Summary

Here follows the first translation of the Historia Johannis, commonly called "The Hermit's Tale."

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The sea roared. John woke with his cheek pressed to the earth. Blood ran from a wound on his shoulder. He lifted his head. A long wooden spar protruded from his back. He must have been caught in the impact against the rocks.

Bodies lay nearby along the shore, the last of John’s crewmen. John did not see them move. He found it hard to focus. The grey light illuminated only the shapes of things. He dug his fingers into the earth and pushed, cursing the pain that shot through him as he moved. He could not rise. Out in the water, he saw the last of the ship as it sank.

Footsteps came. John saw bare feet and the hem of a rough garment. Then he slept. In his dream, a man with fiery hair and eyes bore him into the clouds. There, he saw a burning book transfixed with a sword, and he felt his own flesh to be pierced. It seemed to him that some holy secret was upon him; but he was not a holy man, and he did not understand.

When he woke, John believed at first that he was dead and lay in a crypt. Then a torch lit the darkness and showed him that he was on the stone floor of a cavern. No other light reached him. The torch-bearer spoke.

“Vales?”

John found he was able to sit up. He studied the man before him. He was very thin, and he wore only a rough shift, belted with a rope. His hair seemed as black as the darkness of the cave and his skin was as pale as snow. John stared, wonder-struck. The man frowned.

“Stolidus es,” he said.

John could not understand the man. He spoke to him in English. “I am John, Walter’s son, of York. Where am I, and what are you called?”

The other man appeared surprised at this. “Anglicus, mirabile dicit! Nonne es perditus clarusque vir, qui primus ab oris Troiae Italiam venit?” He winked and looked mischievous, and John worried that he had fallen into the lair of a spirit, or that he dreamt still; but the word Italiam was familiar to him.
“Non Italiam,” John tried, and the other man made a face. Then, to John’s further astonishment, he began to speak in English as if he had done so all his life.

“I suppose it would be too much to ask that the first company the Lord has sent me in five years would be a man as lettered as I,” he said. “Have you any trades?”

John was too dumbfounded to answer at first; then he replied, “But you speak English after all.”

The other man set the torch into a bracket and began to pace the room, waving his hands about with wild frenzy as he spoke. “Yes, and the tongue of the Franks; my own Scottish tongue; the language of Aristotle; the language of the Turks; and that most beautiful of languages, Latin, in which I spoke to the masters of Paris when once I studied there.”

John marveled greatly at this. Before he could question him about it, however, the other man repeated himself: “Have you no trades?”

Said John, “That depends on what you mean by a trade, sir. I have been in my time a sailor, a soldier, and a surgeon, though all have brought me to misfortune. I was on my way to Edinburgh to see if any surgeons were wanted there.”

The man replied, “I would say that has brought you great good fortune. You have arrived here, to Inchcolm Isle. And you may easily use all of those trades on this island, though we are the only inhabitants that go about on two legs rather than four.”

John said, “How shall I use a trade in a city of two inhabitants?”

The other man said, “Very easily; for we must sail the coast to find supplies for hunting amongst the broken ships in the shallow water; we must wage a war against the deer and rabbit so that we may eat; and when either of us are ill, you shall cure us.” He looked pleased to see John now, or perhaps he was only pleased at his own rhetoric.

“Do you always speak in riddles?” John asked, wondering greatly what sort of man this was.
The man replied, “Often I do not speak at all, for days; and on other days I play upon a lyre late into the night. I am by turns melancholy, ambitious, reclusive, and sanguine. Will this trouble you?”

John said, “It will not. It seems I will winter here. But what are you called?”

The man said, “I am called ‘Scir-Lock’; it is an ironic name.” John did not doubt that he spoke truly; and yet in his soul he believed that this was a sign from God, for certainly this was the man he had seen to be his saviour in his fever dream.

[Several folios missing]

...therefore. We must hurry.” So saying, he ran to the boat. John followed behind a little way, fearing that the animal would scent his friend’s blood; but no further misadventure befell them, and they returned along the island’s shoreline to the cave, where John bound up his friend’s wounds and kept watch over him as he slept.

_Caput XI. Hiems. In quo tempestas venit._

There came a day when the snows fell so deep that the mouth of the cave was sealed up, and the storm could be heard outside. The two friends had laid in stores of wood and of food, and it was fortunate that they had done so, for the storm did not cease for nearly a fortnight. On the first day of the storm, they busied themselves with work, cleaning their home and mending garments, but by the second day, there was little to be done. John said to his friend then, “Where did you learn to write?”

His friend replied, “As all men do; I learned as a child, studying the Bible. When did you?”

[7] This is likely also a joke, or perhaps at Hermit (or the author) to show off his education, as each of these moods corresponds to the temperaments correspond to the Galenic humors.

[8] The name “Scir-Lock” is Old English for “Bright-Hair.” The irony presumably rests on the fact that his hair is black.

[9] “Chapter 11. Winter. In which the storm comes.” There is no chapter numbering in the initial rubric, and it is written in the margin; the numbering is thus likely a later addition to the heading by the monks of Inchcolm.
John said, “I never learned to write.” He saw his friend was stupefied by this. He tried to explain what all surgeons know, namely, that writing is very different for a doctor than it is for a monk, and that he did not have his friend’s skill, as so amply demonstrated in the books on which he wrote his miniscule.10

His friend fell into a reverie then, and some hours passed. John knew him to do this often, and was little troubled by it, for he himself had known holy men to stay at prayer just as long. There was now no sound save the storm outside. He began to whittle with his knife on a deer bone. After some time, his friend rose and went to his scriptorium, or what passed for it in that humble place. He had several pots of ink. He brought one over to John, along with a stylus.

“I shall teach you,” he said. John did not take the stylus from him. “Tolle, scribe,” he said, with some urgency.11

John said, “You have so little parchment here. If we had a wax tablet, I should be very glad to learn at your knee, but I could not deprive you of the few tools you have with which you do what you love most.”

[10] Presumably a missing chapter explains what these books are. It would be surprising if the Hermit were composing his own texts, since supplies would be near impossible to come by in such a remote place. The mention of “r could be other than a technical term referring to the author may instead be indicating writing a gloss in the margins of some other book, a slightly less incredible claim (supposing we believe his education). Noted monastic scholar A. M. pointed out that certain mss. in the collection possess unusual marginalia, all in a small, unusually black ink. These addenda are ranging from a solitary “Stulta” (“These things are foolish”) or “Falsus!” (“Wrong!”) to lengthy discursive comments on optics, the weather, and astronomy. The highly technical nature of these comments, however, leads Grandgarden to conclude that these must postdate the supposed time of the Hermit, as he finds it deeply improbable. As Grandgarden says, “Nobody could be so clever.” See Grandgarden, A. M., “The Genius of Inchcolm Abbey,” Speculum, Vol. 71, No. 3 (Jul., 1996), pp

“We have all the parchment we need,” his friend said. John did not understand, but he accepted the stylus. Without another word, his friend removed his belt and shift and lay on the stone floor before him.\footnote{Here begins the passage for which this text is now famous. Given the immense body of writing on this critical survey may be of use to the reader this passage is, of course, Lynn Black’s \textit{Mediaeval Science and Cultural Shifts} (1962), which interrogates for the spread of literacy in the twelfth century however, operates from a purely technical questioning the feasibility of writing on human skin with a stylus and what is presumably oak gall ink, which is, of course, highly acidic. Not until the late eighties did this work circulate outside the relatively insular circles of monastic studies and the history of science and technology, however, until it was noticed by a few social historians at Berkeley. At that point interest in the text shifted rapidly from a technological investigation the relationship between the two men, and a debate fairly exploded. The most relevant comments on this can be found in the reviews pages of the \textit{Journal of Amer. no. 2 (Sep., 1989)}, in which famed but aging scholar Rufus Northrup declared the interpretations of queer scholarship—as fanciful as if it had pages of a bestiary” (p. 801). Despite this may be deemed the old guard, queer theorist Katherine Winshaw’s article “Entering the Cave: Or, Sometimes a Stylus Is Not Just a Stylus” (\textit{Diacritics} Vol. 24 (Summer - Autumn, 1994), pp. 390-406) has gained traction over the years, and it is now widely accepted that queer readings of this scene are possible. A new perspective, however, and one with which this editor has sympathy, suggests that this encounter between John and the Hermit is in fact in its entirety a religious symbol, representing the miracle of the Word made flesh and the transmission of the grace of God to the unconverted masses (here represented by the unlettered, and therefore symbolically unconverted, John). This is made especially compelling by John’s vision of the Hermit earlier in the text. It may also serve as a symbol of Scottish religious independence, given the time period and St. Columba, for whom the island was named. See Thomas Blanche, “Writing On the Hermit of Inchcolm: A New Perspective,” \textit{Speculum}, Vol. 82, No. 3 (J 789).}

“Now you must take instruction,” his friend said. With his hand, he molded John’s fingers around the stylus, showing him how to grip the shaft. He did this several times, repositioning John’s hands until he was satisfied. John felt the keen sting of pride at first. He had used a stylus before, after all, if not so skillfully as a monk or canon might. His friend’s charity taught him patience, however, and he allowed his hand and his heart to be moved.

When he was ready to begin writing, his friend directed him to bring the torch closer, so that he might more clearly see his writing surface, and John did as he was bid. His friend’s skin was pale as snow, as was said before, and when John touched the ink-laden stylus to his flesh, the blackness of the first letter stood out so dark that John feared the mark would never wash away. He said as much; but his friend gripped him by the hand and said, “So long as it is your writing, I do not care if it stays; in fact, I shall be glad.”

Then his friend directed him to finish the letter at the top and bottom. When John had done so, he marveled at the beauty of the letter on his friend’s flesh, and more so that he had been able to create something so beautiful on a human body. John knew the cures of earthly aches and pains, but this seemed a divine transformation; it drew him close to his friend, caused him to caress the flesh with his fingers, to adore the capital he had drawn. “Now you must make a rule with a string,” his friend said, and handed him the rope from his belt. John took this and...
...just in that way, indeed, just like that,” his friend said. John felt as if flames were all around him, and yet at the same time he felt moved by a divine spirit, at which he was much amazed. His hands touched the words inscribed on his friend from gut to throat: *In principio erat verbum*. John had made those words. How much his friend loved him, to teach him this, and to offer himself thus. He was humbled.

His friend’s eyes seemed to shine with an inner light. He folded his hands beneath his lips, as if in prayer. “The first verse of John,” he said. John laughed with great joy.

Hours passed, and then days, and neither needed more sustenance than this: the long journey of the stylus over the skin; the precision and diligence of the student, the wisdom and discipline of the master; and the purity of the holy words which John transcribed faithfully, feeling them to be inscribed on his very soul. When John asked his friend if he was tired, or what he wished, his friend replied, “*Interea magno misceri murmure caelum incipit; fulsere ignes et conscius aether conubiis.*”

When at last the storm passed, John had learned to write several verses of the scriptures and was beginning the Lord’s Prayer.

*Caput XII. Ver. Exitus*. “death”; the sense is ambiguous here.
As spring returned to the sleeping world, the waters around the island calmed, and John believed he could sail one of the small boats they had made all the way to the mainland without fear of being dashed against the rocks of the bay.\[^{16}\] His friend insisted that the journey was not safe, however; and when John made it clear that he meant to depart regardless, his friend begged him not to leave. John was much moved by the way his friend wrung his hands and wept, and so John agreed to stay.

That night, however, John crept out to the boats alone and in secret, taking nothing with him but a single stylus he had carved for himself. In the darkness, he reached the mainland, and he traveled thence by land to Stirling, where he lived many years as a clerk, and became famous for his beautiful and unusual script. He often inquired about his friend of passing strangers, especially visitors at court, but they could tell him nothing of a hermit living in solitude on the island. He never returned to the island itself; indeed, he never again went to sea.

Then, one day, rumor reported that there had been a great fire on the island, and many of those now living there had perished; and, heavy with regret and sorrow, he composed a letter and begged a young man on his way to Edinburgh to deliver it for him:

\[^{16}\] This is surely a rhetorical device or a narrative ploy. Inchcolm Island is hardly a quarter mile distant that could easily be crossed by a determined swimmer. Some scholars have that the entire tale is imagined, and that the hero’s departure only so long as it suits the climate differences between 12th-century Scotland, and concluded that indeed prevent a return trip across even a small, especially if the sailor had only a small, hand-built craft. Additionally, the waters of Mortimer’s Deep claimed to be a frightening 50 fathoms in reason, John’s stay on the island does never know why he delayed his return for period of time, any more than we may understand his subsequent choices, which he comes t
infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo
venerat extinctam ferroque extrema secutam?
funeris heu tibi causa fui? per sidera iuro,
per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est,
invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi.
sed me iussa deum, quae nunc has ire per umbras,
per loca senta situ cogunt noctemque profundam,
imperis egere suis; nec credere quivi
hunc tantum tibi me discessu ferre dolorem.
siste gradum teque aspectu ne subtrahe nostro.
quem fugis? extremum fato quod te adloquor hoc est.\textsuperscript{17}

This is, of course, the famous speech of Aeneas to Dido in
the underworld (\textit{Aeneid} VI. 456-466), and
her.

“Unhappy Dido, then the word I had was
dead? That you pursued your final moment
I bring only death to you? Queen, I swear
above, and any trust that may be in this
unwilling when I had to leave your shore:
orders of the gods that now urge on my
shadows, through abandoned, thorny
land
drove me by their decrees. And I could not
going I should bring so great a grief as this.
Do not retreat from me. Whom do you flee
fate will let us speak.” (\textit{Aeneid}, trans.
Ma.
146.)

It is unclear whether this is intended by th
contents of the letter, or if it is a postscript
perhaps even have been added by a later
main text, the hand here is uneven, in pac
scholar J. J. McCleod has suggested that t
the “letter,” and that this history was writt
patron, perhaps one to whom the author v
connected. (See J. J. McCleod, “Unlettered
of the \textit{Historia Johannis},” \textit{Modern Philol}
2009), pp. 465-496.) If this is the case, the
favorite verse of the patron’s, included in
Another possibility is that it may be a nest
passage is itself a reference to a Catullan of
a lock of hair, perhaps a play on the H
that the Hermit has died, that the narrative
See R. A. Smith, “A Lock and a Promise
Aeneas’ Farewell to Dido in ‘Aeneid’ 6.”

\textsuperscript{17} [Apparently, this verse terminates the work; the following folio is a much later text, a section of John Gowe Amantis.]
Editor’s remarks:

This fragmentary chronicle, popularly called the *Historia Johannis*, is the only surviving account of the Hermit of Inchcolm, or the Solitarius Insulae Columbae. The manuscript was apparently found and preserved by the monks of the abbey that later stood on the site of the Hermit’s cave, but by that time it had already sustained serious damage from saltwater and exposure. Previous editors have suggested it is they who included the Latin rubrics, but the presence of Latin elsewhere in the text and the fact that the rubrics run flush with the main body of writing would suggest otherwise. The author of this text was clearly a native Englishman who had learned some Latin and could write. Mysteriously, the hand contains distinctly Continental elements, which perhaps lends credence to the recent theory that the entire text is a 13th-century forgery. If the history is a truthful one, then it is possible that the Hermit did indeed teach John to write, and that John is the author; the Hermit’s purported Parisian training would account for the style of the script. Whatever the manuscript’s authorship, it is a valuable contribution to the history of Inchcolm Abbey and its mythos.

A final note: the Scots name for the place, St. Comb’s Isle, may be responsible for later redactions of the Hermit’s name in Abbot Walter Bower’s 15th-century *Scotichronicon* as the enigmatic “Scirlocke Cholmbes,” transliterated in the Walter Goodall edition (Edinburgh, 1759) as “Sherlock Holmes.”

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