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The namegiving of a new-settled country - like Iceland - and of newfoundlands - like Greenland, *Vínland*, *Markland*, *Helluland* - is reported by the written Icelandic sources following the pattern of aetiological tales. *Landnámabók* relates that while exploring the country during the spring Floki saw a fjord full of drift ice (H 5, *ok sá norðr yfir fjöllin fjörðr fullan af hafisum*), and after this he named it forever (*því kölluðu þeir landit Ísland, sem þat hefir síðan heitit*). Besides, *Íslendinga-bók* relates that Eirik gave Greenland purposely a promising name in order to allure immigrants (VI, *hann gaf nafn landinu of kallaði Grænland ok kvað menn þat myndu fýsa þangat farar, at landit ætti nafn gótt*). These are surface interpretations which cannot be based on serious grounds.

The choice of the colour name "green" after which a country is called brings back to symbolic meanings of colours in archaic cultures. The question arises as to the choice of a non-appealing name like Iceland. As we shall see, the ultimate origin of the name must be detected within the context of the primitive thought; but the way Scandinavians became acquainted with it went apparently through written sources.

It is a well known fact that the earliest word which

denoted the far Northern area was Thule (Greek Θούλη). The Massilian Greek Pytheas in the fourth century B.C. explored the British Isles and the North Sea giving the first geographical description of sea routes that seem to have been empirically known by local sailors (British, Irish, Pictish, Norse).

Pytheas' writings are only indirectly documented but for the fragments reported by other authors [Mette 1952; Stichtenoeth 1959]. Thule is characterised as an island laid a six days' trip north of Caledonia (Pliny *NH* II, 187) where, because of its high latitude, during the summer solstice the light never disappears and therefore "the Barbarians show the place of the sunset", and where "the frozen sea" is at the distance of one day's sail (πεπηγυῖα θάλαττα and hence *mare concretum* by Pliny IV, 104) could be observed [Gisinger 1963]. Pliny the Elder relied upon Pytheas' commentary securing the spreading of these scientific observations throughout the Middle Ages.

The location allotted to Thule has been moving according to the Author who was dealing with the topic. For the Roman general Agricola Thule can be scanned from the Orkney Islands (Tacitus, *Agricola* X: *dispecta est et Thule*). But on the other hand in the Roman literature Thule meant the most northerly inhabited land; Thule, that often is called *ultima*, is mentioned by Virgil (*Georgicae* I, 30), Statius (*Silvae* V, 1, 91), Silius

Italicus (III, 597), Jovenal (XV, 112), Seneca (*Medea* 379).

The swinging in the Roman culture between real or unreal locations of Thule [Cassidy 1963] ends when St. Isidore's *Etymologies* teach that Thule is really the *ultima insula Oceani inter septentrionalem et occidentalem plagam ultra Britanniam* "the furthest island in the ocean ... beyond Britain" (XIV, 6). More interesting is the fact that St. Isidore dovetails the opposing data of the Pythean tradition: Thule owns its name to the sun because of the summer solstice ([Thule] *a sole nomen habens, quia in ea aestivum solstitium sol facit et nullus ultra eam dies est*), that entails "a dull and frozen sea" surrounding the isle (*unde et pigrum et concretum est eius mare*). The rhetoric goal of the passage is to focus the dialectic relation between the terms of a bipolar pair. In this way St. Isidore recalls the terms of the primitive thinking that perceives the totality through their components: e.g. "earth + sky", "sea + earth", etc. By describing the arctic region, each of the two principles shows a want of the other half in order to warrant the very possibility of living: "heath" and "light" link with "cold" and "darkness".

It has been recently proposed that the Pytheas' Θούλη may be a wrong interpretation of a Celtic form **SUI*-*ē* (cp. Welsh *haul* "sun", Irish *súil* "eye", Latin *sōl*, Greek ἥλιος, Norse *sól*) and

therefore it would mean "Sunland" [Luiselli 1992: 106 f.]. It is a well-known fact that confusion between θ and σ is documented in the Gaulish inscriptions [Evans 1967: 410 ff.] and in Greek dialectology [Schwyzer 1968: 205 f.]. Whatever be the case, Medieval authors keep developing the coterminous presence of the two cosmogonic principles as a cultural notion.

Up to the settlement of Iceland that finally allowed to identify the names *Island* -Thule with a country performing its historical role, the literary sources we have are obviously vague as to the location of the place.

The Venerable Bede takes his information from Pliny and Solinus (cp. *De temporibus, De natura rerum, De temporum ratione*), but the Irish monk Dicuil (9th century) - who got also a direct knowledge from Irish hermits - rejects Pliny's view of an alternating night and day of six months each (*De mensura orbis terrae*, VII). And for king Alfred *Thila* is still *ultima*, the *ytremest land* (*Orosius* I).

With Adam of Bremen we have a witness that the name *Island* is now taking over Thule (*haec itaque Thyle nunc Island appellatur*). Adam explains it aetiologically, from the ice which binds the ocean (*a glacie, quae oceanum astringit*). We have here an outspoken statement of the shift from the formula "Thule -Iceland" to "Iceland". But on the other hand Geoffrey

of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* ignores the name Iceland and explains that the name of the far Thule derives "from the sun, because of the solstice which the summer sun makes there" (881-3: *ultima, quae Thule nomen de sole recepit, / propter solsticium, quod sol aestivus ibidem / dum facit...*).

The cultural tradition has now split up the two meanings which originally belonged to the same ideological structure.

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