

The History of Belerion:

*An Investigation into the discussions of Greeks and
Romans in Cornwall*

[Volume One of One]

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Signed:

Cara Sheldrake

Abstract

"Who controls the past [...] controls the future: who controls the present controls the past,"¹

In the first century BCE Diodorus of Sicily described a corner of the British Isles he called Belerion and drew attention to the ingenious way the inhabitants extracted tin and the civilised manner they had acquired through trading that metal. In 2012 a tourist may stay in a bed and breakfast near Penzance or buy books from a shop named after that promontory. However, during the nineteenth century a debate amongst historians arose as to the meaning of Diodorus' Greek text, its relationship to other classical texts and the status of Cornwall in antiquity. The discussion involved at least ten treatments specifically of the topic in Cornwall alone and was incorporated into a variety of other narratives. The debate offers an unusual insight into the role of classical texts in the description and understanding of local identity.

This thesis looks at passages from the classical world that have been linked to Cornwall and which often have very little academic scholarship relating to them, and examines how they have been interpreted by Cornish historians. It will show how, despite the inconclusiveness of the ancient material, a connection between Cornwall and Greek and Roman traders has been constructed by Cornish writers, and why they were interested in doing so. This thesis suggests that the political and social contexts of local historiographers has actively shaped the interpretations of the texts often assigning a meaning to classical texts that allows a narrative of independence, cultural sophistication and unbroken mining innovation to be constructed concerning Cornwall. As such this thesis will form part of a rapidly expanding inter-disciplinary interest in our understanding of responses to the Classics and to our conception of the formation of regional historical narrative.

1 G. Orwell (1973) p.38.

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