

Monique Mund-Dopchie. *Ultima Thulé: Histoire d'un lieu et genèse d'un mythe*.

Histoire des idées et critique littéraire 449. Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 2009. 494 pp. index. bibl. n.p. ISBN: 978-2-600-01234-8.

It is no light task to analyze a tradition twenty-four centuries old in a way that is both comprehensive and readable, simultaneously avoiding the Scylla of the catalogue and the Charybdis of the simplifying overview. In *Ultima Thulé: Histoire d'un lieu et genèse d'un mythe* Monique Mund-Dopchie has triumphantly steered this middle course, synthesizing in just under 400 pages the history of a place that has been the subject of debate, scientific inquiry, and scientific fiction from classical antiquity to the present day. While there have been previous monographs devoted to this topic — notably Luigi De Anna's relatively brief survey *Thule: Le Fonti e le Tradizioni* (1998) — and many more on the general question of representation of the north, Mund-Dopchie puts her own distinctive stamp on this subject, combining an eye for continuities with a sharp sense of key moments of change. The story she has to tell is unique, and not without some surprising twists and turns.

Thule was the island allegedly visited by Pytheas of Massalia, a Greek voyager of the fourth century BC, whose report of its location survives indirectly in the works of classical authors such as Pliny the Elder, Strabo (who doubted Pytheas's veracity), Pomponius Mela, and Claudius Ptolemy. Even more crucially, perhaps, Thule was mentioned in Virgil's *Georgics* and Seneca's *Medea*, in both of which it was accorded the subsequently unshakeable adjective *ultima*. Thule was the last of lands to the northwest of the known world, associated with an impassable sea (variously described as fixed, iced, heavy, and obscurely as a kind of "lung" in which all elements were held in suspension), characterized by distance yet reachability from Western Europe, and with unknown inhabitants. At the same time Thule was an idea, with the

potential for association with myth and folklore. The medieval reception of this classical tradition was not passive: Mund-Dopchie emphasizes the range of interpretations and contestations of Thule, culminating in Petrarch's characteristic rejection of the search for Thule "pour privilégier la vie intérieure" (106).

Equipped with an expanded range of source material (including Strabo and Ptolemy), Renaissance savants eagerly debated the location of Thule. The dominant trend in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was identification with Iceland (a move made as early as the eleventh century by Adam of Bremen). But there were resisters, not least among the Icelanders themselves: in 1609 Arngrimur Jonsson denounced the possibility that Iceland could be Thule; in his *Britannia* William Camden opined that the Shetland Islands provided a more likely bet, thereby bringing Thule within the British orbit; Abraham Ortelius, meanwhile, changed his mind, altering his initial equation of Thule with Iceland in his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* of 1570 to an equation with Telemark on the Scandinavian peninsula in the 1590 *Additamentum quartum* to the *Theatrum*. In the following century the Scandinavian hypothesis was vigorously pushed by the Swedish nationalist Olof Rudbeck, who wanted to prove that his native land was none other than the "vagina nationum" identified by Jordanes, the birthplace of all peoples. Mund-Dopchie identifies this appropriation of Thule for nationalistic purposes as one key moment in the transformation of the classical, medieval, and early modern tradition: the island became a site for the location of origins and Nordic purity. By the nineteenth century, in the wake of Madame Blavatsky's five ages of the earth, one of which was associated with a Hyperborean race, occultists associated mystical powers with Thule, and, Mund-Dopchie suggests persuasively, occultism led to the darkest manifestation of what had become a myth: the proto-Nazi *Thulegesellschaft* and its followers, who claimed Thule as an Aryan homeland. The other crucial nodal point in the transmission of the idea of Thule appears to have been Goethe, whose ballad "Der König von Thule" was incorporated into *Faust* and sparked a succession of literary and musical references and imitations, reemerging strikingly in the *Fausts* of Gounod and Berlioz. As Mund-Dopchie observes, having started its literary life as a synecdoche — one part signifying the entire margin, or outer limit — Thule had by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attained the properties of a metaphor, no longer bound to geographic reference, capable of signifying extremity in general. It is in this mode that it appears in the works of writers as diverse as Alexandre Dumas, Umberto Eco, and the Australian author Henry Handel Richardson.

Looking across the vast spread of reference to Thule assembled by Mund-Dopchie, a handy bibliography of which is printed in chronological order at the conclusion of her work, one is struck by the rebarbative quality of this place between reality and imagination. So many of the references to Thule are fleeting, learned nods to Virgil and Seneca; in the Renaissance Mund-Dopchie counts only five serious examinations of the subject; many of the island's attributes (fire and ice, volcanoes) were borrowed from Iceland; even the postmedieval fantasists were restrained — however poignant, Goethe's ballad seems appropriately ornamental, marginal. In part this may be due to its insular nature: unlike Atlantis, to which it

was also from time to time assimilated, or *Terra Australis Incognita*, Thule was too small and too northern to sustain big-canvas painting. Perhaps more significantly, the synecdochical function of the toponym discouraged the elaboration of sustained fictions. And ultimately — nationalists aside — the point of Thule is its rebarbative qualities: its cold, its “lung sea,” its position on the border of light and dark. Borders don’t invite long stays. Even so, Mund-Dopchie’s lengthy residence in the literature of Thule has yielded rich results: she sensibly avoids making any claims to comprehensive coverage of the topic, but a work that treats with equal suppleness Pytheas of Massalia and the twentieth-century *bandes dessinées* that recount his voyages, Olof Rodbeck and Lennart Meri, the ex-president of Estonia who claimed Thule was the island of Saarema, Adam of Bremen’s *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, and Joanna Kavenna’s 2006 travelogue *The Ice Museum* is the product of years of labor and a lightly worn, yet incisive, erudition.

ALFRED HIATT

Queen Mary, University of London