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# Centrality, Marginality and Distance: Britain's Changing Location on the Map of the World

Fabienne Michelet

This essay examines the variations of Britain's location in antique and medieval representations of the *orbis terrae*. It analyzes the various strategies Anglo-Saxon authors developed to redefine the situation of their island in a wider continental geography, thereby remapping Europe's northern limits. Focusing on selected historical and cartographic sources, this article investigates what is at stake in geographical positioning, and it questions the location of the centre and the evaluation of distance as well as the links existing between localization and identity. It contends that insular authors, minimizing or transcending the distance separating their homeland from a Mediterranean centre of civilization, elaborate a new centrality around their island.

In his *Geography*, the first-century Greek scholar Strabo offers a description of Britain. He mentions its location, size and natural resources, before turning his attention to the island's inhabitants. He says:

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. (II. 4. 5. 2, 255)

If the Britons stand out in the crowd, it is not simply because of their size: it is above all because Strabo portrays them as ugly and misshapen. A few lines below, proceeding with his unflattering portrayal of the Britons, the Greek geographer stigmatizes their customs when he declares that "their habits are in part like those of the Celta, but in part

more simple and barbaric [. . .]” (II. 4. 5. 2, 255). In this ethnographic account therefore, the Britons’ physical alterity is reflected in their primitive behaviour.

In the geography outlined by Strabo’s text, Britain lies in the distance, near the limits of inhabitable lands, a limit which the geographer situates in Ierne (Ireland). Reflecting on the northern end of the world, Strabo observes that:

[. . .] modern scientific writers are not able to speak of any country north of Ierne, which lies to the north of Britain and near thereto, and is the home of men who are complete savages and lead a miserable existence because of the cold; and therefore, in my opinion, the northern limit of our inhabited world is to be placed there. (I. 2. 5. 8, 443)

Ierne is the only land to be found north of Britain, and the two islands lie near one another. There is a gradation toward savageness in Strabo’s text: the further north one goes, the wilder the lands and the people become. Britain is remote from a Mediterranean centre of civilization, and its inhabitants are unattractive brutes whose customs are barbaric. They do not compare favourably with the Romans.

Seven centuries later, the Anglo-Saxon historian Bede gives another account of the impression Britain’s inhabitants make in Rome, in a famous episode of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In this anecdote, Anglo-Saxon slave boys are put up for sale in a Roman market. They catch Gregory’s eye, and the future Pope is struck by their beauty:

[Gregory] uidisse inter alia pueros uenales positos candidi corporis ac uenusti uultus, capillorum quoque forma egregia. Quos cum aspiceret, interrogauit, ut aiunt, de qua regione uel terra essent adlati; dictumque est quia de Brittania insula, cuius incolae talis essent aspectus.<sup>1</sup> (II. 1, 132)

Bede’s insular boys also stand out in a Roman crowd, but this time, it is their fairness that draws attention. Gregory inquires further about who these youths are. More precisely, he wants to learn the name of their people, of their king and their place of origin. These questions are the occasion for Gregory’s famous puns which transform the *Angli* into an-

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<sup>1</sup> “As well as other merchandise he [Gregory] saw some boys put up for sale, with fair complexions, handsome faces, and lovely hair. On seeing them he asked, so it is said, from what region or land they had been brought. He was told that they came from the island of Britain, whose inhabitants were like that in appearance.” The translations are from this same edition.

gels, their kingdom *Deiri* into "de ira", the divine wrath from which they are snatched, and the name of their king, *Ælle*, becomes "alleluia," an injunction to sing God's praise. Bede thus reads in the answers given to his questions God's plan for the Anglo-Saxons in Britain: their beauty reveals that they are in fact proleptic Christians, and it announces the special role they have been granted in religious history.

These anecdotes present two radically different pictures of Britain and its inhabitants. Yet this discrepancy is not surprising as it reflects their authors' respective positions. The former account is the work of someone from the Mediterranean world who situates Britain in the distance and who links it to the wildness traditionally associated with the periphery. The author of the latter episode is a native of the British Isles who identifies himself as one of the English whose history is being recorded.<sup>2</sup> He rewrites his homeland as a significant place in Christendom and his own people as elected even when they were still pagan. Curiously however, Bede does not negate the distance separating his homeland from the continent, for Gregory does not know who the slave boys are, where they come from and who their king is.

Despite their idiosyncrasies, these two anecdotes share some important features: they both associate identity with localization and invite us to question how geographical distance is measured and appreciated. The present contribution to the exploration of the "space of English," or rather, of the "space of the English" intends to trace the variations of their ancestral homeland's position in classical and medieval representations of the world. It will compare antique with Anglo-Saxon views of the world, with special attention to the geography of northern Europe. My focus will be on Tacitus's *Agricola*, as well as on the geographical sections of two historical chronicles (the opening of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and of the Old English translation of Orosius's *Histories against the Pagans*). To this material, I will add selections from another important body of geographical learning, namely early medieval *mappae mundi* (the Albi and the Cotton maps).

In what follows, I will investigate what is at stake in geographical positioning and I will question the nature and evaluation of distance. For, reflecting on these questions, Jacques Le Goff reminds us that "*la localisation est un processus d'identification*" which inscribes sameness and differ-

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<sup>2</sup> In the preface to the *Ecclesiastical History* (2), Bede identifies himself as one of the *Angli*. He rejoices that King Ceolwulf wants to know more about "nostrae gentis uires inlustres." The pronoun *nostra* includes Ceolwulf and Bede, as well as the medieval audience.



ence in space (836, emphasis Le Goff). According to mediéval thinking indeed, the position an individual or a people occupies is part of their identity: far from being a mere topographical accident,<sup>3</sup> it is, on the contrary, a crucial ingredient in any process of self-definition. Consequently, the estimation of distance, geographical location and questions of identity and self-definition are closely related issues.<sup>4</sup>

Although common sense readily recognizes that any act of representation is shaped by ideological or political assumptions, my purpose here is not to study the distortions that affect the depiction of the surrounding world. To situate the locus of my investigation more precisely, my reflection on space comprises three levels of analysis.<sup>5</sup> The first deals with the topographic reality in which a society lives. It calls for a study of the salient features of the landscape or the distribution of the population in the countryside: it examines how a physical space is occupied, dominated and transformed. The second level of analysis is the culture of space, by which I mean the space of the scholar, the concepts and ideas about space that are transmitted through tradition. This body of knowledge is inscribed in an intellectual history and is subject to change as a result of new scientific developments. Space as a mental structure constitutes the last aspect of this threefold division. It examines the affective connotations that are conferred on space and orientation, that is, the spatial imagination of an individual or a society. For instance, the oppositions high / low or central / peripheral usually go hand-in-hand with positive and negative overtones. Contrasting with the historical perspective inherent in a culture of space, these values tend to endure through time and to be transmitted through the generations of a given culture with little change.

My focus here is on the interplay between the second and third levels of analysis, namely between tradition – the position of Britain on the map of the world – and the affective connotations granted to localization. I contend that a spatial representation received through tradition can challenge the way a group perceives its geographical location and, as a result, itself. In a reverse movement, the various biases attached to lo-

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<sup>3</sup> See Zumthor 51-55.

<sup>4</sup> I pursue these issues further in my recently completed doctoral dissertation: "Creation, Migration and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature."

<sup>5</sup> My own thinking on space and spatial representations is greatly indebted to the works of Paul Zumthor, Jacques Le Goff and Henri Lefebvre.

calization and the spatial presuppositions underlying any sense of self may also modify a spatial image received from tradition.

Classical learning situates Britain in the periphery. In addition to Strabo who places the home of the Britons near the limit of the inhabitable world, one could mention among others Pliny the Elder and Solinus. In his *Natural History*, Pliny locates Britain far away from the continent. The island is facing Germany, Gaul and Spain "magno intervallo adversa"<sup>6</sup> (IV. 16. 102, 348). Solinus clearly opposes Britain to the rest of Europe: "finis erat orbis ora Gallici litoris, nisi Brittania insula non qualibet amplitudine nomen paene orbis alterius mereretur"<sup>7</sup> (22. 1, 99-100). Solinus expresses Britain's alterity by comparing it to another world set beyond the limit of the ecumene. This image draws attention to the island's size, but it also suggests that Britain is separated from the rest of Europe, not only geographically, but also by its very nature: it is a radically different place.

One could multiply at will examples of a tradition which relegates Britain to the periphery and which constructs the gap separating it from the continent as a sign of the island's otherness. Yet some texts, such as Tacitus's *Agricola*, have a particularly complex articulation of proximity and distance. The Roman historian follows the convention that confines Britain to the margins; he implies that there is no land to the north of it when he says: "[. . .] septentrionalia eius, nullis contra terris, uasto atque aperto mari pulsantur"<sup>8</sup> (10. 2, 8). A few lines below, he adds that Agricola was the first to discover its insularity: "hanc oram [north of Scotland] nouissimi maris tunc primum Romana classis circumuecta insulam esse Britanniam adfirmavit"<sup>9</sup> (10. 5, 8). In Tacitus's European geography, Britain is the remotest of all lands, it lies in the "last sea" (the *novum mare*) and has remained, until Agricola's coming, uncharted and unknown. Its northern borders were not precisely defined until the Roman governor's expedition mapped and surveyed this outlying corner of the world. The mention of the circumnavigation of Britain also indicates that Agricola literally encompasses and symbolically appropriates the island. Tacitus's narrative therefore claims the whole of Britain for the

<sup>6</sup> "across a great distance." Unless otherwise specified, translations are my own.

<sup>7</sup> "the sea coast of Gaul was the end of the world except that the island of Britain, of whatever size it be, almost deserves the name of another world."

<sup>8</sup> "[. . .] its [Britain's] northern shores alone have no lands facing them, but are beaten by the wastes of open sea."

<sup>9</sup> "for the first time, the Roman fleet sailed round the shore of the last sea and established that Britain was an island."

known world, an interpretation that is supported by the name the British chief Calgacus later gives his Roman enemies: *raptores orbis*<sup>10</sup> (30. 6, 24). Agricola's journey explores a distant land and in so doing annexes it to the Roman sphere of control.

Britain's remoteness is again foregrounded in the speech Tacitus attributes to Calgacus. Interestingly, in these lines, distance becomes something positive, for the insular leader declares that it is his homeland's remoteness and obscurity that have preserved his tribe's independence. Calgacus is moreover aware that the periphery may appeal to some when he observes that "omne ignotum pro magnifico est"<sup>11</sup> (30. 4, 24). The distance that usually signifies barbarism becomes appealing and invites exploration and conquest.

Throughout the *Agricola*, Tacitus plays with the topos that views Britain as a remote land. He uses it to enhance the achievements of his hero who has mapped an outlying island. Furthermore, by investing with positive meaning the distance separating Britain from a Roman centre of civilization, the historian suggests that his protagonist took control over the desirable home of proud and sovereign warriors, over the last free corner of the world. If remoteness is usually suspect, always a place of possible monstrosity and savageness, it can also shelter freedom and marvels.

From the classical tradition, Anglo-Saxon authors receive a geography wherein their island lies in the distance; they write against a background which confines them to the fringes of the world. This outlook was likely to pose problems to the inhabitants of the British Isles, for centre and periphery, distances and boundaries are relative concepts that are functions of the subject's point of view, and the Anglo-Saxons most probably did not experience themselves as marginal and peripheral.<sup>12</sup> I now wish to examine their reaction to their relegation to the margins. How do they perceive the geography of northern Europe, and especially Britain's position in this spatial layout? Do they modify the world picture they receive from tradition? And if so, how?

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<sup>10</sup> "thieves of the world."

<sup>11</sup> "all that is unknown is magnified."

<sup>12</sup> See Bridges 70-72.

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To answer these questions, I propose first to look at two medieval *mappae mundi* and at the place they assign to Britain. I will then compare this visual evidence to what Bede and the translator of the *Old English Orosius* have to say about Britain's location. When reflecting on cartographic evidence, and especially evidence dating from the Middle Ages, it is crucial to bear in mind that a map is not an a-historical and trans-cultural entity. Mediating between the world and the viewer, it is a graphic representation whose apparent transparency is misleading.<sup>13</sup> For the map always conveys more than purely geographical information: it betrays its maker's cosmological, symbolic, political or religious view of the world.<sup>14</sup> Medieval maps are not reliable depictions of an external reality: they are symbolic and ideological artefacts, and an analysis of Britain's position in these representations of the world can bring to light some of the assumptions which presided over the drawing of the map.

Britain is on the edge of the world in one of the earliest medieval depictions of the ecumene: the coarse map reproduced below and found on folio 57<sup>v</sup> in the manuscript 29 of the Albi Library.<sup>15</sup> The manuscript is an eighth-century miscellanea originating from Spain or southwestern France, and the map precedes geographical extracts.

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<sup>13</sup> See Jacob 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob 36.

<sup>15</sup> The size of the original map is 290 x 230 mm. The sketch of the map is from Miller III 58.

The Albi mapmaker shaped the earth like a horseshoe surrounded by the traditional Outer Ocean. The map is oriented toward the east, with Asia at the top, Europe on the left and Africa on the right. The Mediterranean is the extent of water reaching within the semicircle of lands. *Britania* is placed in the ocean, opposite to *Ispania*, at the very bottom left-hand corner of the map. It is alone in lying in the Outer Ocean: all the other islands that are depicted on the map, such as *Corsica*, *Sardinia*, *Sicilia*, *Creta* and *Cyprus*, are included within the land masses.

If the actual geography of Europe and its islands is reflected in this spatial organization (Britain is situated toward the northwest and islands such as Corsica, Sardinia, etc. in the Mediterranean), the map nevertheless stresses Britain's isolation, for it is the only place lying beyond the circle of lands represented by the horseshoe. Moreover, neither the shape of the island nor that of the European coastline suggests any relationship between the two places. The northern shores of the continental land masses are not indented in accordance with the shape of the island facing it, since the mapmaker adopts a conventional rounded or oval shape when drawing coastlines. Visually therefore, the Albi map clearly isolates Britain from the rest of the world.

Contrasting with this southern and early map, the Cotton *mappa mundi* was produced in England before the Norman Conquest. Preserved in British Library Cotton Tiberius B. V, part 1 f. 56v, a bilingual manuscript containing writings both in Latin and in Old English, this map is the only one surviving from the Anglo-Saxon period, probably dating back to the tenth century.<sup>16</sup> The Cotton map provides a striking depiction of northern Europe. The British Isles take up a large portion of the map, much larger in fact than their actual size would allow for. Moreover, the map offers a fairly accurate depiction of this part of the world. This may be due to the rectangular shape of the picture – which would facilitate the drawing of this “corner” of the world. More likely however, the map drew on better, more accurate information about northwestern Europe.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The size of the original map is 210 x 170 mm. The map is discussed in McGurk 79-86.

<sup>17</sup> McGurk 80.

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Commenting on this *mappa mundi*, Patrick McGurk observes that the extra space granted by the rectangular shape of the map was used to depict not land masses, but seas and inlands.<sup>18</sup> In this novel representation of northern Europe, Britain is surrounded by various islands, such as *Island*, the *Orcades*, *Tylen* and *Hibernia*. Although the uneven outline adopted by the mapmaker in his depiction of the coastlines is as much a convention as the geometrical shapes found in the Albi map,<sup>19</sup> the indentation of Britain's seashores matches that of the corresponding continental littoral. The British Isles are shown in their correct position opposite the French coast.<sup>20</sup>

When Anglo-Saxon scholars draw a *mappa mundi* therefore, they prove reluctant to isolate their island in the distance. They resort to mapping strategies that assign to their homeland a new location on the map of the world. In the Cotton map, Britain is granted pre-eminence because it is allowed to occupy so much space in this representation of the world. The depiction of its coastlines emphasizes the relation uniting it to the continent. By including Britain within the broad outline of the land masses and by enclosing it in a cluster of islands, the Anglo-Saxon mapmaker grants his own country a new, regional centrality.<sup>21</sup>

Moving from graphic to textual representations of the world, I would like now to examine the first chapter of the ninth-century Old English translation of Orosius's *Histories against the Pagans*, before returning, by way of conclusion, to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. The vernacular translator took many liberties with Orosius's text when depicting northern Europe, possibly in an attempt to clarify the geography of this region. Yet the modifications brought to the source text have a wider import, remapping the septentrional end of the continent. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to present an exhaustive analysis of the *Old English Orosius*'s opening section, and I will limit my comments to a report interpolated in the translation, namely Ohthere's travel account.<sup>22</sup> Ohthere is a Norwegian traveller who journeys north; he passes the North Cape and reaches the White Sea. He presents himself as an explorer heading towards wild lands. He declares that he

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<sup>18</sup> McGurk 83.

<sup>19</sup> McGurk 82.

<sup>20</sup> McGurk 80.

<sup>21</sup> For a different view of Britain's position on the Cotton Map, see Howe, "An Angle on this Earth" 12.

<sup>22</sup> This interpolation took place before the composition of the Lauderdale manuscript, dated from the tenth century. See Bately xxiii.

“wolde fandian hu longe þæt land norþryhte læge, opþe hwæðer ænig mon be norðan þæm westenne bude. Ða for he norþryhte be þæm lande”<sup>23</sup> (14). His expedition thus amounts to a charting enterprise, and his travels open European space toward the north. In accordance with the topos that links distance and savageness, Ohthere meets with wild lands and uncivilized tribes. He says that north of where he lives, the land “is eal weste, buton on feawum stowum stycemælum wiciað Finnas, on huntoðe on wintra 7 on sumera on fiscaþe be þære sæ”<sup>24</sup> (14). The Finns the explorer mentions do not till the land and have a primitive lifestyle. This is also the case of the Terfinnas, their neighbours, whom he encounters further north. The description of their land echoes that of the Finns: it “wæs eal weste, buton ðær huntan gewicodon, opþe fisceras, opþe fugeleras”<sup>25</sup> (14).

As the boundaries of the familiar world are pushed further and further away, disparaging terms are used to describe distant regions. At first sight, Ohthere’s account seems to be modelled on this trope. Yet a different picture of the north emerges under closer analysis; for, beside the Terfinnas dwell the Beormas, who “hæfdon swiþe wel gebud hira land”<sup>26</sup> (14). The Beormas are not only able to adapt their environment to their needs, they are also knowledgeable and they preserve some form of learning. Thus, they inform Ohthere on a number of subjects: “fela spella him sædon þa Beormas ægþer ge of hira agnum lande ge of þæm landum þe ymb hie utan wæron”<sup>27</sup> (14). With this account of the Beormas, distance no longer entails a plunge into barbarism, and the explorer testifies that civilized people dwell in the periphery.

The inclusion of Ohthere’s report in the *Old English Orosius* affects Britain’s geographical situation, and the Beormas function as a mirror image reflecting King Alfred’s own court. For, having demonstrated that it was possible to discover alternative civilized centres beside the obvious one in Rome (the focal point of Orosius’s *Histories* and of its vernacular rendering), this travel narrative recasts the royal court as a new

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<sup>23</sup> “[he] intended to explore how long that land stretched toward the north, or whether any man lived to the north of the wilderness. Then he went directly north along that land.”

<sup>24</sup> the land “is all waste, except on a few places here and there [where] Finns camp, hunting in the winter and fishing at sea in the summer.”

<sup>25</sup> it “was all waste, except where hunters camped, or fishermen, or fowlers.”

<sup>26</sup> who “had cultivated their land very well.”

<sup>27</sup> “the Beormas told him many stories, both about their own land and about the lands that were round about them.”

central point. It becomes the place where the explorer narrates his adventures, the pole of attraction to which travellers come back to recount their journeys. New knowledge is collected there, an important fact when one remembers that knowledge, and especially knowledge of distant lands, is a crucial attribute of leadership.<sup>28</sup> King Alfred's court is pulled away from the margins and is transformed into a centre of geographical exploration; no longer a terminus, it becomes a pivotal point in European geography. As a consequence of this new position, the Anglo-Saxons and their king are redefined; they no longer partake of the wildness of the periphery.

Both the Cotton map and the opening section of the *Old English Orosius* elaborate a strategy of recentering based on remapping: they take liberties with their sources and redraw the contours of northern Europe. They surround Britain with distant lands which become the "them" against which an Anglo-Saxon "us" is constructed. This original geography, organized around Britain's new centrality, emerges to accommodate the inheritance of tradition to the Anglo-Saxons' sense of their own location, and thus of themselves.

I opened this paper with Bede's eighth-century anecdote of the Anglo-Saxon slave boys, an episode to which I would like to return now. I suggested above that the fact that the Northumbrian historian was himself a native of the British Isles accounted for the positive picture of the insular youths and their homeland these lines present. And yet, even though he discards the traditionally negative view of his island and thus seems to retrieve his homeland from the misty confines of the earth, Bede nevertheless locates Britain in the distance. Gregory, for instance, does not know anything about the slave boys and for him, Britain is a complete *terra incognita*. A few lines below, the distance separating Britain from Rome is again foregrounded. For, as soon as he sees the Anglo-Saxon youths, Gregory wants to set out to their island on a mission of religious conversion. But Bede specifies: "Quod dum perficere non posset quia, etsi pontifex concedere illi quod petierat uoluit, non tamen ciues Romani, ut tam longe ab urbe secederet, potuere permittere"<sup>29</sup> (II. 1, 134). Britain is presented as remote and difficult of access, and the journey there is perilous.

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<sup>28</sup> See Helms 11.

<sup>29</sup> "But he was unable to perform this mission, because although the Pope was willing to grant his request, the citizens of Rome could not permit him to go so far away from the city."

Even though he clearly writes this episode in praise of his homeland and of his fellow countrymen, Bede nevertheless retains some of the to-poi which locate Britain in the periphery. The way the historian articulates centrality and distance is a question of special significance in a work which, like the *Ecclesiastical History*, is focused on Rome in its defence and promotion of orthodox religious observances. Although he does not play down the distance separating his island from Rome, Bede linguistically redeems it with the puns he attributes to Gregory. For, they rehabilitate another crucial element constitutive of Britain's alterity, namely language. The initial incomprehension that necessitated a translator mediating between Gregory and the slave boys vanishes when the vernacular names *Angli*, *Deira* and *Ælle* become the portents of the Anglo-Saxons' extraordinary religious destiny.<sup>30</sup> The puns are more than a movement of cultural appropriation; they are linguistic and creative acts that conjure up a new mental space, the homeland of "angelic" inhabitants. As such, they influence the perception of Britain's location and of the character of its inhabitants.

In this passage, Bede also rewrites another pun which links the *Angli* to the corner – *angulus* – to which their homeland is relegated. Gregory associates these two terms in a letter he addresses to Eulogius, bishop of Alexandria. The Pope talks about the missionaries he has sent to Britain, and he describes the English as "gens Anglorum in mundi angulo posita"<sup>31</sup> (VIII. 29, 551). Just like Bede, the Pope resorts to etymology as a hermeneutic device. But his play on *Angli* and *angulo* drastically contrasts with the narrative strategies of the Northumbrian historian, for it situates Britain in the distance. Bede and Gregory both pun on the name *Angli* – with different ends in view. They thus demonstrate the power of language to characterize, define and locate.

The religious centrality promised to Anglo-Saxon England in the founding anecdote of the slave boys is actualized later in the *Ecclesiastical History*, when English missionaries bring the Picts and the Irish to accept Roman religious observances and set out to the continent on missions of conversion. For instance, when the Pictish king Nechtan decides to

<sup>30</sup> On this point, see also Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking* 118-19 and Howe, "An Angle on this Earth" 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> "the people of the English situated in an angle of the world." Other instances of this pun are found in Widukind I. 8, 28 and Thietmar von Merseburg, VII. 36, 392. Widukind names England's inhabitants *Anglisaxones* and Thietmar brings together the two puns associated with *Angli*, namely *angeli* and *angulus*. On this point see also Howe, "An Angle on this Earth," esp. 3-6; Lavezzo 83 and Foot 43.

adopt Roman rituals, he seeks “auxilium de gente Anglorum”<sup>32</sup> (v. 21, 532) in order to ease the change to orthodoxy and to implement it with authority. Similarly, it is an Englishman, Egbert, who brings the Irish to orthodox rituals: Bede says that the Irish “correcti sunt per eum”<sup>33</sup> (III. 4, 224). Insular clerics also undertake missions to the continent. In Book V, especially chapters 9 to 11, the Northumbrian historian mentions the missionary enterprises of Egbert, Willibrord, Swithberht and the two Hewalds. The *Ecclesiastical History* closes on an image of Anglo-Saxon England as a new religious centre of gravity where orthodoxy is preserved. It spreads over the British Isles and to the continent thanks to the missionary travels undertaken by insular preachers.

Bede's transformation of distance into something mysterious and appealing in the episode of Gregory and the Anglo-Saxon youths could recall the conclusions reached at the end of my analysis of Tacitus's *Agricola*, and especially of Calgacus's speech. But the geographical centre around which these two narratives are organized is not the same. For Tacitus, the focus remains firmly in Rome throughout the *Agricola*. The last recesses of the world are incorporated in a familiar, Mediterranean world by the Roman legions' expeditions who, in Calgacus's words, “steal the world.”<sup>34</sup> Rome also plays a pre-eminent part in the *Ecclesiastical History*, but Bede uses religious history to reorganize his geography of Europe. A fundamental shift of perspective characterizes his work, which revolves around Britain.

An analysis of Britain's position on the map of the world demonstrates that insular authors resort to different strategies to resituate their island in a wider European geography. Remapping the continent's northern regions, the translator of the *Old English Orosius* and the Cotton mapmaker minimize the distance separating their island from Rome; Bede transcends it by inscribing his homeland and its inhabitants in a religious frame of reference. Yet, despite their differences – in particular their attitudes toward distance – these three authors adopt a new perspective on centrality and periphery, and organize their geographical perspective around their homeland. Thus, they clearly dissociate themselves from a classical outlook focused on the Mediterranean world.

Negotiating between the culture of space they receive from tradition and their own understanding of what is at stake in localization, Anglo-

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<sup>32</sup> “help from the English.”

<sup>33</sup> “he set them right.”

<sup>34</sup> See note 10 above.



Saxon authors thus elaborate a new geography to accommodate their own sense of identity. As they did not experience the liminality assigned to them in classical geographical accounts, they had to redefine their position in relation to continental Europe.

Negating or reinvesting distance, mapping out a new centrality toward the north, they move from "them" to "us," thus challenging the role of "constituting other" which classical tradition attributed to them. By refusing to be confined to a remote geographical location, insular authors contest a negative vision of themselves. In recentering their island on the map of Europe, they reinterpret their homeland and their fellow countrymen as central and civilized, thereby illuminating the relation between location and identity.

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- Fig. 3: British Library Cotton Tiberius B V part 1, f. 56<sup>v</sup>. By permission of the British Library.