

BRITAIN:

A VIEW

BY

STRABO

Compiled by

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Introduction

Strabo was a historian and geographer of Greek ancestry who lived in the Roman Empire. His magnum opus was the *Geographica*, his compilation of all the geographical, historical, and scientific knowledge he had gained during his travels.

(Right - 16th century inscription of the Greek historian, Strabo)

Strabo was born to an affluent family from Amaseia in Pontus (modern Amasya, Turkey), a city that he said was situated the approximate equivalent of 75 km from the Black Sea. His mother was Georgian. Pontus had recently fallen to the Roman Republic, and although politically he was a proponent of Roman imperialism, Strabo belonged on his mother's side to a prominent family whose members had held important positions under the resisting regime of King Mithridates VI of Pontus.



Strabo's life was characterized by extensive travels, and he journeyed to Egypt and Kush, as far west as coastal Tuscany, and as far south as Ethiopia in addition to his travels in Asia Minor and his time spent in Rome.

Travel throughout the Mediterranean and Near East, especially for scholarly purposes, was popular during this era and was facilitated by the relative peace enjoyed throughout the reign of Augustus (27 BC - AD 14).

Strabo moved to Rome in 44 BC, and stayed there, studying and writing, until at least 31 BC. In 29 BC, on his way to Corinth (where Augustus was at the time), he visited the island of Gyaros in the Aegean Sea. Around 25 BC, he sailed up the Nile until reaching Philae, after which point there is little record of his activity until 17 AD.

stretches parallel to Celtica [France], neither exceeding nor falling short of the length of Celtica; for each of the two lengths is about four thousand three hundred -- or four hundred -- stadia..."

Strabo uses Caesar's visit to Britain as an example of the "short distance" between the shores of Gaul and Southern Britain: *"He [Caesar] put to sea by night and landed on the following day about the fourth hour, thus having completed three hundred and twenty stadia in his voyage across..."*

Strabo describes Britain and its resources as: *"Most of the island is flat and overgrown with forests, although many of its districts are hilly. **It bears grain, cattle, gold, silver, and iron. These things, accordingly, are exported from the island, as also hides, and slaves, and dogs that are by nature suited to the purposes of the chase..."***

Strabo goes on: *"The forests are their cities; for they fence in a spacious circular enclosure with trees which they have felled, and in that enclosure make huts for themselves and also pen up their cattle -- not, however, with the purpose of staying a long time. Their weather is more rainy than snowy; and on the days of clear sky fog prevails so long a time that throughout a whole day the sun is to be seen for only three or four hours round about midday. And this is the case also among the Morini and the Menapii and all the neighbours of the latter."*

Of the Britons, he says: *"The men of Britain are taller than the Celti, and not so yellow-haired, although their bodies are of looser build. The following is an indication of their size: I myself, in Rome, saw mere lads towering as much as half a foot above the tallest people in the city, although they were bandy-legged and presented no fair lines anywhere else in their figure. Their habits are in part like those of the Celti, but in part more simple and barbaric -- so much so that, on account of their inexperience, some of them, although well supplied with milk, make no cheese; and they have no experience in gardening or other agricultural pursuits. And they have powerful chieftains in their country. For the purposes of war they use chariots for the most part, just as some of the Celti do."*

Speaking of the Irish (cannibals), Strabo said: *"Besides some small islands round about Britain, there is also a large island, Ierne, which stretches parallel to Britain on the north, its breadth being greater than its length. Concerning this island I have nothing certain to tell, except that its inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, **since they are man-eaters** as well as heavy eaters, and since, further, they count it an honourable thing, when their fathers die, to devour them, and openly to have intercourse, not only with the other women, but also with their mothers and sisters; but I am saying this only with the understanding that I have no trustworthy witnesses for it; and yet, **as for the matter of man-eating, that is said to be a custom of the Scythians also, and, in cases of necessity forced by sieges, the Celti, the Iberians, and several other peoples are said to have practised it.**"*

Strabo speaks of local/Roman political/business association: *"At present, however, some of the chieftains there, after procuring the friendship of Caesar Augustus by sending embassies and by paying court to him, have not only dedicated offerings in the Capitol, but have also managed to make the whole of the island virtually Roman property. Further, they submit so easily to heavy duties, both on the exports from there to Celtica and on the imports from Celtica (these latter are ivory chains and necklaces, and amber-gems and glass vessels and other petty wares of that sort), that there is no need of garrisoning the island; for one legion, at the least, and some cavalry would be required in order to carry off tribute from them, and the expense of the army would offset the tribute-money; in fact, the duties must necessarily be lessened if tribute is imposed, and, at the same time, dangers be encountered, if force is applied."*

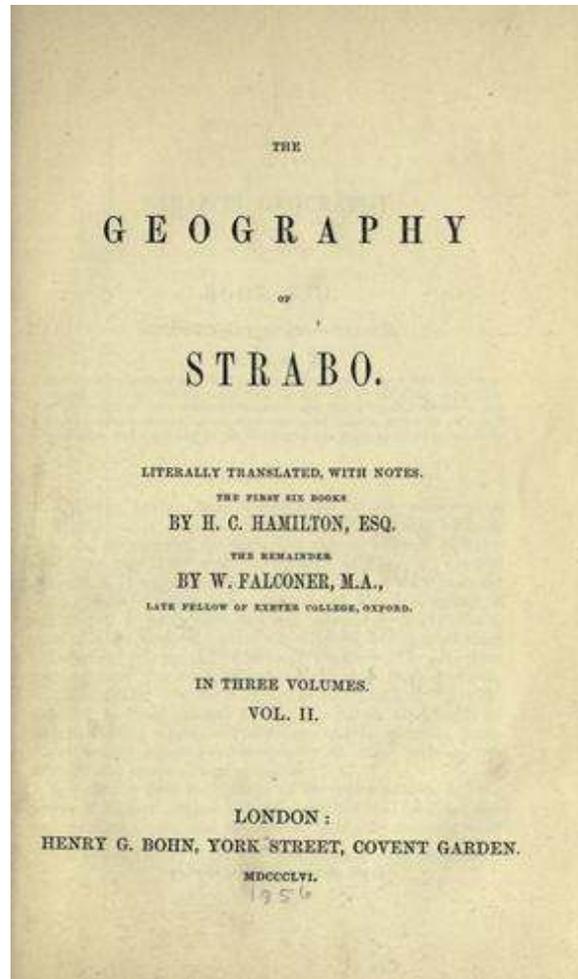
Following is the complete text of *Strabo, Geography, Vol II, Book IV, Chapter V.*

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GEOGRAPHY

by

Strabo



*(Written sometime between
07 AD and 23 AD)*

Vol II

Book IV Chapter V

1 Britain is triangular in shape; and its longest side stretches parallel to Celtica, neither exceeding nor falling short of the length of Celtica; for each of the two lengths is about four thousand three hundred -- or four hundred -- stadia: the Celtic length that extends from the outlets of the Rhene as far as those northern ends of the Pyrenees that are near Aquitania, as also the length that extends from Cantium (which is directly opposite the outlets of the Rhene), the most easterly point of Britain, as far as that westerly end of the island which lies opposite the Aquitanian Pyrenees. This, of course, is the shortest distance from the Pyrenees to the Rhene, since, as I have already said, the greatest distance is as much as five thousand stadia; yet it is reasonable to suppose that there is a convergence from the parallel position which the river and the mountains occupy with reference to each other, since at the ends where they approach the ocean there is a curve in both of them.

2 There are only four passages which are habitually used in crossing from the mainland to the island, those which begin at the mouths of the rivers -- the Rhenus, the Sequana, the Liger, and the Garumna. However, the people who put to sea from the regions that are near the Rhenus make the voyage, not from the mouths themselves, but from the coast of those Morini who have a common boundary with the Menapii. (On their coast, also, is Itium, which the Deified Caesar used as a naval station when he set sail for the island. He put to sea by night and landed on the following day about the fourth hour, thus having completed three hundred and twenty stadia in his voyage across; and he found the grain still in the fields.) Most of the island is flat and overgrown with forests, although many of its districts are hilly. It bears grain, cattle, gold, silver, and iron. These things, accordingly, are exported from the island, as also hides, and slaves, and dogs that are by nature suited to the purposes of the chase; the Celti, however, use both these and the native dogs for the purposes of war too. The men of Britain are taller than the Celti, and not so yellow-haired, although their bodies are of looser build. The following is an indication of their size: I myself, in Rome, saw mere lads towering as much as half a foot above the tallest people in the city, although they were bandy-legged and presented no fair lines anywhere else in their figure. Their habits are in part like those of the Celti, but in part more simple and barbaric - so much so that, on account of their inexperience, some of them, although well supplied with milk, make no cheese; and they have no experience in gardening or other agricultural pursuits. And they have powerful chieftains in their country. For the purposes of war they use chariots for the most part, just as some of the Celti do. The forests are their cities; for they fence in a spacious circular enclosure with trees which they have felled, and in that enclosure make huts for themselves and also pen up their cattle -- not, however, with the purpose of staying a long time. Their weather is more rainy than snowy; and on the days of clear sky fog prevails so long a time that throughout a whole day the sun is to be seen for only three or four hours round about midday. And this is the case also among the Morini and the Menapii and all the neighbours of the latter.

3 The Deified Caesar crossed over to the island twice, although he came back in haste, without accomplishing anything great or proceeding far into the island, not only on account of the quarrels that took place in the land of the Celti, among the barbarians and his own soldiers as well, but also on account of the fact that many of his ships had been lost at the time of the full moon, since the ebb-tides and the flood-tides got their increase at that time. However, he won two or three victories over the Britons, albeit he carried along only two legions of his army; and he brought back hostages, slaves, and quantities of the rest of the booty. At present, however, some of the chieftains there, after procuring the friendship of Caesar Augustus by sending embassies and by paying court to him, have not only dedicated offerings in the Capitol, but have also managed to make the whole of the island virtually Roman property. Further, they submit so easily to heavy duties, both on the exports from there to Celtica and on the imports from Celtica (these latter are ivory chains and necklaces, and amber-gems and glass vessels and other petty wares of that sort), that there is no need of garrisoning the island; for one legion, at the least, and some cavalry would be required in order to carry off tribute from them, and the expense of the army would offset the tribute-money; in fact, the duties must necessarily be lessened if tribute is imposed, and, at the same time, dangers be encountered, if force is applied.

4 Besides some small islands round about Britain, there is also a large island, Ierne, which stretches parallel to Britain on the north, its breadth being greater than its length. Concerning this island I have nothing certain to tell, except that its inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, since they are man-eaters as well as heavy eaters, and since, further, they count it an honourable thing, when their fathers die, to devour them, and openly to have intercourse, not only with the other women, but also with their mothers and sisters; but I am saying this only with the understanding that I have no trustworthy witnesses for it; and yet, as for the matter of man-eating, that is said to be a custom of the Scythians also, and, in cases of necessity forced by sieges, the Celti, the Iberians, and several other peoples are said to have practised it.

5 Concerning Thule our historical information is still more uncertain, on account of its outside position; for Thule, of all the countries that are named, is set farthest north. But that the things which Pytheas has told about Thule, as well as the other places in that part of the world, have indeed been fabricated by him, we have clear evidence from the districts that are known to us, for in most cases he has falsified them, as I have already said before, and hence he is obviously more false concerning the districts which have been placed outside the inhabited world. And yet, if judged by the science of the celestial phenomena and by mathematical theory, he might possibly seem to have made adequate use of the facts as regards the people who live close to the frozen zone, when he says that, of the animals and domesticated fruits, there is an utter dearth of some and a scarcity of the others, and that the people live

on millet and other herbs, and on fruits and roots; and where there are grain and honey, the people get their beverage, also, from them. As for the grain, he says,-- since they have no pure sunshine -- they pound it out in large storehouses, after first gathering in the ears thither; for the threshing floors become useless because of this lack of sunshine and because of the rains.

End

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