments have been offered above. It remains to deal with what Breeze and Wilkins assert in the last section of their paper: «Wolfson claims that Tacitus' Thule was Shetland and that Agricola's fleet actually landed there»¹¹. Wolfson does indeed claim – or demonstrate convincingly, in the present writer's view – that Tacitus' Thule was Shetland¹². Yet nowhere does he claim that «Agricola's fleet actually landed there». Wolfson insists that in the key phrase in the *Agr.*, 10.4 *dispecta est et Thule*, the verb «does not mean *sighted*, nor *seen from far off*, nor *glimpsed*» but closely examined¹³. His two critics claim that Wolfson's interpretation of *dispecta* is «unacceptable», that his «handling of this key passage is tendentious and flawed» because he relies on the meaning of the related verb *perspicere*, and «by a further sideways move»

Wight, *Vectis*, conquered by Vespasian as legionary legate in A.D. 43 and a northern island with a similar name.

⁹ Cunliffe 2001, 130, quoted by Breeze – Wilkins 2018, 304 f.

¹⁰ Wolfson 2008, 17, with further references. At 16, n. 12 he cites a native of Orkney, Fotheringham 1859, 502 for the valuable conclusion that «six days would not be too many for navigation among the islands forming the two clusters of Orkney and Shetland with their strong tides and other difficulties attending a navigation through northern islands».

¹¹ Breeze – Wilkins 2018, 5, referring in their n. 47 to Wolfson 2008, 29 f.

¹² As pointed out by Bianchetti 1998, 154, Agricola's Thule was certainly Shetland—and hence, it must be stressed, the Thule of Domitian and of the Silver Age poets was likewise Shetland.

¹³ Wolfson 2008, 30, referring in his notes 94–6 to predecessors, too numerous to repeat here. Cf. now also C.S. Kraus in Woodman 2014, 138, in her commentary on *dispecta est Thule*: «*dispecta* (cf. *OLD* 3a) probably means "picked out", i.e. from the innumerable islands off the coast of northern Scotland, or "discerned", i.e. in the distance». At p. 31 Wolfson gives his own translation: 'A close examination of Thule was also made'.

uses parallels from Greek. Further, they assert that Wolfson pushes the meaning of the verb *dispicere* thereby «hinting at physical action on Thule». They ignore Wolfson's reference to Tac. *ann.* 13.27.3. in which the verb *dispicere* does indeed mean 'examine closely'¹⁴.

They have misrepresented what Wolfson wrote, having evidently overlooked the following four passages in his book:

The scenario, as I see it, is that the Roman fleet was instructed to return to winter anchorage at the end of the military campaigning season, sailing, I suggest, from a bay in Caithness to a base somewhere on the Clyde (Dumbarton?). It would be no problem to overrun the Orkneys. The opportunity to follow in the wake of Pytheas and to reconnoitre Shetland was too good to be missed and might never occur again. It would require no great time to cover the distance from Scapa Flow to Mainland, Shetland, to make a detailed report of the coastline, to instil fear in the natives by its very presence in a major harbour and then sail back to its winter base on the Clyde with the claim that it had been the first time that any Romans had reached, let alone "sighted", Thule¹⁵.

...it is nowhere implied that troops landed on Shetland: the fleet reached Thule Harbour, showed the flag and terrified the natives. That was all it was meant to do¹⁶.

The conquest of Shetland may have been on Agricola's agenda, but it never materialised. [*This is taken further in the accompanying note:*] This point needs to be qualified. Agricola was recalled to Rome in spring of AD 84. But the Romans maintained a presence in Caledonia until AD 87, and there is no reason why Agricola's successor should not finish off what Agricola began and complete the conquest of Shetland. In which case references in the Silver Age poets to the conquest of Thule under Domitian may well be true. Tacitus would obviously not mention the achievements of Agricola's successor¹⁷.

After criticising Wolfson for his interpretation of Pomponius Mela and the Elder Pliny, Breeze and Wilkins assert that «There is no reason to doubt Rivet and Smith's conclusion that the Shetland Isles were *Haemodae/Acmodae*». Lower down on the same page, this has become certainty and they ask: «As the name of the Shetland Isles was *Haemodae*, or the like, why did Agricola not use it, if he thought his fleet had sighted them?»¹⁸. Wolfson commented that «Pliny's *Acmodae* (*HN* 4.103) and Mela's *Haemodae* (3.30) are clearly identical and have been erroneously suggested

¹⁴ Breeze – Wilkins 2018, 307, on Wolfson 2008, 30, where he cites the passage from Tac. *ann.* at n. 97. Ellmers 2010, 377 renders *Agr.* 10.4 as: «Nach genauer Untersuchung auch von Thule — denn bis dahin lautete der Befehl — drohte der Winter». He adds the following observation: «Damit ist eindeutig klar, dass Agricola von den Orkneyinseln aus Thule als die nach wie vor im Fahrbereich der einheimischen Schifffahrt gelegenen Shetlandinseln identifizierte und genau untersuchte. Nach Ausführung des Befehls vollendete er seine Rundreise wegen der fortgeschrittenen Jahreszeit ohne weitere verzögernde Zwischenaufenthalte, konnte aber insgesamt den Wahrheitsgehalt des Pytheasberichts für die Britischen Inseln genau bestätigen».

¹⁵ Wolfson 2008, 34.

¹⁶ Wolfson 2008, 42, n. 172.

¹⁷ Wolfson 2008, 48, with n. 214.

¹⁸ Breeze – Wilkins 2018, 305 f.

as the Shetland Islands by a range of scholars over the centuries»¹⁹.

Tacitus' sparing provision of British geographical names of course creates difficulties. There are only thirteen in the text printed by modern editors: a region, Caledonia (10.3, 11.2, 25.3, 27.1, 31.4), clearly the land beyond the Firths of Forth and Clyde; four states (or 'tribes'), the Silures (11.2, 17.2), Brigantes (17.1, 31.4), Ordovices (18.1, 2) and Boresti (38.2); three islands or groups of islands, Orcades, Thule (10.4) and Mona (14.3, 18.3); three estuaries, Taus (22.1), Bodotria (23, 25.1, 3) and Clota (23); a mountain, the site of the final battle, Graupius (29.2); and a harbour, Trucculensis (38.4). There has long been dispute about the location of Mons Graupius, which need not be discussed here. But the account of the battle's aftermath has also caused uncertainty. Agricola 'led the army into the territories of the Boresti', *in finis Borestorum exercitum deducit* (38.2), and 'at the same time, with favourable weather and reputation the fleet entered the Trucculensian harbour', *et simul classis secunda tempestate ac fama Trucculensem portum tenuit* (38.4). Minor adjustment to the text of 38.2 by Wolfson produces far better sense. The *Boresti*, not attested by Ptolemy or by any other source, can be dispensed with: *in finis Borestorum exercitum deducit* can be emended to *in finis boreos totum exercitum deducit*, 'led the entire army into the northern extremities'. The elimination of the 'Boresti' has been accepted by the latest editor of the *Agricola*, A.J. Woodman²⁰.

On the crucial phrase in *Agr.* 38.4, *et simul classis secunda tempestate ac fama Trucculensem portum tenuit*, Wolfson, after a lengthy discussion of abortive attempts to emend *Trucculensem* as the name of a harbour, conjectures *et simul classis secunda tempestate ac fama trux Tulensem portum tenuit*, relying on the marginal reading *trutulense(m)* by E^{2m}, the contemporary corrector of E, and emending *tru* to *trux*²¹. In this case Woodman regards Wolfson's emended text, which he himself renders as '[the fleet], ruthless because of the favourable weather and its reputation' as 'quite implausible'. Wolfson's own translation, it may be noted, is: «the fleet, its ruthlessness enhanced by rumour and favourable weather». Yet Woodman appears to believe that the emended text involves belief in a landing on the island, which is not the case (see above)²². Breeze and Wilkins object: «But

¹⁹ Wolfson 2008, 20, where at n. 49 he lists a dozen names, including «Breeze 1999» – which should be 'Breeze 1989'. For Rivet and Smith 1979, he refers to their p. 241, where, to be fair, those scholars were more cautious than is implied by Breeze and Wilkins: they only identify the Aemodae as 'Probably the Shetland Islands, which were misidentified as Thule by Agricola's fleet' (emphasis by the present writer).

²⁰ Wolfson 2008, 65-74. It may be noted that Wolfson 2008, 67-8, refers to Ammianus (23.6.4) (also to Priscian and Avienus), for the use of the adjective *boreus* in Latin. As he observes, Viansino 2004, 124 f. counted 93 examples of Ammianus' vocabulary which echo Tacitus in the *Agricola*. See Woodman 2014, 283, accepting Wolfson's emendation and noting other occurrences of *boreus* in Latin. This emendation is not mentioned by Breeze and Wilkins.

²¹ See Wolfson 2008, 25-8 on the manuscripts of the *Agricola*, and 34-42, especially 42, on the high quality of this corrector, in particular for the reading of proper names. Cf. Martin 2009, 246: «A further feature of the Carolingian quaternion of the *Agricola* remains to be noted: there are numerous marginal variant readings by a contemporary hand. These variants are of a vastly differing quality, but a number are of such excellence that they cannot reasonably be ascribed to a ninth-century copyist».

²² Woodman 2014, 284: «Wolfson ... wanted a reference to Shetland ('Tulensem portum') and hence preferred to base his argument on the marginal reading of H [otherwise known as E^{2m}]; but

the phrase *fama trux* is not idiomatic Latin». They dismiss two examples of the adjective in Tacitus quoted by Wolfson²³. But they ignore his further argument:

The introduction of *trux* eliminates the awkward syllepsis involving *secunda*: the ablative cases are causal; it was the fine weather and its previous record (cf. *Agr.* 25.2, 29.2) which allowed the fleet to pose such a threat. This was no random phrase by Tacitus; he was looking for something to balance a similar description of the *army*. The *variatio* is clear: *fama ferox exercitus*, “the army, formidable (or emboldened) through the report” (*Agr.* 27.1)²⁴.

Wolfson earlier on remarks that

Trux, meaning *ruthless, threatening, fearsome*, in conjunction with the ablative case, is relatively common in Tacitus. If it can be applied to a cohort in the *Annals*²⁵ and to a battle line in the *Histories*²⁶, it is certainly applicable to a fleet whose effect on the natives would be impressive and intimidating (*Agr.* 25.1, 25.2²⁷). *Fama trux* relates both to the past record of the fleet and to its anticipated impact on those unfamiliar with its terror, a daunting prospect in Shetland harbour²⁸.

In any case, to assert that a phrase is «not idiomatic Latin» is rather unconvincing when dealing with Tacitus (to be sure, in this case as emended), «the most difficult of Latin authors»²⁹. At this point, one may offer a slightly different rendering of the sentence: ‘At the same time the fleet, with favourable weather, and frightening because of its reputation, entered the harbour of T(h)ule.’

It may be hoped that enough has already been said to defend Wolfson’s interpretation. But it would be a pity not to add some remarks on at least parts of his Chapter 5, “Thule in Contemporary Latin Poetry”. Here he notes at the outset that Agricola’s governorship can be dated to A.D. 77-84³⁰. This is an important proviso, since the dating adopted by editors of the various poets is based on the now generally rejected view which used to assign Agricola’s term of office to the years 78-85. The im-

dispecta est et Thule at 10.4 implies that there was never a landing on the island» – this statement implies that Woodman understands Wolfson to argue for a landing on the island, which is of course not the case, see above.

²³ Breeze – Wilkins 2018, 307.

²⁴ Wolfson 2008, 42.

²⁵ *ann.* 4.47.3: *quam* (sc. *cohortem*) *Romanus... tumultu trucem... instruxerat* (‘which, menacing in its uproar, the Roman had drawn up’). By mishap Wolfson cites this as *ann.* 4.7.3; the false reference is taken over by Breeze – Wilkins 2018, 308.

²⁶ *hist.* 4.46.3: *cum... aciem telis et armis trucem... aspicerent* (‘when they were looking at a battle-line fearsome with its missiles and weapons’).

²⁷ One could add here *Agr.* 29.2: *praemissa classe quae pluribus locis praedata magnum et incertum terrorem faceret*, ‘the fleet was sent ahead in order to create general panic after having plundered in numerous places’.

²⁸ Wolfson 2008, 40 f.

²⁹ Woodman 2004, XXI: ‘No one else ever wrote Latin like Tacitus, who deserves his reputation as the most difficult of Latin authors.’

³⁰ Wolfson 2008, 47-62, citing on the date of the governorship at 47 n. 207 *inter al.* Raepsaet-Charlier 1991, 1842 ff.; Campbell 1986; Birley 2005, 77 f.; see further Wolfson’s “Appendix 3, The Coinage of Titus and Agricola’s Caledonian Campaign of AD 79”, 78-87.

proved chronology supports the argument that the third campaign, datable to A.D. 79, had achieved important successes before the death of Vespasian on 24th or 25th June of that year. Wolfson makes a good case for the view that a passage in the prologue to Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, written very shortly before Vespasian's death, and crediting the old emperor with opening up 'the Caledonian Ocean', refers in fact to Agricola's campaign of that year, which reached the Tay (*Agr.* 22.1)³¹. Long after Vespasian's death, but soon after Tacitus wrote the *Agricola*, Silius Italicus in his *Punica*, praising the 'warrior family reared on the berry that grows in the Sabine land', *bellatrix gens bacifero nutrita Sabino*, affirms that 'the father [Vespasian] shall present to this [family] unknown Thule for conquest', *huic pater ignotam donabit vincere Thylen* (3.596 f.)³².

Statius, in his poem in honour of Domitian's *ab epistulis* Abascantus, portrays that official dealing with despatches from all four quarters:

*quae laurus ab Arcto,
quid vagus Euphrates, quid ripa binominis Histri,
quid Rheni vexilla ferant, quantum ultimus orbis
cesserit et refugo circumsona gurgite Thule
(omnia nam laetas pila attollentia frondes
nullaque famosa signatur lancea penna)*

He had to enquire 'what laurelled message comes from the North, what news the wandering Euphrates, the banks of the Ister with two names, the standards of the Rhine, bring, how much the end of the world has surrendered, and Thule, round which the ebbing floodtide roars – for every spear raises joyful leaves and no lance is marked with the ill-famed feather' (*silv.* 5.1.88-93)³³. In the next poem in the *Silvae*, the *Laudes Crispini Vetti Bolani filii*, 'Praises of Crispinus the son of Vettius Bolanus' (5.2), Statius devotes a lengthy section (5.2.140-9) to the British governorship of Bolanus, one of Agricola's predecessors, under whom Agricola had served as legionary legate and whom Tacitus portrayed rather negatively (*Agr.* 8.1, 16.5; cf. *hist.* 2.97.1). There is room for discussion about the facts behind that passage in Statius: Bolanus may indeed have done some campaigning in the north,

³¹ Wolfson 2008, 56-62, esp. 56, citing Val. 1.8-10: *tuque o, pelagi cui maior aperti | fama, Caledonius postquam tua carbasa vexit | Oceanus Phrygios prius indignatus Iulos*, 'And you, whose glory is greater for having opened up the sea, after the Caledonian ocean had borne your sails, the ocean which had previously raged against the Phrygian Iuli'. For literature on the controversial dating of Valerius Flaccus' Prologue see Scaffai 1994, 2368-73; Liberman 1997, XVIII-XXIII. D'Espèrey 1986, 3073 justifiably writes that Valerius Flaccus was not a 'poète courtisan'.

³² Wolfson 2008, 54 f. convincingly favours the reading *huic* found in three manuscripts of Silius, **F.**, **G.** and **Ξ**, against *hinc* in modern editions. See the stemma in Delz 1987, which indicates that these MSS have at least as much validity as the rest.

³³ Gibson 2006, 111 on *Silvae* 5.1.91 explains *cesserit* by «Agricola's victory at Mons Graupius... The reference to Thule in the next line evokes Agricola's circumnavigation in AD 84». On the circumnavigation – datable to A.D. 83 rather than 84 – see at n. 30 above. (Gibson 2006, 8, following Courtney, prints a lacuna of one line between *frondes* and *nullaque*, but comments, 112, that '[i]f there is a break in the text, the related subject matter of 92-3 indicates that it cannot be long.')

even as far as the fringes of Caledonia³⁴. But earlier in the poem Statius makes a claim that is manifestly outrageous: *tu disce patrem, quantusque negatam | fluctibus occiduis fessoque Hyperione Thulen | intrarit mandata ferens*, ‘you should learn from your father, how great he was, as, bearing his orders, he entered Thule that had been denied by the western waves and weary Hyperion’ (2.54-6)³⁵. Wolfson’s comments on this passage deserve quotation³⁶:

The reference to weary Hyperion (the sun) is clearly an echo of Pytheas, where Thule is described as the place where the sun has its bed.³⁷ But in composing these lines Statius clearly had in mind what he had written earlier (5.1.88-89) about the implied surrender of Caledonia in AD 83. Note the similarity: *quantus/quantum*, verb moods, *intrarit/cesserit*, synonyms, *fluctibus/gurgite* and the position and inaccessibility of *Thulen/Thule*. By regressing a quarter of a century to the governorship of Bolanus he produces a stanza which is highly dubious and at the same time disturbing. The curious similarity, between Bolanus entering Thule on Vespasian’s instructions, and Agricola’s fleet reaching Thule on Domitian’s instructions, raises the question of major distortion. Statius composed this poem c. AD 95, a decade after official reports of Agricola’s final campaign were in the public domain. Tacitus’ *hactenus iussum* (‘their orders took them this far’) clearly represents the official *mandata* and may well echo the basis of such a military report which Statius could have used and manipulated for his own ends.

A final reference may be made to another poet. Juvenal, without naming Thule, clearly alludes to it: ‘our arms we have indeed pushed beyond the shores of Ireland and the recently captured Orkneys and the Britons satisfied with the shortest night’, *arma quidem ultra | litora Iuvernæ promovimus et modo captas | Orcadas ac minima contentos nocte Britannos* (2.159-61). In a later satire he jokes that ‘Thule is talking about hiring a rhetoric-teacher’, *de conducendo loquitur iam rhetore Thyle* (15.112).

Wolfson plausibly notes that «Agricola’s expedition to Shetland may have taken its origin from his earlier years, when... as a young student at... Massilia (*Agr.* 4.2), the home town of Pytheas, he would have imbibed not only traditional philosophy, but also the seafaring aura of the town, the four hundred years of Pytheas’ legacy and the works of Pytheas, the “Massaliot philosopher”, as Pytheas was called by the astronomer Cleomedes»³⁸. It is worth registering here the presence in Britain during Agricola’s governorship of the Greek grammarian, Demetrius of Tarsus. Plutarch portrays him participating in his dialogue on the decline of oracles, of which the dramatic date is just before the Pythian festival of A.D. 83-84:

ὁ δὲ Δημήτριος ἔφη τῶν περὶ τὴν Βρεττανίαν νήσων εἶναι πολλὰς ἐρήμους σποράδας, ὧν ἑνίας δαιμόνων καὶ ἡρώων ὀνομάζεσθαι· πλεῦσαι δὲ αὐτὸς ἱστορίας καὶ θεὰς ἕνεκα πομπῇ τοῦ βασιλέως εἰς τὴν ἔγγιστα κειμένην τῶν ἐρήμων, ἔχουσιν οὐ πολλοὺς

³⁴ Cf. e.g. Birley 2005, 60 f.

³⁵ Gibson 2006, 209-11, discusses his version of the text, which Wolfson 2008, 89 f., n. 425, follows with reservations. But Gibson avoids comment on the content, apart from describing it as «hyperbole».

³⁶ Wolfson 2008, 90 (omitting most of his detailed annotation).

³⁷ This is derived from Gem. *Calend.* 6. See Wolfson 2008, 90 n. 426: «Geminus (citing Pytheas) 6, Fr. 8, ultimately derived from Homer (*Od.* 1.45)». Cf. Breeze – Wilkins 2018, 304 at (d).

³⁸ Wolfson 2008, 31, citing at n. 107 Cleom. *Cael.* 1.4.208-10 [*De motu circ.* I 7, p. 68, 21 Ziegler].

ἐποικοῦντας ἱεροὺς δὲ καὶ ἀσύλους πάντας ὑπὸ τῶν Βρεττανῶν ὄντας.

Demetrius said that of the islands around Britain many were deserted and scattered, of which some were named after divinities or heroes. He himself, by the emperor's order, had for the purpose of research and observation sailed to the one that was the nearest to the deserted islands; it had not many inhabitants, but they were regarded as holy and inviolate, all of them, by the Britons³⁹.

It would be nice to infer that Demetrius had in the first instance been brought to Britain by Agricola to teach the Britons some Greek. This would have been an aspect of what Tacitus claims was done in Agricola's second winter: *iam vero principum filios liberalibus artibus erudire* (Agr. 21.2). Demetrius could have learned enough of the British language to converse with the holy men, whose stories about their doctrines he passed on to Plutarch's circle. Two silvered bronze plates found at York (Eboracum) record dedications that were surely made by this man: 'To the gods of the governor's headquarters Scrib(onius) Demetrius' (θεοῖς τοῖς τοῦ ἡγεμονικοῦ πραιτωρίου Σκριβ(όνιος) Δημήτριος) and 'To Ocean and Tethys Demetrius' (Ὠκεανῶι καὶ Τηθύι Δημήτριο[ς])⁴⁰.

Although the dedication may suggest that Demetrius was a member of Agricola's staff, it is striking that as reported by Plutarch he states that he was 'sent by the Emperor' to investigate the island, not of course identified. Numerous names have been proposed, from the Scillies to Anglesey to the Hebrides, but it could have been one of the Orkneys. Agricola himself may have specified the detailed destination for Demetrius' venture, but πομπῇ τοῦ βασιλέως surely indicates that Domitian had ordered the drive to the far north – and after all, the last three words of the statement *dispecta est et Thule, quia hactenus iussum* (Agr. 10.4) say exactly that⁴¹.

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³⁹ Plut. *mor.* 419E, Demetrius' arrival at Delphi en route from Britain to his home at Tarsus is reported at 410A.

⁴⁰ *RIB* 662 f. The identity of the dedicator with Plutarch's visitor has sometimes been denied on the grounds that York was not the governor's 'headquarters' or chief residence. But as noted by Haensch 1997, 127 f. (who accepts the identity), «es ist immer noch damit zu rechnen, daß nur ein für kurze Zeit – z.B. einen Winter – benutztes Praetorium gemeint war». Agricola's initiative might be credited with leading to proficiency in Greek as well as Latin to *principum filiae* as well as *fili*: *Claudia caeruleis cum sit Rufina Britannis | edita, quam Latiae pectora gentis habet, | quale decus formae. Romanam credere matres | Italides possunt, Atthides esse suam* (Mart. 11.53.1-4). Equally, Juvenal's joking remark, quoted above, was perhaps not so far off the mark: if a γραμματικός was at work in the 80s and even penetrated to an offshore island, perhaps in the Orkneys (cf. next note), a *rhetor* might not be far behind.

⁴¹ Cf. Wolfson 2008, 31, 51 with n. 236. It may be added, as a postscript, that while Wolfson 2008, 30 f. approves the translation of *dispecta est Thule* in Agr. 10.4, by Birley 1999, 9, «was thoroughly viewed», Birley 1999, 71, in his note on the passage followed the view of Rivet and Smith. Subsequent familiarity with Wolfson 2002 and then Wolfson 2008 led to a conversion, see n. 4 above.

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Abstract: A detailed discussion of Agricola's navy by S. Wolfson published in 2008 (and originally online in 2002) was the object of robust criticism in *Britannia* 49, criticism which it is shown here to be at least in part unfounded. Support for the arguments and textual emendations by Wolfson is cited and his interpretation of the significance of Thule in Silver Age Latin poetry discussed.

Keywords: Thule, Pytheas, Agricola, Tacitus, Silver Age poetry.

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