

EARLY BRITISH HISTORICAL SOURCES

People, texts & interpretations

a brief summary by
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Who are our major sources of information?

PYTHEUS of MASSALIA, circa 330 BC

Probably one of the most influential of Greek maritime explorers of the ancient world. His account of Atlantic voyages, *Peri Okeanou*, does not survive in its original original form, but widely mentioned or referred to by subsequent scholars

RUFUS FESTUS AVIENUS, 4th century AD . . .

Geographer and historian, recounting navigation undertaken by men such as Pytheus and Himilco, as far back as the 6th century BC, included in the poetic summary, *Ora Maritima*

Who was Pytheus?
And why Massalia?



‘Around 330 BC, a remarkable man named Pytheus set out from the Greek colony of Massalia (now Marseille) to explore the fabled, terrifying lands of Northern Europe. . . a mysterious largely conjectured zone that according to Greek science was too cold to sustain human life yet was somehow, they knew, the source of precious commodities such as tin, amber and gold.’

(Introduction to Professor Barrie Cunliffe's *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheus the Greek*)

Massalia along with Sicily, southern Italy, Naples, etc was symbolic of Greek expansion, influence and control in the Mediterranean sometimes in confrontation with Carthage, a major competitor with its own search for empire-building.

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PERI OKEANOU . . . *On the Ocean*

- Considered a prime source for information on the earlier historical period of the British Isles
 - Source of first indications for the name used for the British of the Iron Age . . . 'Pretanoi'
 - Later cognates:
 - Britannia (Latin)
 - Brytwylisc (Saxon) [Britwelsh]
 - Prydein (Old / Middle Welsh)
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Ora Maritima (1)

Why is it significant ?

- > Considered to be a rewriting of an otherwise lost Greek 'periplus'
- > Periplus: a guide for the mariners in the Mediterranean world, developed mainly by Greece, essential for longer voyages out into the Atlantic
- > Considered as a source containing information before Pytheus' time, eg, Himilco, the great Carthaginian leader referred to as someone well acquainted with time and distance from North Africa to Britain

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Ora Maritima (2)

Terminology

The original would possibly have contained earlier or alternative terms for describing the British Isles

- > Inhabitants of Ireland referred to as ***gens Hiernorum*** [1]
- > The island of the British as ***insula Albionum*** [2]

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the journeyofPytheus.jpg
Pytheus' journey drawn from Greek historians

A possible realisation of

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PretanikEuropaKeltika.jpg

Alternative interpretation by Graham Robb . . . *The Ancient Paths* (see Bibl.)

9 Greek ocean-going crafts . . . example of sail-only vessel (ceramic-ware, Classical period, Athens)

Greeksailonly.jpg

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Example of oar-powered ship . . . classical ceramic-ware illustrating rowing complement plus additional sail potential

greeksailandoar.jpg

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His achievements occasionally enter discussions of early maritime techniques, ship or boat construction, routes etc.

Example:

The Voyages of the Celtic Saints

Author : Graham Panes

Publisher: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch

An invaluable source for further investigation in terms of. . .

- ☐ Academic sources and publications for further reference
- ☐ Prehistory
- ☐ Maritime topics
- ☐ Religion and its development
- ☐ Old Irish memorial script
- ☐ Archaeology
- ☐ Roman Britain
- ☐ Dark Age topics . . . people, conflict, maps and illustrations

A worthwhile 'signpost' volume for deeper study from other sources suggested in the text.

SUMMARY

*PYTHEUS AND HIS IMPORTANCE TO THE HISTORIAN
THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES AND PRESENT-DAY STUDENT OF
EARLY HISTORY OF BRITAIN AND THE MEDITERRANEAN*

- ★ ORIGINS OF BRITAIN'S NOMENCLATURE
 - ★ DIODORUS SICULUS ABSORBS HIS DATA AND DESCRIBES
THE ISLE AS PRETANNIA, THE PEOPLE AS PRETANNI [3]
 - ★ PLINY THE 'ELDER' DRAWS OPENLY ON PYTHEUS . . .
'According to Pytheus . . . ' etc [4]
 - ★ FREELY EXCERPTED BY OTHER GREEK WRITERS, E.G. TIMEUS,
ERATOSTHENES, STRABO, POSIDONIUS OF APAMEIA, ETC
 - ★ RUFUS FESTUS AVIENUS INHERITS THE COMBINED
KNOWLEDGE OF THE FOREGOING, INCLUDING PYTHEUS, TO
REINTERPRET THE PERIPLUS MODEL INTO AN EPIC VERSE OF
SOME 700 LINES
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PYTHEUS MASSALIA'S STATUE IN MARSEILLE . . .
adopted hero of the south of France

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notes

- 1 *Ora Maritima* , line 111
- 2 *ibid*
- 3 *Bibliothekh istorika*
- 4 *Naturalis Historia*

Bibliography

Cunliffe, B. *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheus the Greek*' (London: Penguin books, 2003)

Panes, G. *The Voyages of the Celtic Saints* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2008)

Robb, G. *The Ancient Paths* , , , discovering the lost map of Celtic Europe (London: Picador press, 2014)

Rufus Festus Avienus *Ora Maritima* <http://topostext.org>