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Pliny and the classical tradition of the description of Britain

Аннотация. Статья посвящена описанию Британии в «Естественной истории» Плиния Старшего. Прослеживаются источники, которыми пользовался Плиний, а также место, которого это описание занимает в античной географической традиции. Римский автор имел возможность опереться на сочинения целого ряда своих предшественников, начиная с Пифея из Массалии, предположительно совершившего в IV в. до н. э. плавание на север вдоль западного побережья Европы. В трудах географов эллинистического (Посидоний, Гиппарх) и римского (Страбон, Диодор Сицилийский) времени сложился достаточно устойчивый набор элементов характеристики Британских островов. Хотя ко времени, когда Плиний писал свой труд, Британия уже стала провинцией Римской империи, в «Естественной истории» использована главным образом предшествующая ученая традиция, а не свидетельства очевидцев. Плиний не успел включить в свой труд материалы, полученные экспедицией Марка Випсания Агриппы. Образ Британии, сложившийся на основании трудов Плиния и др. римских и греческих авторов, обладал рядом устойчивых, повторяющихся характеристик: это остров в Океане, находящийся на самом краю ойкумены, далекий и труднодоступный, но при этом плодородный и обладающий природными богатствами. Поскольку Океан в античной географии обозначал водное пространство, опоясывающее весь обитаемый мир, Британия и соседние с ней острова иногда рассматривались, как «другой мир» (alter orbis). Для римских авторов завоевание Британии было закономерным завершением процесса распространения власти Вечного Города до самых отдаленных пределов мира. Заключительная часть статьи посвящена анализу влияния, оказанного сочинением Плиния на средневековые представления о географии Британских островов. Сделан вывод, что по крайней мере некоторые авторы XII–XIII вв. (включая знаменитого английского хрониста Матвея Парижского) обращались за информацией непосредственно к «Естественной истории», а в некоторых случаях сопоставляли друг с другом различные источники, отмечая расхождения между ними.

Ключевые слова: Британия, Англия, античная география, географические представления, Плиний, Орозий, Гильда, Беда Достопочтенный, Матвей Парижский

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Pliny and the classical tradition of the description of Britain

Abstract. The paper deals with the description of Britain in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder. The author traces the sources of Pliny and the place of his description in the classical geographical tradition. The Roman author had the opportunity to rely on a number of predecessors, starting with the semi-legendary Pitheas of Massalia (fourth century BCE) who allegedly navigated to the north along the western coast of Europe. Though by the time Pliny wrote Britain had already been a Roman province, the author of the *Natural History* mostly uses scholarly tradition rather than eyewitness accounts. The *Natural History* became the basis for most of the Late Antique and medieval descriptions of Britain (by Solinus, Orosius, Gildas, Bede etc.). It included several of the usual topoi: Britain is an island in the Ocean, it is situated at the edge of the known world, it is remote and hard to reach, but is also fertile and rich in nature resources. For Roman authors, the conquest of Britain was a natural end to the spread of the power of the Eternal City to the remotest limits of the world. The last part of the article is devoted to an analysis of Plinian influences on medieval views on the geography of Britain. It is demonstrated that at least some 12th and 13th-century writers (including the chronicler Matthew Paris) drew information directly from *Natural History* and sometimes compared various sources, noting their discrepancy.

Keywords: Britain, England, classical geography, geographical imagination, Pliny, Orosius, Gildas, Bede the Venerable, Matthew Paris

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Towards the beginning of the 1st century CE, both Hellenistic and Roman geographers gathered a considerable amount of information concerning the British Isles. It came mostly through trade expeditions by Carthaginian and Greek sailors. Probably the earliest name of the island in the classical tradition was "Albion" (*insula Albionum* in the 4th-century CE poem *De ora maritima* of Rufus Sextus Avienus, thought to be based on a lost Massalian periple of 6th or 5th century BCE) [Ekwall 1930: 149–150].

The spread of the name "Britannia" among Greek and later Roman authors is traditionally associated with the semi-legendary sailor Pitheas of Massalia (c. 325 BCE), who is said to have navigated to the north along the western coast of Europe. The work of Pytheas, supposedly called "On the Ocean", does not survive, and might be only partially restored through references and quotations from later authors. The Greek historian Polybius (Polyb. III.57.3) was the first to write about the "British Isles" (Βρεττανικόν νήσων), noting them as an important source of tin in the 2nd century BCE. He too mentioned Pytheas and doubted his authenticity (Polyb. 3.57.2; 34.5.2). The British Isles had been described by the greatest Hellenistic geographers of the 2nd–1st centuries BCE — Posidonius and Hipparchus, but since their writings also have survived only in a fragmentary condition, we have to rely on later, but belonging to the same tradition, testimonies of Diodorus of Sicily (1st century BCE) and Strabo (early 1st century CE).

Diodorus writes that the island of Britain (Πρεττανικὴ):

> is triangular in shape, very much as is Sicily, but its sides are not equal. This island stretches obliquely along the coast of Europe, and the point where it is least distant from the mainland, we are told, is the promontory which men call Cantium, and this is about one hundred stades from the land, at the place where the sea has its outlet, whereas the second promontory, known as Belerium, is said to be a voyage of four days from the mainland, and the last, writers tell us, extends out into the open sea and is named Orca. Of the sides of Britain the shortest, which extends along Europe, is seven thousand five hundred stades, the second, from the Strait to the (northern) tip, is fifteen thousand stades, and the last is twenty thousand stades, so that the entire circuit of the island amounts to forty-two thousand five hundred stades (Diod. V.21.3–4, trans. C. H. Oldfather).

The description by Strabo is rather similar:

> Britain is triangular in shape; and its longest side stretches parallel to Celtica, neither exceeding nor falling short of the length of Celtica; for each of the two lengths is about four thousand three hundred — or four hundred — stadia: the Celtic length that extends from the outlets of the Rhenus as far as those northern ends of the Pyrenees that are near Aquitania, as also the length that extends from Cantium (which is directly opposite the outlets of the Rhenus), the most easterly point of Britain, as far as that westerly end of the island which lies opposite the Aquitanian Pyrenees. This, of course, is the shortest distance from the Pyrenees to the Rhenus, since, as I have already said, the greatest distance is as much as five thousand stadia; yet it is reasonable to suppose that

> there is a convergence from the parallel position which the river and the mountains occupy with reference to each other, since at the ends where they approach the ocean there is a curve in both of them (Strab. IV.5.1, trans. H. L. Jones).

Among the Roman writers, the first to give an extended description of Britain was Julius Cesar, who launched two military expeditions on the island from Gaul (55–54 BCE). However, analysis has demonstrated that Cesar's text was largely based not on first-hand experience but on Hellenistic stock learned tradition [Krebs 2018: 103–112]:

> *Insula natura triquetra, cuius unum latus est contra Galliam. Huius lateris alter angulus, qui est ad Cantium, quo fere omnes ex Gallia naves appelluntur, ad orientem solem, inferior ad meridiem spectat. Hoc pertinet circiter mila passuum quingenta. Alterum vergit ad Hispaniam atque occidentem solem; qua ex parte est Hibernia, dimidio minor, ut aestimatur, quam Britannia, sed pari spatio transmissus atque ex Gallia est in Britanniam. In hoc medio cursu est insula, quae appellatur Mona: complures praeterea minores subiectae insulae existimantur, de quibus insulis nonnulli scripserunt dies continuos triginta sub bruma esse noctem. Nos nihil de eo percontationibus reperiebamus, nisi certis ex aqua mensuris breviores esse quam in continenti noctes videbamus. Huius est longitudo lateris, ut fert illorum opinio, septingentorum milium. Tertium est contra septentriones; cui parti nulla est obiecta terra, sed eius angulus lateris maxime ad Germaniam spectat. Hoc milia passuum octingenta in longitudinem esse existimatur. Ita omnis insula est in circuitu vicies centum milium passuum* (The island is triangular in form; one of its sides lies opposite Gaul. One angle of this side, which is in Kent, where almost all the ships from Gaul arrive, faces east; the lower angle looks to the south. This side extends for about five hundred miles. The second side protracts towards Spain and the west, in which part lies Ireland, smaller by one-half, as they think, than Britain. However, the sea-passage is of equal length to that from Gaul to Britain. In the middle of the way is an island called Mona; besides it, several smaller islands are supposed to lie close to land. About those islands, some have written that at the time of winter solstice night there lasts for thirty whole days. We could discover nothing about that matter in our inquiries; however, by exact measurements with water, we observed the nights to be shorter than on the continent. The length of this side, as they believe, is seven hundred miles. The third side extends to the north, and has no land opposite it; but the angle of that side faces on the whole Germany. The side is believed to be eight hundred miles long. Thus, the circumference of the whole island is two thousand miles — *De bello Gallico* V.13).

In the 1st century CE, in the reign of Claudius (41–54), most of the island was conquered by the Romans, and the province *Britannia* was established. Under the Roman governor Gnaeus Julius Agricola (c. 78–85), the Roman fleet allegedly made the first circumnavigation of the whole island, which not only gave new valuable geographical information, but also delivered a clear symbolic message, consolidat-

ing Roman power over Britain. But that remarkable expedition unfortunately took place too late for Pliny the Elder, who had to base the description of Britain in his *Natural History* (*Nat. Hist*. IV.16.102) chiefly on stock material derived from Greek authors (Pytheas and Isidore of Charax), as well as on the geographical treatise of Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (1st century BCE), now lost. Pliny also tried to reconcile the contradictory information in his sources, stating that Albion was the former name of the island, and Britain — the modern one:

> *Ex adverso huius situs Britannia insula, clara Graecis nostrisque monimentis, inter septentrionem et occidentem iacet, Germaniae, Galliae, Hispaniae, multo maximis Europae partibus, magno intervallo adversa. Albion ipsi nomen fuit, cum Britanniae vocarentur omnes de quibus mox paulo dicemus. haec abest a Gesoriaco Morinorum gentis litore proximo traiectu L. circuitu patere |XXXXVIII|·LXXV Pytheas et Isidorus tradunt, XXX prope iam annis notitiam eius Romanis armis non ultra vicinitatem silvae Calidoniae propagantibus. Agrippa longitudinem DCCC esse, latitudinem CCC credit, eandem Hiberniae, sed longitudinem CC minorem* (Opposite to this region lies the island of Britain, famous both in the records of the Greeks and in our own. It lies to the north-west, facing, across a great distance, Germany, Gaul and Spain, which constitute bigger parts of Europe. Its name was of old Albion, while all the islands about which we shall soon briefly speak were called the Britains. It is situated on the shortest distance of 50 miles from Gesoriacum on the coast of the Morini. Pytheas and Isidore report that its circumference is 4875 miles. About thirty the Roman army achieved its exploration, but only to a point not far from the Caledonian Forest. Agrippa believes the length of the island to be 800 miles and its breadth 300, and the breadth of Hibernia the same but its length 200 miles less).

Pliny's description synthesized previous tradition and, in turn, became a basis for most of the Late Antique and medieval descriptions. It included several standard *topoi*: Britain is an island in the Ocean, it is situated at the edge of known world, it is remote and hard to reach, but it also is fertile and rich in natural resources. Since the Ocean in ancient geography denoted the water space encircling the entire inhabited world, Britain and its neighboring islands were sometimes regarded as "another world" (*alter orbis*). For the Roman authors, the conquest of Britain was a natural end to the spread of the power of the Eternal City to the remotest limits of the world. A 4th-century Christian author, known as Pseudo-Hegesippus, in his Latin translation of Joseph Flavius' *The Jewish War* [Ussani 1932: 150], expresses that view, for example.

The lasting influence of Plinian description of Britain is easily recognized in later influential and popular works by Gaius Julius Solinus (early 3rd century CE?) and Orosius (early 5th century CE).

Solinus has:

> *Finis erat orbis ora Gallici litoris, nisi Britannia insula non qualibet amplitudine nomen pæne orbis alterius mereretur: octingenta enim et amplius millia passuum longa detinet, ita ut eam in Calidonicum usque angulum metiamur. In quo recessu Vlixem Calidoniae appulsum manife-*

> *stat ara Graecis litteris scripta* [*votum*] (The shore of Gaul was the end of the world, except the island of Britain, which for not insignificant size almost deserves the name of another world. It stretches for eight hundred and even more miles in length, as far as we were able to measure it to the Caledonian angle. It is obvious that Ulysses once reached Caledonia, as there are in that faraway place an altar inscribed with Greek letters — Solin. *Coll. rer. memor*. XXII.1).

Orosius is more specific:

> *Britannia oceani insula per longum in boream extenditur; a meridie Gallias habet. cuius proximum litus transmeantibus ciuitas aperit, quae dicitur Rutupi portus; unde haud procul a Morinis in austro positos Menapos Batauosque prospectat. haec insula habet in longo milia passuum DCCC, in lato milia CC. A tergo autem, unde oceano infinito patet, Orcadas insulas habet, quarum XX desertae sunt, XIII coluntur* (Britain is an island in the ocean that extends far into north. To the south it has Gaul. Those, who cross the sea have as the nearest landing place on its shore a city called the Port of Rutupi. It is situated not far from the Morini and looks upon the Menapi and the Batavi in the south. The island has eight hundred miles in length and two hundred miles in breadth. From its rear end, where the infinite ocean stretches, it has the Orkney islands, of which twenty are uninhabited and thirteen are peopled — Oros. *Hist. adv*. I.1.76–78).

Note, however, that Orosius (probably due to a scribal mistake at some stage of transmission) gives the breadth of the island as 200 miles vs. 300 miles in Pliny.

Apparently, during the period of Roman dominion, there occurred the forging of a collective identity of at least a part of the local population. They began to regard themselves as "Britons" (*Brittones*). The most important text where this "British" identity found an expression is "De Excidio Britanniae" by a cleric called Gildas the Wise. The genre and date of his work remain highly controversial; according to different estimates, it was written between the late 5th century and the middle of the 6th century CE. The description of Britain, placed by Gildas at the beginning of the work, follows the above-mentioned ancient tradition, but at the same time, it significantly enhances the traits characteristic of the classical *topos* of the "beautiful place" (*locus amoenus*) and of the biblical image of the "Promised Land":

> *Britannia insula in extremo ferme orbis limite circium occidentemque versus, divina, ut dicitur, statera terrae totius ponderatrice librata ab Africo boriali propensius tensa axi, octingentorum in longo millium, ducentorum in lato spatium, exceptis diversorum prolixioribus promontoriorum tractibus, quae arcuatis oceani sinibus ambiuntur, tenens, cuius diffusiore et, ut ita dicam, intransmeabili undique circulo absque meridianae freto plagae quo ad Galliam Belgicam navigatur, vallata, duorum ostiis nobilium Tamesis ac Sabrinae fluminum veluti brachiis, per quae eidem olim transmarinae deliciae ratibus vehebantur, aliorumque minorum meliorata, bis denis bisque quaternis civitatibus ac nonnullis castellis, murorum turrium serratarum portarum domorum, quarum culmina minaci proceritate porrecta in edito forti compage pangebantur, muni-*

tionibus non improbabiliter instructis decorata; campis late pansis collibusque amoeno situ locatis, praepollenti culturae aptis, montibus alternandis animalium pastibus maxime convenientibus, quorum diversorum colorum flores humanis gressibus pulsati non indecentem ceu picturam eisdem imprimebant, electa veluti sponsa monilibus diversis ornata, fontibus lucidis, crebris undis niveas veluti glareas pellentibus, pernitidisque rivis leni murmure serpentibus ipsorumque in ripis accubantibus suavis soporis pignus praetendentibus, et lacubus frigidum aquae torrentem vivae exundantibus irrigua (Britain, an island almost at the extreme edge of the [earth] circle, is aligned from the south-west in the direction of the west and north-west-west with divine, as they say, scales that weigh the whole world, taking a place closer to the north pole. It takes a length of eight hundred miles, a width of two hundred, not counting the various capes with long braids that are washed by the curved bends of the ocean. It is fenced by this very extensive and, I will even say, impassable circle from everywhere, with the exception of the channel at the southern coast, which floats to the Belgian Gaul. It is irrigated by the mouths of two noble rivers – Thames and Severn, as if by the sleeves through which the little ships once brought overseas luxury goods, as well as other, smaller [rivers]. It is decorated with twice ten and twice four cities, and many fortifications, and useful structures – walls, battlements, gates of houses, the roof skates of which formidable cliffs stretched upwards, fastened with a powerful brace. It is endowed with wide-spread fields and picturesque hills, suitable for powerful agriculture, interspersed with mountains, highly suitable for pasturing animals; their flowers are multicolored when they are swayed by human steps, as if gracefully imprinted the same picture as a chosen bride, gifted with various ornaments; bright springs with frequent streams playing pebbles, white as snow, and brightly shining rivers snaking languid babble and giving those who lay down on their banks, the guarantee of a sweet dream; washed and cold lakes, beating over the edge with a stream of living water) [Winterbotton 1978: 89–90].

This image corresponded to the task undertaken by Gildas, who wished to represent the Britons as a "new Israel", a chosen people who violated the covenant with God and now must bring repentance for the committed sins. Gildas' book, as well as the works of Roman authors, in particular Pliny and Orosius, were in circulation in the 7th–8th centuries among educated Anglo-Saxons, mostly ecclesiastics. Those books were studied in a school founded in Canterbury by Archbishop Theodore and Abbot Hadrian, and they were well-known to Bede the Venerable. His description of Britain reveals obvious traces of borrowings from Pliny, Orosius, and Gildas:

Brittania Oceani insula, cui quondam Albion nomen fuit, inter septentrionem et occidentem locata est, Germaniae, Galliae, Hispaniae, maximis Europae partibus, multo interuallo aduersa. Quae per milia passuum DCCC in Boream longa, latitudinis habet milia CC, exceptis dumtaxat prolixioribus diuersorum promontoriorum tractibus, quibus efficitur, ut circuitus eius quadragies octies LXXV milia conpleat. Habet a meridie Galliam Belgicam, cuius proximum litus transmeantibus aperit ciuitas, quae dicitur Rutubi portus, a gente Anglorum nunc corrupte Reptacæstir

uocata, interposito mari a Gessoriaco Morynorum gentis litore proximo, traiectu milium L, siue, ut quidam scripsere, stadiorum CCCCL. A tergo autem, unde Oceano infinito patet, Orcadas insulas habet. Opima frugibus atque arboribus insula, et alendis apta pecoribus ac iumentis; uineas etiam quibusdam in locis germinans; sed et auium ferax terra marique generis diuersi; fluuiis quoque multum piscosis ac fontibus praeclara copiosis, et quidem praecipue issicio abundat, et anguilla. Capiuntur autem saepissime et uituli marini, et delphines, nec non et balenae; exceptis uariorum generibus concyliorum; in quibus sunt et musculae, quibus inclusam saepe margaritam omnis quidem coloris optimam inueniunt, id est et rubicundi, et purpurei, et iacintini, et prasini, sed maxime candidi. Sunt et cocleae satis superque abundantes, quibus tinctura coccinei coloris conficitur, cuius rubor pulcherrimus nullo umquam solis ardore, nulla ualet pluuiarum iniuria pallescere; sed quo uetustior, eo solet esse uenustior. Habet fontes salinarum, habet et fontes calidos, et ex eis fluuios balnearum calidarum omni aetati et sexui per distincta loca iuxta suum cuique modum accommodos. Aqua enim, ut sanctus Basilius dicit, feruidam qualitatem recipit, cum per certa quaedam metalla transcurrit, et fit non solum calida, sed et ardens. Quae etiam uenis metallorum, aeris, ferri, et plumbi, et argenti, fecunda, gignit et lapidem gagatem plurimum optimumque; est autem nigrogemmeus, et ardens igni admotus, incensus serpentes fugat, adtritu calefactus adplicita detinet, aeque ut sucinum. Erat et ciuitatibus quondam XX et VIII nobilissimis insignita, praeter castella innumera, quae et ipsa muris turribus, portis, ac seris erant instructa firmissimis (Britain, whose former name was Albion, is an island of the ocean. It lies to the north-west, opposite to main parts of Europe, such as Germany, Gaul, and Spain, however at a great distance from them. It extends 800 miles to the north; its breadth is 200 miles broad, if we do not take into account various promontories that stretch out further. When counting them, the whole circuit of the island is 4,875 miles. To the south, it has Belgic Gaul. For those, who travel by sea, the closest port to that shore is the city called Rutubi Portus, which the English now corruptly call Reptacaestir. It is situated opposite the closest place in the land of the Morini, called Gessoriacum, at the distance of fifty miles or, as some writers say, 450 stadia. Behind the island, where it lies open to the immense ocean, are the Orkney Islands. The island is rich in crops and in trees, and has good pastureland for cattle and livestock. Some regions of it produce vine as well, and it is abundant of fowl of various kinds. It is remarkable for its rivers, which are rich in fish, particularly salmon and eels, and for copious springs. There are often captures seals, dolphins, and even whales. Besides these, there are various kinds of shellfish, including mussels, and enclosed in these they often find excellent pearls of various colours, red and purple, violet and green, but mostly white. There is also a great plenitude of whelks, from which a scarlet-coloured dye is produced, a most beautiful red, which neither fades through the heat of the sun nor damage of the rain; but the older it is the more beautiful it gets. There are in this land salt springs and warm springs and from the latter there flow streams, which make hot baths, suitable for all ages and both sexes, in separate places and according to the needs of each. That happens because, as St. Basil says, the water acquires the quality of heat when it

> passes through certain metals, so that it not only becomes warm but even scorching hot. The land also possesses rich veins of metal, copper, iron, lead, and silver. It gives birth to a great deal of excellent jet, which is shiny black and burns when one puts it into the fire. And, when kindled, it drives away serpents. If one rubs it, it gets warm and attracts whatever is applied to it, just as amber does. Once this country was famous for its twenty-eight noble cities as well as innumerable fortified places equally well protected by the strongest of walls and towers, gates and hasps — Bed. *Hist. eccl*. I.1).

It was Bede's description of Britain that became the basis for all subsequent Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman tradition. The Jarrow monk, following Gildas, gives Britain certain features of the Promised Land, but does this, of course, for his own purposes, trying to present as a God-chosen people not Britons who, from his point of view, were unworthy to own such a fertile country, but the new conquerors — the English (*Angli*). Bede shared the ancient idea that Britain is situated on the edge of the world or in its "corner" (*in extremo mundi angulo* — perhaps a play of words, built on the consonance of the Latin word for "corner", *angulus*, and the ethnonym *Angli*). The notion that Britain is situated in the corner of the oecumene and is a sort of "another world" is reflected in the so-called "Cotton mappa mundi" (preserved in a manuscript from the first half of the 11th century, now London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v, fol. 56v). There the outlines of Britain and Ireland, as if on a reduced scale, repeat the outlines of the rest of the inhabited world. It is noteworthy, however, that the geographical nomenclature on this map does not reveal obvious parallels with the ancient authors (with the possible exception of the Old English translation of the *History* of Orosius) or with Gildas and Bede [Foys 2004].

As the successors of King Alfred in the 10th century significantly expanded their realm thanks to a series of military and diplomatic victories, various expressions appeared in their titles, often deliberately archaic, denoting power over the whole island: *rex totius Britanniae*, *totius Brittanni basileus*, *monarchus Brittannum*, *totius Albionis imperator* [Molyneaux 2011]. Parallel to this, the Celtic (British) population in the territory of modern Wales and Cumberland has retained the idea of Britain as a geographical and political community, the power over which the Saxons have taken from the Britons. The most aggressive expression of such anti-Anglo-Saxon sentiments is found in the poem *The Prophecy of Britain* (*Armes Prydein*), written in the 10th century and preserved in a 14th century manuscript. Its author calls on compatriots to unite and expel from the island the "Saxons" (*Saesson*). For him, the extreme points of Britain were the Orkney Islands (*Ynys Weir*) in the North and Sandwich in Kent (*Aber Santwic*) in the South [Breeze 2011]. The idea of the "monarchy of Britain" (*Unbeinyaeth Prydein*) was also a distinct feature of the later medieval Welsh literary tradition, including the collections of laws and "antiquarian" texts, such as *Enwau Ynys Prydain* and the *Triads of the Isle of Britain* (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein*) [Owen 2000: 229–232].

At the same time, in the last decades of the 10th century a new geographical concept arose among the Anglo-Saxon elites — "England" (*Engla lond* in texts in Old English, *Anglia* in Latin ones). After the Norman Conquest of 1066, the notion of "England" acquired a certain duality, as it could be used both in a broad sense (the new name of the entire island of Britain) and in a narrow one, as the core of

royal possessions, with fairly developed institutes of local government (counties and hundreds), judicial bodies and system of tax-collection. A good illustration of this duality, as well as of the vitality of the classical (ultimately Plinian) geographical tradition, is found in a brief text that contains a description of the size of the island, as well as lists of English counties and church dioceses. It is preserved in one version in Old English [Morris 1872: 145–146] and in two independent Latin translations. One of these is preserved in a single late 12th century manuscript, probably from Durham [Hodgson Hinde 1868: 220–222]. The second translation (hereafter — version R) has survived in quite a number of manuscripts, but has not been specifically studied and remains unpublished. Its earliest copy is a mid-12thcentury manuscript from East Midlands (Cambridge University Library, MS. Mm.5.29), but the version closest to the original might be found in an early 13th century miscellany from St. Albans (London, British Library, MS. Royal 13.D.v). Based on its contents it can be established that the original version of this treatise was written at the turn of the 11th–12th centuries, between 1090 and 1109 (it mentions the transfer of the episcopal seat from Wells to Bath in 1090, but says nothing about the creation of the new diocese of Ely in 1109).

The treatise begins with an indication of the size of "England" (*Engle lond* in Old English version, *Anglia* in Latin):

> …eight hundred miles in length from Cape Penwith, which is fifteen miles behind the church of Michael in Cornwall, and from there to Caithness. The width of England is three hundred miles wide from the church of David to Dover [Morris 1872: 145].

It is noteworthy that this width of 300 miles here corresponds to the figure in Pliny's *Natural History*, but contradicts Orosius, Gildas and Bede, who all give 200 miles.

Could it be that an anonymous compiler deliberately changed the figure in question, relying on his knowledge of the *Natural History*? That might well be the case, since the work of Pliny (both in full and in extracts) was rather well known in 12th century Normandy and England, though the Roman author was not always considered an unquestioned, impeccable authority.

Thus, the famous historian William of Malmesbury (d. c. 1143) made a series of extracts from various parts of *Natural History* (through Book 32) in his florilegium "Polyhistor", and then commented:

> *Vellem de Plinio plura sed multa sunt et inania; plurima etiam ipse Plinius a Valerio, Valerius pene omnia que dixit sumpsit a Tullio; hic tamen non incommode posita puto, ut scias quid quisque mutuatus est ex altero* (I heavily pluck Pliny, but much of what he says is trifle. Besides, Pliny took much from Valerius, and Valerius had taken virtually everything he said from Tullius. However I do not think inappropriate to put these things here, in order that you might learn what each borrowed from the other) [Testroet Ouellette 1982: 61].

William's younger contemporary and fellow-countryman Robert of Cricklade (died c. 1171) composed, probably in the early 1130s, a shortened 9-book version

(*Defloratio*) of Pliny's *Natural History*. Robert, who dedicated his work to King Henry I (1100–1135) and later rededicated it to his grandson, Henry II (1154–1189), retained the full description of Britain, and in one of its 12th century copies (now Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 160.1 Extrav., fol. 16v) there is a marginal note, "mensuram scilicet", that demonstrates the interest of at least one medieval reader in the subject of the island's dimensions.

At least one other later medieval author noted the discrepancy in the size of Britain in various sources. On the margin of an early 13th century copy of "version R" of the above-mentioned treatise of English counties and dioceses (London, British Library, Royal 13.D.v, fol. 152r/v), the famous English chronicler Matthew Paris (died 1259) left a note: "Hic est discordia inter h[oc] et Gildam de dimensione Anglie. Respice in principio Gilde". It refers not to the original work of Gildas (Matthew seems never to read it), but to another historical text in the same manuscript (on fol. 38r), a 9th-century Welsh *Historia Brittonum*, sometimes in the Middle Ages erroneously ascribed to Gildas. Matthew Paris not only noted the discrepancy in his sources, but also clearly preferred the Plinian variant of 300 miles. On his own pioneering map of Britain (in the manuscript Cambridge Corpus Christi College, MS. 16, fol. IVv) he quotes from "version R" and gives the breadth of the island as 300 miles. One cannot be sure that he preferred that variant on the authority of Pliny himself. But we know that in the 13th century Matthew's monastery, the abbey of St. Albans, possessed a copy of *Natural History* (only Books 1–19; now Oxford, New College, MS. 274) and Matthew definitely used information from Pliny in some of his works. Thus, the Plinian tradition of descriptions of Britain probably remained quite influential in medieval England through the High Middle Ages.

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