Islands in the *Vita Merlini*

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The first two articles in this three-part series were straightforward accounts of the *Vita Merlini* ("life of Merlin," *VM*) poet's versifications of prose passages in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, in which the topics were, respectively, birds and bodies of water. I had hoped that this third and final installment would have been equally straightforward and workmanlike, but that was not to be, because Isidore's text, duly versified by the *VM* poet, contains unmistakable traces of that strange document called *The Circumnavigation of Hanno*. I will not belabor the question, but cannot avoid it. Nor can I avoid the splice that connects the "islands" passage with the "nine sisters" episode, which in turn modulates into an account of the passing of Arthur. In addition to raising these peripheral questions, I have chosen to demote an issue that seemed of primary importance in the previous articles, the discussion of what Latin versification

meant in the Middle Ages. It is important that the reader understand the poetic conventions that distinguished medieval poetry from prose, but I will assume that most of the readers of the present article have read my discussion of this subject in last year's <u>Medieval and Early Modern English Studies</u> (Vol. 15, 2007). The reader who has not will find the same discussion in an appendix.

The *VM* poet has selected eleven islands or archipelagoes for description.

1.	Thanatos (875-877)	6.	The Hesperides (896-7)
2.	The Orkneys (878-80)	7.	The Gorgades (898-9)
3.	Thule (881-6)	8.	Argire & Crisse (900-901)
4.	Ireland (887-892)	9.	Ceylon (902-5)
5.	Gades (893-5)	10.	Tiles (906-7)

11.   The Fortunate Islands (908-915)

There follows a digression on the nine sisters who rule the Fortunate Islands (916-28), and a digression on the passing of Arthur (929-40)

As in the passages discussed earlier in this series, we note that the *VM* poet is respectful of Isidore, but not slavish: to begin with, he chooses only islands outside the Mediterranean, even though this means ignoring the famous sites that Isidore mentions whose associated history and mythology would seem to tempt his pen. Also, for no reason that I can see, he changes Isidore's order, reversing the positions of Thule and the Orkneys; he also reverses the order of the "Gorgades" and the Fortunate Isles, although this transposition seems to be purposeful, allowing as it does for the transition to the non-Isidorean material that follows.

These touches are minor, but there is one personal touch in this passage that is of surpassing importance in understanding the *VM*: the author identifies his

nationality.

Insula post nostram prestantior	887. The island after ours that is said to
omnibus esse	be more excellent
Fertur hibernensis felici fertilitate	Than all is Ireland, with its
	fortunate fertility.

It is reasonable to take this statement of not-Irishness as a statement of Britishness, and this clue enlightens us as to one of the four loose ends in the question of antecedents to the *VM*. Let the reader indulge a digression on them before we go on. Joscelin's *Life of Kentigern* has a prose account of a madman cured by drinking water from a healing spring, just like the *VM*. Does this mean that the *VM* poet borrowed the scene from Joscelin's *Life*? I see no evidence that this is so, and it is difficult to imagine any between-the-lines inferences that can "trump" the observation that the *VM* poet consistently portrays the Scots as hostile foreigners, and *Kentigern*, although written in Latin, is Scotch in theme and (probably) in authorship. The question of the relationship between *Merlin* and *Kentigern* must remain unsettled for lack of evidence.

The second loose end is the presence of Grecisms in a literary context where Greek is supposed to have been unknown; the third is the startling similarity between Merlin's "laughing" episodes and two anecdotes in an Aramaic commentary on the Hebrew Old Testament. I will deal with these two loose ends in forthcoming articles.

Bhuile Suibhne Geilt (*BSG*) is the fourth loose end, and is the most vexing. I have said in my book *Merlin, Merlin, Merlin* (www.skupinbooks.com) that in the *VM* "*BSG* is everywhere and nowhere." Translated as "Mad Sweeny," it

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is a Gaelic tale of a mad king that is so similar to the *VM* that some sort of
affinity is impossible to deny, and would suggest a very likely scenario of the
VM being a Latin version of *BSG*, presumably written by an Irishman, a
scenario with the evidentiary support of at least two instances that indicate that
the *VM* poet shows a knowledge of Greek; and it is well known that the
survival of Greek studies in Western Europe was unique to Ireland.   The
"islands" passage in *VM*, however, is specific that Ireland is "over there",
distinct from the *VM* poet's homeland, and, we infer, his nationality, which
leaves us with either Welsh or English authorship.   This does not even come
close to being definitive, but eliminating scenarios involving Scotch or Irish
authorship at least narrows the question down.

   Turning our attention to the *VM* itself, we note the trademark latitude of the
author in his paraphrases.   Isidore writes *Tanatos insula Oceani freto Gallico,
a Brittania aestuario tenui separata* ("Tanatos, an island in the Atlantic
separated from Britain by the Gallic Straits [English Channel?], a narrow body
of water"); The *VM* poet telescopes this into *adiacet huic* ("it lies near here").
Isidore's *frumentariis campis et gleba uberi* ("with fruitful fields and rich soil")
becomes simply *multis rebus* ("with many things").   The *VM* poet is interested
in snakes.

   Isidore derives Tanatos from *a morte serpentum* ("from the death of
snakes"), one assumes, because of its similarity with the Greek word θάνατoς
("death"); the *VM* poet at first seems to follow with his Romanization *Thanatos*
(Θ = th), but his rendering is very free.   There is no Thanatos = death.   Instead,
we find an absence: *mortifero serpente caret* ("it lacks a death-dealing snake").

   Adiacet huic thanatos que multis   Nearby lies Thanatos, which abounds in
          rebus habundat   many things.

Mortifero serpente caret tollit que	876. It lacks a deadly snake, and its soil
venenum	does away
Si sua cum vino tellus commixta	With venom if it is mixed with wine.
bibatur	

Note that the last line and a half are new. Isidore's account of Tanatos has nothing about venom at all.

We have observed that the *VM* poet treats the Orkneys next, departing from Isidore's order. Here is his first statement of his Britishness (my emphases).

Orchades a <u>nobis</u> <u>nostrum</u> quoque	888. <u>Our</u> sea divides the Orkneys from
dividit equor	<u>us</u>.

We also note an abbreviation: Isidore has *intra Britanniam positae* ("located around Britain"). Afterward, a circumlocution: Isidore's simple *triginta tres* ("thirty-three") becomes the *VM*'s *tres ter dene* ("three thrice-ten"), Isidore's *viginti* ("twenty") becomes *bis dene* ("twice ten"), and instead of Isidore's final *tredecim* ("thirteen"), the *VM* poet gives a perfunctory *alie* ("the others"). Both authors, however, end with the identical verb, *coluntur* ("are farmed").

Hec tres ter dene se iuncto flumine	They are thirty-three in number, divided
fiunt	by the currents.
Bis dene cultore carent alie que	880. Twenty are untilled, the others are
coluntur	under cultivation.

The description of Thule (*VM*) or Thyle (Isidore) is interesting for its

account of the long polar nights and for what I take to be its description of icebergs. Isidore has *Vnde et pigrum et concretum est eius mare* ("whence its sea is sluggish and solid"). The phrase is echoed by the *VM* poet, who also alludes to the danger that icebergs pose.

Abducit que dies ut semper nocte perhenni	And takes away the days so that in the perennial night
Aer agat tenebras faciat quoque frigore pontum	885. The air always makes shadows, it makes the sea freeze
Concretum pigrum que simul ratibus que negatum	Solid and sluggish, and at the same time denied to vessels.

Isidore treats Scotland and Ireland as separate islands; the *VM* poet seems to know better, and speaks only of Ireland, and he follows the absence of snakes with the business of Ireland's soil eradicating them. This may be the source of the new material in the "Thanatos" lines. As an example of the *VM* poet's versifying artistry, Isidore's *Illic nulla anguis, avis rara, apis nulla* ("there no snakes, birds few and far between, no bees," my emphases) becomes

Est etenim maior nec apes nec aves nisi raras	It is larger, and produces neither bees nor birds except for those seldom encountered,
Educit penitus que negat generare colubres	891. And within it does not allow snakes to reproduce.

Isidore's description of Gades is quite detailed as to geography and etymology of the name; he makes only a passing reference to trees whose sap

hardens into gems. The *VM* poet focuses on the gems: he gives them two lines, the geography only one, and transposes Isidore's mention of a dragon, *in quarum hortis fingunt fabulae draconem pervigilem aurea mala servantem* ("in the orchards of which the fables say is a watchful dragon guarding golden apples"), from Isidore's description of the "Gorgades," and inflates Isidore's one line into two.

Gadibus herculeis adiungitur insula gades	Gades Island is connected to the Cadiz of Hercules.
Nascitur hic arbor cuius de cortice gummi	A tree originates here from whose bark a gum
Stillat quo gemine fiunt super illita iura	895. Drips, from which gems are made, over its broken sap.
Hesperides vigilem perhibentur habere draconem	They say that the Hesperides have a a guardian dragon
Quem servare ferunt sub frondibus aurea poma	Who, they say, keeps golden apples under leaves.

Isidore's mention of a promontory called *Hesperu Ceras* and hairy women who outrun rabbits are "fingerprints" of the document called *The Circumnavigation of Hanno* that I have already alluded to, which purports to be an account of a Carthaginian naval expedition around Africa. Here is an excerpt, to get an idea of the tone:

ΥΔΡΕΥΣΑΜΕΝΟΙ Δ ΕΚΕΙΘΕΝ ΕΠΛΕΟΜΕΝ ΕΙΣ ΤΟΥΜΠΡΟΣΘΕΝ ΗΜΕΡΑΣ ΠΑΝΤΕ ΠΑΡΑ ΓΗΝ, ΑΧΡΙ ΗΛΘΟΜΕΝ ΕΙΣ ΜΕΓΑΝ ΚΟΛΠ ΟΝ, ΟΝ ΕΦΑΣΑΝ ΟΙ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΕΣ ΚΑΛΕΙΣΘΑΙ **ΕΣΠΕΡΟΥ ΚΕΡΑΣ**.

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ΕΝ ΔΕ ΤΟΥΤΩ ΝΗΣΟΣ ΗΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΝ ΤΗ ΝΗΣΩ ΛΙΜΗΝ ΘΑ
ΛΑΣΣΩΔΗΣ, ΕΝ ΔΕ ΤΑΥΤΗ ΝΗΣΟΣ ΕΤΕΡΑ, ΕΙΣ ΗΝ ΑΠΟΒΑΝΤΕΣ
ΗΜΕΡΑΣ ΜΕΝ ΟΥΔΕΝ ΑΦΕΩΡΩΜΕΝ ΟΤΙ ΜΗ ΥΛΗΝ ΝΥΤΟΣ ΔΕ Π
ΥΡΑ ΤΕ ΠΟΛΛΑ ΚΑΙΟΜΕΝΑ, ΚΑΙ ΦΩΝΗΝ ΑΥΛΩΝ ΗΚΟΥΟΜΕΝ
ΚΥΜΒΑΛΩΝ ΤΕ ΚΑΙ ΤΥΜΠΑΝΩΝ ΠΑΤΑΓΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΚΡΑΥΓΗΝ
ΜΥΡΙΑΝ. ΦΟΒΟΣ ΟΥΝ ΕΛΑΒΕΝ ΗΜΑΣ, ΚΑΙ ΟΙ ΜΑΝΤΕΙΣ ΕΚΕΛ
ΕΥΟΝ ΕΚΛΕΙΠΕΙΝ ΤΗΝ ΝΗΣΟΝ.

("From there, having replenished our water supply, we sailed further close to
the shore for five days, until we arrived at a great bay, which the translators said
was called **Hesperu Ceras**; in it was a great island and in the island a navigable
lake in which there was another island; in this we did not see anything but forest
during the day, but at night (we saw) many bright fires and we heard the sound
of flutes, cymbals and drums, and deafening noise and yelling. Then we were filled
with terror and the priests ordered us to leave the island.")

The reader interested in this strange document is invited to read (and even
download!) my book on the subject, *The Carthaginian Columbus*
(www.skupinbooks.com), which has an extended analysis of this text. For the
purposes of the present paper, however, it is not necessary to go in deep, since
all that concerns us here is how Isidore, writing more than a millennium after
The Circumnavigation of Hanno was penned, understood it. He took the text
at face value, joining other authors who made Hanno, in the happy phrase of
the Spanish historian Casariego, *fuente en donde bebieron los geógrafos
grecolatinos* ("a fountain where the Greco-Roman geographers drank"), for all
its strangeness and ambiguity .

In his versification of Isidore's account of the other islands, Chryse, Argyre,

Ceylon and Tiles, the VM poet is quite workmanlike, and consistent with the palette that we have observed. Then, abruptly, he leaves Isidore behind with his description of the Fortunate Isles, transposed from its place before the "Gorgades", and transposed as well into the imagery of the Celtic Otherworld: the islands are ruled by thrice-three sisters with magical powers, to whom Arthur is brought to be healed of his wounds. It will be noted that the narrative changes from the impersonal to "we." I am unable to identify an antecedent for this episode. Normally it would be bad form to end a paper on a note of puzzlement, but since this paper is about versification of Isidore of Seville, and since we have left Isidore behind, we may treat this puzzlement as an incentive for future research.

As in the other installments of this series, I end by letting the VM poet have the last word, as translated in my book *Merlin, Merlin, Merlin.*

> The isle of Thanatos is found quite near. 875.
>
> It's snake-free, though it teems with living things.
>
> Its soil's an antivenom, mixed with beer.
>
> The Orkney Islands lie across the strait,
>
> All thirty-three, out where the currents veer.
>
> Thirteen of them their farmers cultivate. 880.
>
> Ultima Thule's name comes from being last,
>
> Far off from sunshine, so summer comes late.
>
> The sunlight barely reaches, nor shines past
>
> This twilight land of long, bitter-cold night,
>
> Of gloom and shadows, ringed with icebergs massed, 885.
>
> Blockading it better than warships might.
>
> The island after ours that's said to be

Most excellent is Ireland, fertile site!

It's larger, it lacks bird and honey-bee,

Nor can snakes reproduce upon this isle.   890.

If its soil's brought to lands across the sea,

All bees and snakes vanish after a while.

Gades, what later generations call

Cadiz, has gem-trees, at each root a pile

Of jewels, gum beads that drip, harden, then fall.   895.

Isles west of Cadiz, as the tale is told,

Have dragon guards that round gold apples crawl.

The Gorgon Islands near there are controlled

By hairy women who run fast as hares.

Argire and Cryssa, it's said, bear gold   900.

And silver common as stones Corinth bears.

Ceylon is rich for its fast-growing grass.

Two crops a year in climate such as theirs,

Two springs, two summers, two grape-harvests pass

For our one, and gemstones galore gleam clear.   905.

Atiles Isle produces flowers en masse.

It's springtime there twelve months of every year.

The Isles of Apples, Fortunate, they're named,

Because crops grow without a farmer near,

Or plows, or fertilizer. What they're famed   910.

For is that crops of grape and grain burst out

Although not agriculturally tamed.

Great apple trees from tiny speeds will sprout,

Exotic plants, not only turf and hay.

     Man's lifespan there's a hundred years, no doubt.   915.

Nine sisters rule there. By kindly law they

     Govern those who come to them from our parts.

     Morgen, the one the other eight obey,

As they concede her beauty, knows the arts

     Of healing, and she's wise in herbal lore,   920.

     Infusing vigor into failing hearts.

She a shape-changer, too, and she can soar

     Like Daedalus, on unnatural wings

     To Brest or Chartres, even Italy's shore

She reaches through mysterious voyagings.   925.

     Moronoe, Mazoe, Glitonea, Gliten,

     Giton, Tyronoe, Thiten, all siblings,

She taught number-lore. (That's lute-famed Thiten.)

     We carried wounded Arthur to her side

     After the fight at Camlan, we few men.   930.

Barinthus knew the way, and was our guide,

     Steering the vessel to Morgen's domain.

     She courteously asked us to abide,

And having seen the injured monarch lain

     Upon a gold couch, wounds unwrapped, she expressed   935.

     The opinion that he could be whole again

If he stayed long with her, and convalesced,

     Although the treatment would be long indeed.

     We left him with her, hoping for the best,

Returned, with brisk winds giving us good speed.   940.

Appendix: The Poem and the Poetry

It has long been recognized that the 1,529 line *Vita Merlini* ("Merlin's Life") contains passages that derive directly from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies.* This paper will examine one of those passages in detail, and will discuss the technical virtuosity shown in transforming good Latin prose into excellent Latin poetry.

The authorship of the *Vita Merlini* is unknown. My examination and rejection of the commonly-held attribution to Geoffrey of Monmouth may be found on my website www.skupinbooks.com in *Squibs*, the essay titled "Not Geoffrey." Explicitly removing Geoffrey as a factor will help us focus on the poem as it stands on the page, without preconceptions. I will refer to the author as the *Vita Merlini* (*VM*) poet.

The reader unfamiliar with this fine medieval epic is referred to two sources, John J. Parry's annotated *en face* translation (University of Illinois, 1925), and to my website (above), which has a close *en face* translation, a free poetic one with a prefatory overview, and a discussion of the work as a source of twentieth century poet Laurence Binyon's drama *The Madness of Merlin.*

I trust that the reader familiar with Latin poetry will indulge a few prefatory remarks about dactylic hexameter, the meter of the *Vita Merlini*. If this is redundant, so be it; I had rather include readers than exclude them.

Dactylic hexameter, the rhythm *par excellence* of epic poetry, consists of six-beat lines of dactyls (a long syllable followed by two short ones) and spondees (two long syllables). Noteworthy revivals of this meter include Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* and Longfellow's *Evangeline*. Ovid (known to the VM poet) used it for light-hearted themes, but more commonly it is used

as did Vergil (also known to the VM poet), for themes of weight and dignity. The poet controls the tempo by balancing the ictus (the tick-tock regular rhythm) and the accent (the natural stress of the words). When ictus and accent match, the motion of the verse is fast and smooth; when they clash, the movement is slow, with syncopated "kicks." The author's challenge is to fit the poetic means with the poetic message.

On three occasions the VM poet took on another challenge, that of versifying the prose of encyclopedist Isidore of Seville. He did so successfully, and his achievement is remarkable both for the ingenuity of the circumlocutions he employed and for the fidelity to Isidore's original.   VM 875-909 derive from Isidore's XIV.vi, *De insulis* ("concerning islands"), VM 1179-1242 from Isidore's XIII.xiii, *De diversitate aquarum*, ("concerning the diversity of bodies of water"), and VM 1301-1386 from Isidore's XII.vii, *De avibus* ("concerning birds").

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Islands in the *Vita Merlini*

Abstract   Michael Skupin

    It has long been recognized that the medieval Latin epic *Vita Merlini* ("Life of Merlin") contains passages that derive from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae.* This paper, the third in a three-part series, will examine the passages about islands. The *Vita Merlini* poet's resourcefulness in versifying Isidore's prose will be be discussed, as well as his accuracy in translating the encyclopedist's ideas. Since the original includes material from the Greek text called *The Circumnavigation of Hanno*, that controversial text is discussed as an Isidorean source.