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In Search of
the Lost Land of Thule
The Ice Museum
Joanna Kavenna

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The lost northern land of Thule, once a compelling ancient mystery, seems to have become unfashionable in recent years. While the more popular riddle of Atlantis still inspires the occasional quest, Thule's popularity has diminished as modern explorers have tamed the Arctic wilderness. It is therefore exciting to see the legend find new life in Joanna Kavenna's delightful work, in which the author employs Thule as a point of reference for her journeys across the North Atlantic and Baltic regions. For those unfamiliar with the legend, Thule was discovered (or invented) by the Greek explorer Pytheas in the fourth century BCE. Pytheas's account of an inhabited land beset by frozen seas and perpetual darkness was at once a fantastic tale and a credible depiction of the Arctic. In the amorphous space between myth and reality, Thule became synonymous with "the most northerly place in the ancient world" (p. 4). The tantalizing possibility of recreating Pytheas's exploits has since inspired myth-hunters through the centuries, including Greeks, Romans, nineteenth-century Romantics, polar explorers, and Nazis. Kavenna, of course, knows that little ground is to be gained from making a factual claim about the location of Thule. Rather, she retraces the steps of past adventurers and seekers of the lost land as she explores the deep imprint of modern myth-making on the far North. Thus, although readers hoping for new insights on the ancient legend may be somewhat disappointed, general audiences will no doubt learn much from this rich travelogue and reflection on the ways in which modern discovery has coexisted with but never eclipsed the aura of legend surrounding the Arctic.

As her narrative unfolds, Kavenna takes us to a number of potential "Thules," adroitly interweaving the accounts of past explorers with her own travels and holding the ancient and modern threads together by replicating the physical experience of her subjects. "Thule," she reminds us, "was a traveler's account. Pytheas claimed he had really been there. And though the name became a mystery, it was a mystery inextricably entwined with ideas of a particular place" (p. 10). The entire region thus becomes a proverbial "Ice Museum," with each stop along the way exhibiting the legacy of the Thule myth. Kavenna begins by recalling the exploits of great polar explorers on display at a museum in Oslo dedicated to the Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930). The arduous expeditions of Nansen and others in the nineteenth century meant that by the twentieth, "[l]ands draped in shadows for thousands of years had been drawn into the light. Fantasy had been replaced by knowledge" (p. 8). This transformation, we might expect, would signify the moment when modern discovery solved the lingering mysteries of the North. Kavenna quickly reveals, however, that although Nansen's quest was to conquer the Arctic through the application of science, his life's work was nonetheless inspired by the more romantic visions of a distant Thule as the ultimate limit of human exploration. Above all, it was the lure of the myth that led him to employ modern means to attempt a journey "beyond the land of Thule to somewhere still more distant and strange" (p. 14).

Meanwhile, a poetic resonance to the legend fired the dreams of his contemporaries. "Even at the time Nansen sailed north," Kavenna writes, "there was a holiday industry in remote and empty Thules" (p. 45). What in ancient times had symbolized the limits of the known world had, by the late nineteenth century, come to represent the boundaries between the familiar and the foreign. Thule also evoked a welcome sense of isolation, of withdrawal from the crowded cities of the modern world. It offered an escape that led well-to-do Victorian Britons to set sail for the Shetland Isles, where the ancient Romans believed they had conquered Thule and extended their mighty empire to the end of the world. For more adventurous Victorians, Thule was Iceland, where exploding geysers and furious volcanoes raged alongside vast stretches of utter stillness on plains of snow and black rock. It was this remoteness and strangeness that convinced Richard Francis Burton he had found Thule when he reached the top of the great glacier Vatnajökull. "Because of this stretching stillness of ice," Kavenna explains, "Iceland remained a Thule of sorts, thought Burton, a pure northern Arcadia, worthy of a few superstitions" (p. 110).

Kavenna weaves these historical meanings of Thule with her own personal attachment to the North. Her journey is also a retreat from a successful but uncomfortable urban existence. In writing this book, she indulges a craving for a simpler life. Her choice to go North stems from a childhood fascination with the adventure stories of polar explorers. She recalls, "It was the chill of the stories that made them appeal to me.... There was something in the stillness of the ice which gripped me, stillness like suspense, an empty stage, ready at any moment for the grand entrance of another explorer" (p. 30). Like Burton before her, Kavenna expresses a wish to turn modernity against itself, to use its conveyances to escape from its clutches. She remains mindful, of course, of the ways in which Thule was also employed as a frame for shaping modern geographies--a figurative territory to be claimed in the name of various causes. She notes that Fridtjof Nansen was sure that Thule had lain on the coast of his homeland of Norway, which had recently gained independence from Sweden. Icelanders, meanwhile, invoked Thule in the name of freedom as they chafed under Danish colonial rule, while Scottish nationalists clung to the old Roman notion of the Shetlands as Pytheas's destination, thus "casting Thule in the national drama" (p. 61). In each case, the ancient legend afforded a sense of deeper history that legitimized aspirations for independence.

These twin appeals to anti-modernism and nationalism intersected in Germany after World War I, when Nazi sympathizers drew on the Thule myth to represent their vision of an original Germanic homeland inhabited by the penultimate exemplars of the Germanic race. In search of the roots of this radical interpretation, Kavenna travels to Munich to investigate the so-called Thule Society, which promoted the Aryan and antisemitic ideology at the heart of the National Socialist movement and whose members included many who would later become prominent Nazi officials. Unlike the polar explorers, the members of the Thule Society were not concerned with the search for a mythical land but with the use of Thule as a code for the racial and national purity they sought to foster within Germany. Thus, even if Kavenna's lengthy detour in Munich seems out of place with her travels in northern Europe, it serves to highlight the connections between Germanic ideology and Nazi politics. At the same time, her vivid descriptions of the city's neoclassical showpieces create an appropriate backdrop for her account of the curious blending of classical myth and paganism in the fantasies of the Thule Society.

Kavenna correctly recognizes that the ties between the NSDAP and the Thule Society, while significant, were also highly tenuous. Although the ideologues of the society were eager to help the Nazis cultivate an image of national unity and rebirth through the use of ancient Germanic symbols and myths, their worldviews were often at odds with political and military goals of the party. As a result, the Thule Society became increasingly irrelevant well before Hitler's rise to power. Moreover, the German occupation of Norway and Denmark, which to some degree corresponded to fantasies of unifying the "Germanic lands," was a less a product of ideology and more of military strategy. Kavenna, however, maintains that the effects of the Thule Society's visions manifested themselves within occupied Scandinavia. Returning to Norway, she visits the home of a Norwegian *krigsbarn*, whose father belonged to the German SS and whose birth had been part of official Nazi policy to ensure the strength of the Germanic race. Once considered "ideal progeny of the Aryan Empire" (p. 185), the *krigsbarn* have since become pariahs, painful reminders of the long-suppressed memories of collaboration by ordinary Norwegians.

The experience with Nazism marks a sort of false denouement in the book's narrative. Kavenna had expected the power of Thule to have diminished in the first half of the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century fantasies should have succumbed to the inexorable conquest of the northern wilderness, now pacified by the hotels, gift shops, and other trappings of human civilization that greet Kavenna on each of her travels. Moreover, the brutality of the Nazis should have provided a stern warning to those seeking to bend the legend of Thule to their will. What Kavenna discovers, however, is the resilience and malleability of the myth. Despite its abuse at the hands of the Nazis, Thule remains a potent symbol for modern causes. In Norway, the Sámi of Lapland have inserted themselves into the myth as the ancient peoples of Pytheas's account, while the U.S. air base in Greenland, which bears the name Thule, stands as "the northern outpost of a vast military empire" (p. 264). Perhaps most surprisingly, Thule also embellishes the aspirations of the Baltic nation of Estonia, which struggles to reinvent itself in post-communist Eastern Europe. Here Kavenna hears former president Lennart Meri's account of how Thule is not a place but a word for "fire" describing a meteor which struck Estonian soil and lit the winter night for ancient peoples of the North. As Kavenna observes, "Meri had tried to lift Thule out of the scrabbling sets of hands by suggesting that Thule was something beyond the human world. He saw Thule as a story about the power of nature itself" (p. 223).

It is, ultimately, this association between Thule and nature that Kavenna finds most relevant for the twenty-first century. In her last chapters, she journeys to Greenland and Svalbard, the most remote inhabited corners of the Arctic. These regions, lying far beyond the possible reach of Pytheas's ancient craft, reveal to Kavenna the seemingly unending stretches of wilderness and vacant horizons that for her represent the truest vestiges of the mythical Thule. These lands suggest the degree to which both Thule and the Arctic have defied modern conquest and retained their enigmatic quality. In recent years, however, persistent warnings about the changing global environment have emphasized the shrinking Arctic ice and the pollution of the North's pristine wilderness, leading Kavenna to shift the myth into a future tense. She closes by casting the lost land of the past as a current symbol of impending loss. Her book gives voice to philosophers like Arne Naess, who laments the growing alienation from the natural emptiness of the North; to Inuit Eskimos displaced by Western encroachment; and to the scientists in Svalbard, whose grim reports foretell the decline of the northern region in which Thule allegedly lay.

The inevitable irony of *The Ice Museum*, of course, is that its rich narrative also takes something away from the North. By uncovering layer after layer of ancient and modern myth, Kavenna robs Thule of the very remoteness she so eagerly sought and wished to extol. It is a dilemma that she herself acknowledges: "When the remote north was an area of speculation and uncertainty, Thule could be many things. Thule could be pure while it was fantasy, a place beyond the reach of humans. But now, the human history of the north in the twentieth century was bound up with my sense of Thule" (p. 268). Nevertheless, Kavenna succeeds in revealing how a complex and fascinating dialogue between the ancient and modern worlds has unfolded in the northern frontier. In a book aided by maps but (perhaps wisely) devoid of photographs, Kavenna's words paint a picture of the North that is as wild and remote as it is replete with human history and intimately connected to the human future. As a scholarly work, *The Ice Museum* is a light read; we learn very little about how historians and classicists interpreted Pytheas or informed the manipulation of the idea of Thule. For those with a more casual interest, however, it is a marvelous and highly accessible compilation of the ways in which Thule, rather than waiting to be found, has in fact rested in the imaginations of the travelers and dreamers who shaped the North.

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