

PYTHEAS

The Greek explorer Pytheas is the first to have written of Thule, doing so in his now lost work, *On the Ocean*, after his travels between 330 BC and 320 BC. He was sent out by the Greek city of Massalia to see where their trade-goods were coming from. Descriptions of some of his discoveries have survived in the works of later authors.

Polybius in his *Histories* (c. 140 BC) cites Pytheas as one "who has led many people into error by saying that he traversed the whole of Britain on foot and telling us also about Thule, those regions in which there was no longer any proper land nor sea nor air, but a sort of mixture of all three of the consistency of a jellyfish in which one can neither walk nor sail, holding everything together, so to speak."

Strabo in his *Geography* (c. 30) notes that Pytheas says it "is a six days' sail north of Britain, and is near the frozen sea."

Now Pytheas of Massilia tells us that Thule, the most northerly of the Britannic Islands, is farthest north, and that there the circle of the summer tropic is the same as the Arctic Circle. But from the other writers I learn nothing on the subject - neither that there exists a certain island by the name of Thule, nor whether the northern regions are inhabitable up to the point where the summer tropic becomes the Arctic Circle.

Nearly a half century later, in 77, Pliny the Elder published his *Natural History* in which he also cites Pytheas' claim that Thule is a six-day sail north of Britain. Then he writes: "The farthest of all, which are known and spoke of, is Thule; in which there be no nights at all, as we have declared, about mid-summer, namely when the Sun passes through the sign Cancer; and contrariwise no days in mid-winter: and each of these times they suppose, do last six months, all day, or all night."

Finally, in refining the island's location, he places it along the most northerly parallel of those he describes, writing: "Last of all is the Scythian parallel, from the Rhiphean hills into Thule: wherein (as we said) it is day and night continually by turns (for six months)."