

AGRICOLA 24.2

Solum caelumque et ingenia cultusque hominum haud multum a Britannia differ<un>t; in melius aditus portusque per commercia et negotiatores cogniti.

Tacitus is writing about Ireland. In 1967 Ogilvie commented,¹ '*In melius* cannot be taken either with *differunt*, since it contradicts *haud multum*, nor with *cogniti*, since it cannot be imagined that Tacitus was so ignorant of the truth as to suppose that Ireland was better known than England.' He therefore followed earlier editors in deleting *in melius* as a possible interpolation by 'patriotic Irish monks'. Wellesley² ingeniously suggested that a marginal gloss *ri melius*, correcting the manuscript reading *differt*, was later incorporated into the text and altered. But in 1970 Ogilvie had decided that *melius* could be justified.³ He still assumed that 'Tacitus implies that Roman commercial activity had made the harbours of Ireland more familiar than those of Britain,' but said this is true 'if one takes the British coastline as a whole, especially the part north of the Dee and Humber, and is confirmed archaeologically.' However, it is not true that archaeology shows the Irish coastline was better known than the British, even if the latter is taken 'as a whole', while to consider 'especially that part north of the Dee and Humber' is special pleading—particularly since, to the Roman public, 'Britain' would most naturally mean the part of Britain which had been conquered.

The fact that Britain and Ireland are being compared here has perhaps blinded us into assuming that that is the only comparison. Normally, if a statement is made about A, and B is then said to be better known, a comparison is implied between A and B, the subjects of the two sentences. So Tacitus could be saying here that Ireland's *aditus portusque* were better known than the climate of Ireland and the characteristics of its inhabitants. This would certainly have been true, and for the reason he gives: the approaches and harbours would be well known to traders; the soil, climate, and ethnography would be known only to those explorers or geographers who had travelled in Ireland itself. We may then follow Ogilvie in retaining *melius*, but the comparison is between two aspects of Ireland, not between Ireland and Britain. The passage is yet another example of Tacitus' overcompression to the point of obscurity.

As for the manuscript's *in melius*, Ogilvie was surely correct in deleting *in*, and there is an obvious reason why it could have been inserted. The manuscript's *differt* should clearly be *differunt*. Had the missing *un* been written as a correction above the end of *differt*, the text might then have appeared to read *differt un melius*. Given that *differt in melius* is a perfectly acceptable Latin phrase, it would hardly be surprising for this to become the reading. *In* should therefore be deleted; *melius* should be retained.

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¹ *De Vita Agricolae*, ed. R.M. Ogilvie and Sir Ian Richmond (1967), 237.

² *JRS* 59 (1969), 267.

³ Loeb *Tacitus*, Vol. i (revised 1970), 70, n. 3.