

Thule

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Thule (Θούλη, Thyle) is an island situated in the northernmost reaches of the ancient world, first mentioned by PYTHEAS OF MASSALIA in his work "On the Ocean" from the mid-fourth century BCE. This work exists only through references by other ancient writers such as STRABO (1.4.2–5; 2.4.1; 2.5.8; 4.5.5.) or PLINY THE ELDER (*HN* 2.187; 4. 104). According to Pytheas, this island was situated six days' sail to the north of Britain. Around the time of the summer solstice the sun did not set, and around the winter solstice it did not rise. North of Thule, the earth and sea and sky ceased to exist and everything became one, which was impassable by foot or ship. Some authors refer to this phenomenon as the *mare concretum*, the congealed sea. Pytheas' information about Thule was mistrusted by some ancient scholars. Strabo in particular refers to him as a liar and a cheat, as he did not believe it was possible to live further north than Britain. Modern scholars disagree on where to place Thule. Iceland, Norway, and the Shetland and Faroe Islands are all possible locations. In some texts Thule simply becomes a description for the edge of the inhabited world. In TACITUS' account of AGRICOLA (*Agr.* 10.4), the Roman fleet claimed to have seen Thule, but this sighting could only have been the Shetlands, as they were merely circumnavigating Britain. In the sixth century CE, PROCOPIUS mentions Thule (*Goth.* 6.15.4–26; 8.20.4–6), but here it is undoubtedly the Scandinavian Peninsula.

There is evidence for contact between the Romans and the indigenous peoples of northern Europe. The German campaigns of AUGUSTUS initiated the first real contact between them. Although few literary sources mention contact with the Scandinavian peoples, archaeological remains from graves and bogs testify amply to relations between them in the first four centuries CE.

In this period, Roman vessels of silver, bronze, and glass were an important part of the status symbols with which the elite was buried. The evidence of these finds suggests that the contact to the Romans was primarily of a military-political nature, as there is little to suggest regular trade. Roman luxury objects are found all over Scandinavia, but the majority is found in the southern part (roughly modern Denmark). From the middle of the second century CE a power center with direct contacts to *Germania Inferior* and COLONIA AGRIPPINENSIS (COLOGNE) appears to have been established on eastern Zealand. This center, which lasted well into the fourth century CE, controlled the influx of Roman luxury tableware into Scandinavia. The Scandinavian islands in the Baltic Sea played a slightly different role, as they seem to have had stronger connections to the Vistla delta, the starting point for the amber route to AQUILEIA.

One of the major find groups is the bog offerings, especially from Funen and Jutland, where weaponry has been deposited in lakes or bogs. They show links to the Romans through the largest collection of Roman sword blades and fittings such as baldric plates, chapes, and scabbard suspension fittings. The larger weapon deposits are interpreted as sacrifices of war booty from battles between different Germanic armies, possibly as a North Germanic counterpart to the Roman triumph.

SEE ALSO: Britannia, Roman Empire; Germania (Superior and Inferior); Weaponry, Rome.

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