From Pliny to Brexit: Spatial representation of the British Isles

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Abstract   This essay explores the representation of the British Isles on maps and related geographical texts over the course of the Middle Ages. Emphasizing the classical basis for representation of the islands, it examines articulations of insular identity in the debate over the date of Easter as presented in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, in Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hiberniae*, and in later medieval maps of various genres, including *mappaemundi*, regional maps, and portolan charts. It concludes with brief reflections on the contemporary crisis of insular identity manifest in the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union.

Nearly a century ago, the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski published a study of the Trobriand Islands in which he showed that the ostensibly isolated communities of the west Pacific archipelago were in fact intimately and routinely linked by trade and ritual acts of diplomacy. Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) was innovative both in method and in its findings: based on years of fieldwork and first-hand observation, Malinowski described the trading network known as the 'Kula' in rich detail. Of central importance to the study were the journeys undertaken by the islanders for the purposes of trade and the attitudes and practices that these voyages engendered. The Kula defined and connected points within a region in which trade goods moved – the 'Kula ring' – characterised by the cultivation of partnerships and the maintenance of rules of exchange (Malinowski, 1922, 498). Malinowski pointed out that the

islanders were able to make regular journeys across considerable distances, unaided by charts or compasses, relying only on their knowledge of the sea, winds, and regional geography. At the same time, however, he emphasized the high levels of anxiety that surrounded the Kula, the natives' limited knowledge of places beyond the Kula ring, the uncertainties of travel, and the need for constant magical reinforcement to guard against natural dangers (winds), malevolent forces (witchcraft), and the potential failure of the trading partnerships. Malinowski asserted:

> The main attitude of a native to other, alien groups is that of hostility and mistrust. [… A] wall of suspicion, misunderstanding and latent enmity divides [the Trobriander] from even near neighbours. The Kula breaks it through at definite geographical points, and by means of special customary transactions. But, like everything extraordinary and exceptional, this waiving of the general taboo on strangers must be justified and bridged over by magic. (Malinowski, 1922, 345)

A very different account of travel and interrelationships in the Pacific has emerged more recently in the writing of the ethnographer and satirist Epeli Hau'ofa. In his lectures, essays and creative works, Hau'ofa presents the region he prefers to call Oceania as a 'sea of islands,' a space of community and kinship in which the sea works as a highway to connect rather than to divide (Hau'ofa, 2008). In Hau'ofa's account, Pacific islanders, far from fearful, are intrepid and routine voyagers. While he tends to focus on contemporary travel and communication across large distances, he bases his articulation of Oceania on the pre-colonial history of the region. 'The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. […] Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled, unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers' (Hau'ofa, 2008, 32–33). The works of Malinowski and Hau'ofa – written some seventy years apart, and from significantly different perspectives – thus offer linked, but profoundly divergent paradigms of islands and insularity. Both emphasise 'connectivity' between island populations, but whereas in one model movement between islands reinforces and ritualizes difference, in the other it effaces boundaries and forms the bedrock of a shared culture.

Can either or both of these understandings of archipelagic space have utility in understanding medieval European, and specifically medieval British, insularity? Any answer to this question must come fringed with certain caveats. Beyond the obvious point that the medieval Atlantic and North Sea region – if it was a 'region' – is a very different space to the Pacific Ocean both in terms of size and disposition of islands and continent(s), it should not be assumed too readily that the concepts of 'island,' 'continent,' and even 'ocean' remain identical across different cultures (Gautier Dalché, 1988). In the following pages, I argue that in

the Middle Ages there were different and competing understandings of insular and archipelagic space. Consequently, the representation of Britain and surrounding islands may be understood in terms of a series of debates (or, perhaps, the same debate replayed) about the relationship of islands to each other and to the mainland. I will suggest that, in the course of these debates, in which classical geographical descriptions were appropriated by Christian authors, the intellectual, ecclesiastical and political pull of continental Europe ultimately won out over the more de-centred conception of a 'sea of islands.' But I also want to suggest that the idea of a regional network of islands, comprising the British isles but extending to Scandinavia in the north, never went away, and by the end of the Middle Ages increasing interest in the Atlantic as a site of exploration and commerce offered the possibility of a vastly expanded 'sea of islands.' Finally, I will consider the eerie (but from a historical perspective wholly predictable) way in which the debate about whether Britain is an island cut off from Europe or a part of it, out or in, has been reinscribed as the question of Britain's membership of the European Union.

Between North and West

In the Middle Ages, there were many kinds of island: to take only its literal sense, 'insula' might designate a geographical space such as Britain, Ireland, Iceland, or Taprobana, but it might also describe a peninsula such as Lindisfarne, or one of the four great land masses into which – according to classical theories, such as the ones expounded in Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (2.9) – the world was divided. The Ocean, so these same classical authorities held, encircled the entire earth, and could be distinguished from seas, such as the Mediterranean, Caspian, and Red seas; nevertheless, the nature of the Ocean, particularly in its northernmost reaches, remained a matter of uncertainty. On at least one early medieval map, an eighth-century *mappamundi* which appears in the context of Easter tables, the British Isles are directly aligned with the western Ocean. Instead of Britannia and Hibernia, the mapmaker marked the two conjoined landmasses '*oceanus occiduus*' ['western ocean'] and '*mare mortun….occeanus*' ['dead sea, ocean']; the identities of the islands remain legible, in spite of the inscription, but they are subordinated to that of the outer sea.[1] By contrast, the map depicts the Mediterranean as something approaching a sea of islands – Crete, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balearics among them – sheltered by the arc of Europe and Africa.

This map represents only one view of the northwestern islands available to a literate early medieval audience, of course. Elsewhere in contemporary writings, it is possible to find a much more detailed, and less daunting, understanding of the western ocean and its islands. The foundations of medieval visual and verbal

1 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 6018, fols. 63v–64r. The 'mare mortun' (i.e. mare mortuum) refers to the widely dispersed classical and medieval notion of a frozen sea in the far northwest. On the map's association with Easter tables, see Chekin (1999).

descriptions of Britain, its islands, and the sea around them were classical. The island of Britannia was, for Pliny the Elder, 'celebrated in our records and those of the Greeks' ['insula clara Graecis nostrisque monimentis']: 'it lay in the north-west and across a significant interval of water it faced the greatest regions of Europe – Germania, Gallia, and Hispania' ['inter septentrionem et occidentem iacet, Germaniae, Galliae, Hispaniae, multo maximis Europae partibus magno intervallo adversa']. It had once been called Albion; Ireland lay above it (or beyond – '*super*'), and then there were the smaller islands: the Orkneys, which numbered forty, the seven Shetlands, thirty Hebrides and no less than six islands between Hibernia and Britannia ('Mona', 'Monapia', 'Riginia', 'Vectis', 'Silumnus,' and 'Andros'), with two more to the south and others scattered in the 'German sea' (Pliny, 1942, 4.102–103, 198). Farthest flung of all was the island of Thule ('Tyle'), without night in midsummer and without day in midwinter; one day's sail beyond it the sea was frozen (Pliny, 1942, 4.104, 198). To this rapid – yet richly detailed – inventory, Pliny's fourth-century reviser Iulius Solinus added significant details concerning Britain and Ireland. Ireland was remarkable for its savage inhabitants, and its lack of snakes; the inhabitants of the island of 'Silura' (probably the Scilly islands) refused to accept coins, while fertile Thanet was similarly anathema to serpents (Solinus, 1895, 22.2–8, 100–101). Britain itself was notable for its many rivers and rich springs, as well as its minerals and stones (Solinus, 1895, 22.10, 102). Solinus's sources for this expansion of Pliny are for the most part unknown (though he took some material from the *Cosmographia* of Pomponius Mela), and the section is conceivably the addition of a very early reader (Milham, 1986, 259). In any case, by emphasising their strangeness and their resistance to cultural norms, the account of Ireland, Britain, and surrounding islands in Solinus had the effect of putting the region further from the Roman cultural ambit than Pliny had done. Both authors nevertheless clearly conceived of Britannia and Hibernia in archipelagic terms, as larger members of a series of islands, and the content and mode of their descriptions, characterised by the mixture of topography, *mirabilia*, and ethnography, had a lasting influence on medieval geographical writing: as well as a text widely disseminated in its own right, Solinus' *Polyhistor* was a major source for the description of the world in Book 14 of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (2011), as well as for more obscure texts such as the anonymous Carolingian treatise entitled *De situ orbis* (1974).

The Eclipse of Insularity?

Undoubtedly the most influential early medieval description of the British archipelago appeared in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Bede inherited from Pliny and Solinus, as well as from Paulus Orosius' early

fifth-century geographical introduction to his *Historiae adversus paganos* (Orosius, 1889), Isidore, and others, a strong consciousness of the distance separating the island of Britannia from mainland Europe. However, it was the project of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* to identify the providential nature of the island, to document the evangelisation of the *gens Anglorum* and to affirm Britannia's re-insertion within a Roman orbit. Islands and peninsulas abound in the *Historia*: in addition to Britain and Ireland, Bede's narrative ranges from Man (subjected to English rule by King Edwin) and Anglesey, where the north sea crashes, to the Isle of Wight, one of the last refuges of paganism. The conversion of the Angles begins on Thanet where King Æthelberht meets Augustine and his companions and allows them a *mansio* in Canterbury (Bede, 1969, 1.25, 72). Monasteries themselves function metaphorically as islands and literally so in cases such as Lindisfarne and Iona. Britain is fertile, populous; Ireland is blessed, a land of milk and honey, but one that is ultimately eclipsed by developments across the water.

There is no better illustration of the tension between the evangelist's view of the islands – a view authorised and directed by Rome, nourished by journeys back and forth to the metropolis – and the de-centred, archipelagic perspective of the itinerant Irish clergy than in the famous debate about the calculation of the date of Easter that occupies Book 3 of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The climax of the debate, at the Synod of Whitby in 664, pits the spokesman for the 'Irish' calculation, Bishop Colman, against the representative of the 'Roman' date, the priest Wilfred – both men with Lindisfarne connections, but only one on the right side of history. Bede allows Colman a dignified speech – in which the Bishop cites the precedent of his superiors and ancestors and the authority of John the evangelist – but he cannot withstand Wilfred's far longer reply. Wilfrid's argument has a geographic base: he has witnessed the Roman method for calculating Easter not only in the city where Peter and Paul lived, taught, died, and were buried, but also in other parts of Italy, in Gaul, in Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and in every city in which the church of Christ has spread, through multiple nations and tongues. Only the Irish, the Picts, and the British, 'on the two last islands of the Ocean' ['de duabus ultimis Oceani insulis'] – and not even on all of them! – face off against the world (Bede, 1969, 3.25, 300; Merrills, 2005, 258–260). The speech brilliantly turns Pliny's description – 'Britannia the island facing the greatest parts of Europe across a large channel' ['Britannia insula (…) maximis Europae partibus magno intervallo adversa'] – into an encapsulation of perverse isolationism. What about the great Irish saints, pleads Colman: what about Anatolius, Columba, and others? Were they wrong in following John's words? Even if they were saints, comes Wilfrid's scathing reply, is a handful of men from one corner of a far-flung island to be preferred to the universal church of Christ through all the world ['paucitas uno de angulo extremae insulae'] (Bede, 1969, 3.25, 306)? Colman, defeated, tellingly returns to the islands: first to Iona, then Inisboufinde, then Ireland, setting up

monasteries, islands within the islands (Bede, 1969, 4.4, 346–348). The victory of Wilfred is the victory of the mainland, of the world, over the islands at the end of the world, and Wilfred himself is entirely emblematic of the new spatial order: having entered Lindisfarne at 14, he travels to Rome with Benedict Biscop, where he learns the correct method of calculating Easter; he returns to Britannia via Dalfinus in Gaul, then becomes bishop of Northumbria, where reversals of fortune force him into repeated visits to Rome to assert his rights. He has a near-death experience in Meaux, makes converts in Frisia as well as in Sussex, and dies in Oundle (Bede, 1969, 5.19, 516–530). Whereas Colman moves between the islands of the north, Wilfrid's trajectory is vertical – to Rome and back again, through Gallia – and Bede, not without some sympathy for insular particularity and its history, endorses the metropolitan man.

Wilfrid's perspective was, unsurprisingly, shared by other bishops charged with converting pagan peoples in the islands of the far north. Adam of Bremen dedicated the final book of his *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae pontificum* ['*History of the Bishops of the Church of Hamburg-Bremen*'] to a detailed missionary geography of the Baltic Sea and the Scandinavian archipelago, drawing attention to the dangers and distance of far-flung islands but also to the happy fact of their reception of the word of God. 'Only where the world has its end,' Adam delightedly concluded, 'does its [the metropolitan Church at Hamburg-Bremen's] preaching fall silent' ['ibi solummodo ponens evangelizandi silentium, ubi mundus terminum habet'] (Adam of Bremen, 1853, col. 659). Visual description was not always easily assimilable to a narrative of conversion, however, in part because of the eclectic nature of its sources. The Cotton – or 'Anglo–Saxon' – world map was produced in the first part of the eleventh century, probably at Christ Church, Canterbury, but it is surely a copy – if perhaps an elaborated one – of an earlier model (see Figure 1). Its nomenclature is, for the most part, derived from Orosius, but things become more complex in its northwest corner. Here, as has often been observed,[2] a far more detailed regional picture appears than on other world maps. A north sea zone encompasses Thule in the far northwest corner, Ireland, Britain, and the Orkneys in the west, with Iceland ['Island'], Norwegians ['Neronorroen'], and perhaps even Lapps ['Scridefinnas'] further east. One could naturally subject this map to a Wilfredian reading: Rome is given prominence, and the cities in Italy may represent part of an itinerary (Archbishop Sigeric's journey from Rome to Canterbury appears elsewhere in the manuscript). The axis continues through the Cyclades to Jerusalem, suggesting points of connection between the centres of Anglo-Saxon power (London, Winchester) and the parts of world invoked in Wilfred's speech: Egypt, Greece, Asia, Africa. Yet, in another direction, the map tells a different, more oblique, story. At some point, the image must have been subjected to the influence of the eccentric *Cosmography* of 'Aethicus Ister', a work compiled in the eighth century which purports to be Jerome's translation of the eponymous Aethicus ('Aethicus Ister', 2011). The Cotton map's references

2 See, for example, Michelet (2006).

Figure 1: The Cotton world map. East at top. British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius B.V.1, f.56v. ©The British Library Board.

in the far north of Europe and Asia to Turks and the 'race of griffons' have their origin in Aethicus, which suggests something more multi-faceted than a programmatic narrative of evangelisation.

More tantalising still is the glimpse of an early medieval *mappamundi* apparently afforded by a text entitled *Descriptio totius orbis*, which is contained in a twelfth-century manuscript from northern Italy. The *Descriptio* appears to record the inscriptions of a large world map, which Patrick Gautier Dalché has argued on textual evidence is likely to have originated in an insular monastery, perhaps Iona itself, before being conveyed to Bobbio (Gautier Dalché, 2010). Particularly striking is a series of islands recorded in the *Descriptio*: 'In the same sea [i.e. around Britain] there are other islands: Suil, Abath, Scithia, Imdas, Etha, Coloso, Bereba, Malle, Euoea, Selech, as well as Thanatos, Tile, Titana, Scanzia, Meuania, Cathafico, Barcinona, and many others' ['In eodem mari sunt alie insule, scilicet Suil, Abath, Scithia, Imdas, Etha, Coloso, Bereba, Malle, Euoea, Selech, itemque Thanatos, Tile, Titana, Scanzia, Meuania, Cathafico, Barcinona, et alie

multe'] (Gautier Dalché, 2010, 7). Several of these names remain unidentified, but others are clearly from a British and north Atlantic archipelago: 'Thanatos' [Thanet], 'Tile' [Thule], 'Scanzia' (effectively Scandinavia), 'Meuania' [Man]. Still others tally with the *Life of Columba* compiled on Iona by the monk Adomnán: 'Coloso' [Coll], 'Malle' [Mull], 'Etha' [Tiree], 'Scithia' [Skye], 'Suil' (possibly Seil), and 'Selech' (perhaps one of the Scilly isles) (Gautier Dalché, 2010, 7–8; Adomnán, 1961). If Gautier Dalché's hypothesis is correct, the large *mappamundi* copied in the *Descriptio* showed a picture of northwestern islands more detailed than any surviving world image. Its shared topography with the *Life of Columba* suggests its compatibility with the de-centred archipelagic notions of space articulated by Colman, in which far from being cut off, the isles of the northwest represent the presence of Christianity at the ends of the known world.

The Anglo-Norman Archipelago

The years following the Norman Conquest saw profound changes to the relationship between England and its archipelago, with consequences for visual representation of these spaces. The Anglo-Norman drive into Wales and then Ireland found its greatest chronicler, and proponent, in the form of Gerald of Wales. Gerald's *Topographia Hiberniae* operates in the Plinian/Solinian tradition, with an emphasis on *mirabilia* tinged with a keen political sense. Gerald sets Ireland firmly on an east–west axis. It is the 'last of the western islands' ['Insularum occidentalium haec ultima'], the furthest extent of the known world, its marvels in dialectical relation to the better known wonders of the east (Gerald of Wales, 1867, 1.1, 22). An extended comparison of east and far west at the end of the first *distinctio* confirms the salubrious, snake-free west as the physical and moral superior (Gerald of Wales, 1867, 1.34–40, 68–73). The conclusion to the *Topographia* sees Henry II styled a second, western, Alexander ['Alexander noster occidentalis'] for his conquest of the hitherto indomitable Irish (Gerald of Wales, 1867, 3.47, 189). Nevertheless, several sections of the *Topographia* outline not only the connections Ireland has with Britannia and other nearby islands (Man, the Orkneys), but also with Norway, whose occupation of parts of the island were recent history. Farther afield still, Gerald provides commentary on Iceland, significantly noting its distance from Ireland ('three days' sailing'), and the ambiguous Thule, either a fantasy ['fabulosa non minus quam famosa'] or located in the furthest recesses of the northern ocean (Gerald of Wales, 1867, 2.13, 2.17, 95–96, 98–100; Mund-Dopchie, 2009, 89–95). Gerald's interest in insularity extends to a discursus on the origins of islands – they emerged *paulatim* ['gradually'] after the flood – and a characteristic anecdote about a phantasmagoric island ['insula Phantastica'] that appears and disappears but that can be secured by the insertion of burning iron into its surface (Gerald of Wales, 1867, 2.16, 98; 2.12, 94–95).

Two maps have been found in manuscripts of the *Topographia*, both clearly early illustrations of the text, though probably neither authorial. One, contained in four extant manuscripts, is a schematic diagram of the British archipelago – Britannia, Hibernia, and the Orcades – oriented to the east, and with north and south marked.[3] The other, found in a single manuscript, is far more elaborate and essentially constitutes a map of Europe (see Figure 2). This image, which appears between the *Topographia* and Gerald's account of the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland (the *Expugnatio Hibernica*) is also oriented to the east and shows a similar but not identical configuration of the archipelago. This expanded view from the west faithfully reproduces Gerald's location of Ireland in relation to Iceland and Spain while omitting Thule. Above the archipelago appears the superstructure of Europe, with Rome top and centre, France well elaborated, and central and northern Europe compressed. The map could be read as a statement of Norman dynastic influence and control throughout Europe: Normandy, Anjou, Poitou, and Gascony are clearly marked in France, while further west and south, Apulia, Calabria (with the city of Reggio prominent), and Sicily are notable presences. At the same time, the map has been convincingly read as a visualisation of itineraries from Ireland and England to France and Italy (O'Loughlin, 1999). While the map of the archipelago on its own could be read as an emblem of insular culture – in the words of Virgil's *Eclogue* 1, l. 66, 'penitus toto divisos orbe Britannos' ['Britons completely cut off from the entire world'] – the map of Europe firmly locates those same islands within the dominant rhetoric of the *Topographia*. The western isles face east, incorporated in the intellectual, political and religious structures and institutions of mainland Europe. They are at once the spiritual subjects of papal Rome and the political subjects of Angevin power, with its sprawling network extending as far as the kingdom of Jerusalem. This image broadly accords with Robert Bartlett's observation that the powerful connections with France that followed from the Norman Conquest conversely prompted 'a decline of the traditional importance of Scandinavia in English affairs' (Bartlett, 2000, 102). Danish and Norwegian kings, pirates, and settlers were largely a thing of the past. All the same, the text of the *Topographia*, with its digressive island-hopping north of Ireland, subtly allows a meandering trajectory shaped by history and *mirabilia* to accompany the linear narrative of Henry II's conquest.

The *Topographia* maps are, in their way, emblematic of two significant aspects of the cartographic representation of Britain in English maps produced in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: the emergence of regional maps of Britain and the maintenance of the *mappamundi* tradition. The maps of Britain are notable because of the relative rarity of regional maps in the Latin west until the fifteenth century. The four surviving maps of Britain drawn by Matthew Paris around the middle of the thirteenth century are principally concerned with the representation of England, Scotland and Wales, although Matthew included some of the surrounding islands, such as the Orkneys, the Channel islands, Man,

3 The manuscripts are: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 400, f. vii verso; British Library, MS Arundel 14, f. 27v; British Library, MS Additional 33991, f. 26r; and Paris, BNF lat. 4846, f. 63r.
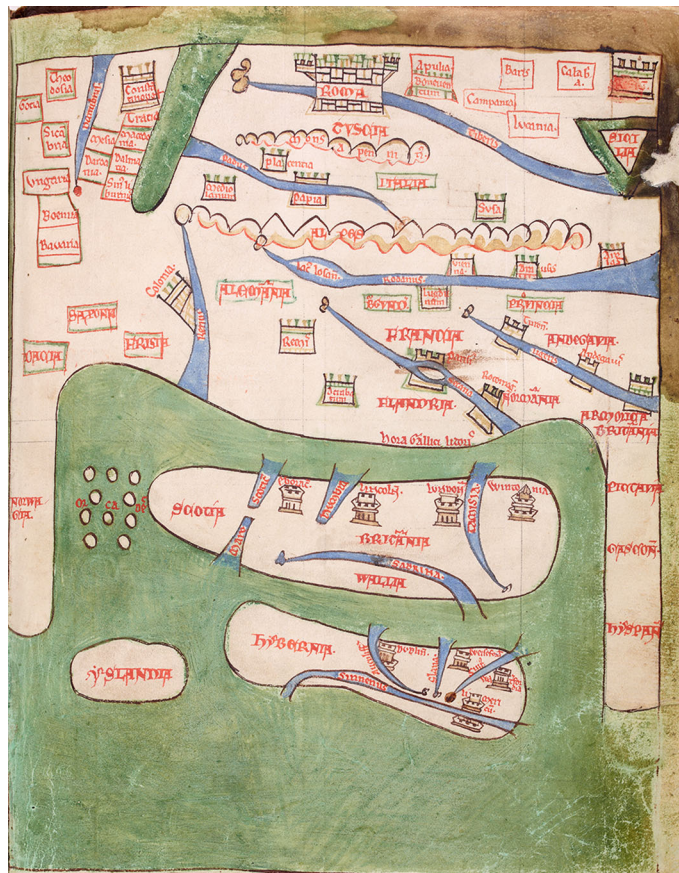
Figure 2: Map of Europe following Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hiberniae*. East at top. Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 700, f.48r. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

and Anglesey.[4] The more detailed Gough map of Britain shows the most developed representation of the Orkneys and the west coast islands of any extant pre-sixteenth-century map. A large 'Insula de Orkeney' includes four towns, the largest of which is Kirkwall. A further seven islands seem to represent the archipelago, although in the current state of the map, any toponyms on them are illegible. Eleven islands of various sizes appear off the west coast of Scotland: these include Iona, the Isle of Bute, possibly the Isle of Arran, and another island marked 'les outisles'. Farther south, between the northwest coast of England and the east coast of Ireland, the Isle of Man seems to have contained a legend referring to the island's occupation by Norway (Parsons, 1958). Here, as on Matthew Paris' maps of Britain, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on land and itineraries within land. Nevertheless, both Matthew and the maker(s) of the Gough map wanted to locate Britain and its islands within a regional space: both

maps indicate land to the northeast and east (Norway, Denmark, and the low countries) as well as French ports across the Channel (Calais, Boulogne). Such toponyms suggest regional networks of trade and travel rather than isolation.

In the *mappamundi* tradition of the later Middle Ages, Britain and Ireland enjoyed varying degrees of prominence on the oceanic periphery. The level of representation could be highly schematic, with Britannia, Hibernia, and the Orcades marked simply among the islands populating the ring of outer ocean.[5] On the other hand, encyclopaedic world maps, such as the Hereford *mappamundi* (ca. 1300), provided relatively detailed representations of the islands within the same basic framework, including many toponyms and topographical details (Westrem, 2001, 296–324). The *mappaemundi* that illustrate copies of the *Polychronicon* of Ranulf Higden in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reinscribe and adapt this model. Higden himself began his chronicle of world history with a verbal *mappamundi*, including description of British and adjacent islands drawn primarily from Bede and Gerald. Higden's account of other islands rounds up some usual suspects (Thule and the Fortunate Islands, with Pliny and Solinus as authorities), but notably includes Iceland ('Islandia') and 'Wyntlandia insula,' a sterile land located to the west of Denmark, occupied by a barbarous race that sells passing sailors the wind sealed in knots on a thread: when a knot is untied, the wind is augmented (Higden, 1865, 1.31, 320–328).[6] The most elaborate of *Polychronicon* maps, drawn at Ramsey Abbey in the late fourteenth century, shows not only an enlarged England, but also a detailed run of islands in the northwest (see Figure 3). These islands begin with a lengthy inscription for Ireland before moving on to include Scotland ('once part of Britain'), Man, Thanet, Norway, Wintland ('gens ydolatra'), Iceland, and Thule (BL Royal MS 14.C.IX, fols 1v–2r). This rim, punctuated by windheads, shows the way medieval authorities such as Adam of Bremen and Gerald of Wales had supplemented the corpus of islands defined by Pliny, Solinus, and other antique authors, without altering their fundamental relationship to mainland Europe.

Overall, then, although there are numerous depictions of islands on medieval maps of various genres, there are relatively few maps that depict something akin to a 'sea of islands'. Maps and topographical diagrams produced in England often suggest or imply insular networks and connections between the periphery and mainland, but in this period their primary focus remained the land rather than the sea. Two partial exceptions should be noted to this statement, as well as a point of comparison. First, in the fifteenth century, the emergence of the *isolario* tradition in the Mediterranean offered a significantly different visual model in which the 'sea of islands' indeed emerged as the subject of cartographic and verbal description. The *isolario* of Christoforo Buondelmonti, which contains both maps and textual descriptions of around 70 Mediterranean islands, was certainly known in fifteenth-century England, where it was copied by William Worcester, who also recorded the Canary Islands and a long list of Atlantic islands off the coast of Guinea, the latter derived from a portolan

5 See, for example, the Sawley world map (c. 1200): Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 66, 2.

6 Higden here seems to draw on Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum.*

Figure 3: World map preceding Higden's *Polychronicon*. East at top. British Library, Royal MS 14.C.IX, fols 1v–2r. ©The British Library Board.

chart (Buondelmonti, 2007; Worcester, 1969, 372–376; cf. Tolias, 2007, 265–268). The portolan chart tradition showed the way to a cartography of the sea rather than the land, in which islands arguably attained a greater significance and centrality. Such charts, which were produced in significant numbers from the fourteenth century in Venice, Genoa, and Mallorca, but (with one possible exception) never in England, took the Mediterranean and Black Sea as their core region. However, as Worcester's notes show, they came to include extensive portions of the Atlantic littoral in both Europe and Africa and formed the template for the sixteenth-century mapping of the western ocean – now no longer 'sine termino.' In that revised picture of the world, Britain, like other western coastal kingdoms such as Portugal and Castile, was well placed to take advantage of a radically revised sea of islands.

The point of comparison is a remarkable map of the Mediterranean that is found in an eleventh-century Fatimid geographical text, the *Book of Curiosities* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Arab. c. 90, fols 30v–31r; Rapoport, 2014, 447–454). This image, probably produced in Cairo, shows the Mediterranean as an oval, filled with dozens of islands. The placement of these islands conforms only roughly to their actual geographical positions, and the weighting is heavily towards the eastern Mediterranean: the purpose of the map seems to have been to gather together available evidence of interest and use to the author and his audience. Taken along with the portolan charts and the *isolario*, this image

suggests that, in terms of visual representation, in the Middle Ages it was the Mediterranean, and perhaps specifically the Aegean, that constituted the primary sea of islands.

'Brexit'

It has been difficult, while writing this essay, to ignore the contemporary reinscription of Colman's debate with Wilfred in the form of the June 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. Superficially at least, the terms remain unchanged after nearly one and a half millennia: should Britannia (and the north of Hibernia) consider itself 'part of Europe,' and therefore subject to and participant in European laws, regulations and institutions? Or should it 'Brexit' and strike out for 'independence' and the 'sovereignty' of its own institutions (the preferred terms of the 'Brexiters')? In place of King Oswiu stood a similarly nonplussed electorate, menaced on one side by threats of isolation and economic catastrophe, and on the other by the spectre of uncontrolled migration and a tyrannous superstate. Neither side seemed to be particularly keen on islands. The 'Brexiters' eschewed the charge of isolationism and talked about the global market; those in the 'remain' campaign emphasised the advantages of being part of a 'bloc.' When the actress Emma Thompson dared to describe Britain as a 'rainy corner of sort-of Europe. A cake-filled [...] grey old island' to – of all people – a German audience, she generated a furiously misogynistic response from the largely pro-Brexit popular press: 'Shut yer cakehole' (Shut Yer Cakehole, 2016). The visual language of insularity returned, somewhat unimaginatively, in cartoons depicting Britain as a boat vainly attempting to row away from the European shore. More enigmatically, on the day after the then mayor of London announced his support for the 'leave' campaign, the *Financial Times* printed on its front page an image of a besuited man, presumably an anxious financier, perched on an upturned Union Jack umbrella, seemingly searching for land as a tide of anti-Europeanism swept him out to sea (Sterling Tumbles, 2016). In the distance, a zig-zagging graph showed the ominous decline in the value of Sterling against the US dollar. But between the claims of 'union' and 'sovereignty,' no vision of 'a sea of islands,' of community and connectivity across distance, appeared. Instead, in the morbid voices of the debate, it was not hard to detect something of Malinowski's characterisation of the Trobriand Islanders' attitude to their neighbours – 'hostility and mistrust [...] a wall of suspicion, misunderstanding and latent enmity' – and little, from either side, of Hau'ofa's strategic optimism.

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