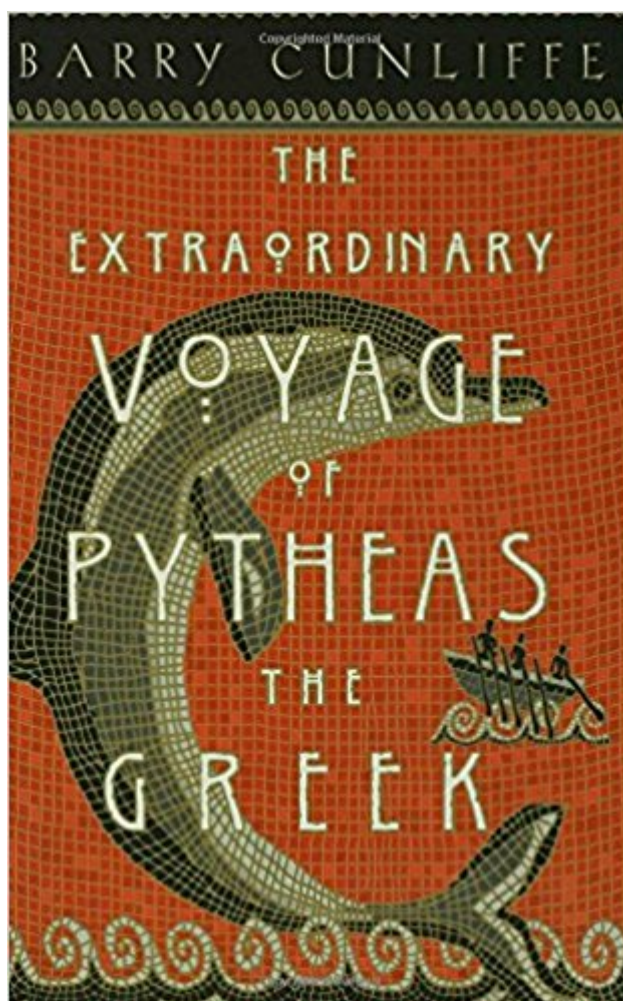


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The Extraordinary Voyage Of Pytheas The Greek: The Man Who Discovered Britain



Synopsis

Around 330 B.C., a remarkable man named Pytheas set out from the Greek colony of Massalia (now Marseille) to explore the fabled, terrifying lands of northern Europe—a mysterious, largely conjectural zone that, according to Greek science, was too cold to sustain human life and yet was somehow, they knew, the source of precious commodities such as tin, amber, and gold. Whether Pytheas headed an expedition or traveled alone, he was the first literate man to visit the British Isles and the coasts of France and Denmark, and there is convincing evidence that he traveled on to Iceland and the edge of the ice-pack—an astonishing voyage at the time. Pytheas's own account of the journey, titled *On the Ocean* and published in about 320 B.C., has not survived, though it echoes in the works of ancient historians like Herodotus and Strabo. Their allusions to his voyage represent the beginnings of European history and underscore how much of a pioneer Pytheas was, for Britain remained without further explorers until Julius Caesar and his legions landed there almost 300 years later. Archaeologist Barry Cunliffe knows perhaps more than anyone about the world through which Pytheas traveled, and he has sifted the archaeological and written records to re-create this staggering journey. Beginning with an invaluable pocket history of early Mediterranean civilization, Cunliffe illuminates what Pytheas would have seen and experienced—the route he likely took to reach first Brittany and then England; the tin-mining and, even then, evidence of ancient cultures he would have witnessed onshore; the challenge of sailing in a skin boat; the magic of amber and the trade routes by which it reached the Mediterranean. In telling this story, Cunliffe has chronicled an essential chapter in the history of civilization.

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Customer Reviews

Over 2,300 years ago, Pytheas of Massalia (now Marseille) embarked on an unprecedented journey to lands beyond the known boundaries of his world: the wilds of northern Europe. He was the first Greek to do so, and upon his return, he chronicled his adventures in *On the Ocean*, alas, no longer extant. Many ancient writers put little stock in its revelations. The Roman geographer Strabo and the Roman historian Polybius, for instance, questioned whether Pytheas even made the voyage at all. But Oxford archeologist Cunliffe (*The Ancient Celts*) argues that there is enough evidence to prove that Pytheas discovered tin fields in Brittany, amber forests in the Baltic region and Ultima Thule, or Iceland. In this dramatic piece of historical detective work, Cunliffe employs archeology, literary studies, geography and imagination to recreate Pytheas's possible routes from the Mediterranean to Iceland and back home again. Cunliffe also draws on the writings of Pliny the Elder and the geographer Dicaearchus to demonstrate that several of Pytheas's near contemporaries welcomed his discoveries about the nature of the solstice and the influence of the moon on the tides. Although Cunliffe often has to speculate in the absence of Pytheas's own words, he nevertheless amasses strong evidence that Pytheas did indeed make his voyage. What Cunliffe neglects to do, however, is make Pytheas the convincing, three-dimensional hero of his own tale. 15 b&w illus., 6 maps.

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Although now lost, Pytheas' *On the Ocean*, an account of his 350 B.C. voyage to Britain, was excerpted by ancient authors. From these snippets, Cunliffe has reconstructed Pytheas' exploit. He also includes modern archaeological findings to highly readable effect. The symbiosis of the two sorts of evidence makes for a captivating journey. Cunliffe describes the economic world of Pytheas' hometown, Massalia, now Marseilles. To the south lay the Carthaginians; to the east, the Romans; and to the north, the Celtic barbarians. From the Celtic lands came tin and amber, and Pytheas was likely an emissary of Massalia's merchants, perhaps to confirm an overland trade route to evade Carthage's control of the Pillars of Hercules. Maps helpfully trace Pytheas' route, as best Cunliffe can infer it from ancient place-names cited by hostile geographers like Strabo, who thought Pytheas concocted his tales. But archaeology proves Greco-Celtic commerce existed, sealing Pytheas' place --albeit an elusive one--in discovery annals. An enjoyable, compact excursion of imagined adventure and ancient history. Gilbert Taylor

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The writing style is quite compelling; I read it strait through. The writings of Pytheas are problematic

because so little survives and much of that in second and third hand accounts from other sources. I was looking for a semi-fictionalized account with flights of fancy and florid prose, but instead the technically proper, pragmatic yet enthusiastic descriptions of the lands travelled might actually have been better. There was not a voice in the back of my brain saying "Aw, you just made that up." Most of the analysis involves taking single observations of Pytheas and correlating these to other sources, scientific and astronomical observations and contemporary archeological evidence in order to find the most reasonable interpretation. This book offers a rare glimpse into Celtic western Europe in the 4th century BC with wonderfully explanatory descriptions of the tin trade, the amber trade and luxury items from the Mediterranean working their way into the Celtic world. I appreciated the author's discussion of the full Hellenistic intellectual scene and the influence Pytheas had on Greek understanding of the world. (Spoiler Alert) The author places Pytheas in Iceland as the fabled "Ultima Thule" while some other historians say the land mentioned must have been Norway instead. I was disappointed that the author did not discuss more thoroughly maritime travel to Iceland in classical times. To my knowledge there is no archeological or written evidence that humans reached Iceland before the 6th Century AD Irish. Yet Pytheas' latitude measurements indicated he reached a north latitude just short of the arctic circle. The author also gives credit to Pytheas for circumnavigating Great Britain, disputed by others.

If you're curious about this era and topic, by all means buy the book. Using the journey of Pytheas the Greek in the 4th Century b.c. as his focus, Professor Cunliffe gathers a cornucopia of information and speculation into a fascinating narrative. I appreciated the way he wove a variety of information about the time and place, from Iceland to Egypt, from late b.c. to early c.e., from Classic writings. My usual reading about this period usually focuses on something particular, like Caesar and the Gauls, or Rome and Carthage, but this little book gives me a context that I will be able to refer to in the future. I have read other books by Professor Cunliffe and while I appreciate his research, scholarship, and caution in drawing conclusions, I happily detected a looser speculation in this book. Something more entertaining, and if I may speculate myself, a bit of fun on his part. I even found the last chapter on why Polybius disliked Pytheas to be downright gossipy.

Prof. Cunliffe uses the travels of Pytheas to Britain and beyond as a framework for a lively discussion of the general state of geographic knowledge and above all trade in Western Europe in the 3rd century b.c. He explains how there was a continual flow of manufactured goods from the South being exchanged for prized tin and amber from the North. Some of this was probably through

long chains of intermediaries, but Pytheas reported that tin traders took their pack horses from the Channel to the Rhone in only thirty days, so it is not too surprising that occasional brave individuals were able to make the same journey. Pytheas himself seems to have traveled almost like a modern back-packer, tagging along with traveling merchants rather than leading an expedition of his own. Cunliffe is Professor of European Archaeology at Oxford, so he knows the archeological record well and he discusses various sites that are representative of the areas Pytheas visited. He also carefully evaluates and explains the potential biases and distortions in the surviving commentaries on Pytheas's travels. For example, some later scholars refused point-blank to accept that humans could survive in such cold climates. I was initially surprised by the claimed extent of Pytheas's travels, but by the end I was convinced that Pytheas did indeed reach the far North (almost certainly Iceland) and record its short summer nights and high latitude for future geographers. An amazing tale, well told. Despite being scholarly, Cunliffe's account is consistently well written, entertaining and enlightening.

Good read for the historian in our house.

A very well researched and argued "reconstruction" of a journey the original report of which seems to have been lost many centuries ago. This book might be of relevance to a reader of ancient history and to those who maintain an interest in the regions of Britain, Greece and Marseilles or the South of France, always in the context of study of ancient history.

Wonderful story for every body who like sailing and traveling

Thank you. JosÃ© Ponte

Great Book

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