



Was Ithaca originally Kefalonia?

The British Homeric scholar James Diggle describes a contemporary adventure in search of the homeland of Odysseus

An interview with Elias Maglinis (translated from the original article in Greek)

Φόρκυος δέ τις ἐστι λιμὴν, ἄλιον γέροντος,
ἐν δήμῳ Ἰθάκης: δύο δὲ προβλήτες ἐν αὐτῷ
ἄκται ἀπορρώγες, λιμένος ποτιπεπτηῦται,
αἱ τ' ἀνέμων σκεπώωσι δυσσάων μέγα κύμα
ἐκτοθεν:

In other words:

On Ithaca there is a bay of Phorcys,
The old man of the sea: in it, two headlands,
Projecting, sheared off, crouching from the harbour,
Shield it from waves whipped up by blustering winds
Outside.

This is one of many passages from Homer's *Odyssey* translated from ancient Greek to English by James Diggle, a professor of ancient Greek and Latin at the University of Cambridge, for the purpose of publishing a book written with Robert Bittlestone: '*Odysseus Unbound - The Search for Homer's Ithaca*'. When the book was released in English in 2005 it drew the attention of the public and the international academic community with the theory that Homeric Ithaca was in fact a part of today's Kefalonia. The book was recently published in Greek in a volume reaching to six hundred pages by the publisher Polytropon.

The original text in English is the result of an obsession and a partnership between three Britons. The obsession came from Robert Bittlestone, an ingenious entrepreneur and childhood enthusiast of the classics (ancient Greek and Latin writers) which he studied; and now, with the help of industrial sponsorship he has launched what is (even if nothing else) a very exciting journey to discover Homeric Ithaca. His persistence however was shared with two other Britons: the aforementioned Diggle and also John Underhill, a geology and stratigraphy professor at the University of Edinburgh. We met Robert Bittlestone and James Diggle in Athens. They had just returned from the island where the geological studies are continuing. James Diggle talked about this ambitious project and how he became involved in it.

Strabo

"My involvement in the story began when Robert asked me my opinion on some texts of ancient Greek writers, especially Strabo, who refers to the geography of Homeric Ithaca. Robert had difficulty in accepting that Homeric Ithaca is the modern Ithaca. He had found a passage in Strabo in which there was a reference that suggested that the solution to the mystery might be found on the island of Kefalonia. The indications were that Homeric Ithaca could have been located where today we find Paliki, the western part of Kefalonia. Robert believes that in the age of Homer and Odysseus this island was divided into two: Sami to the east and to the west, Paliki, which he believes is Homeric Ithaca. He felt that his theory was bolstered by what Strabo wrote about a channel that was from time to time covered from north to south with water. Naturally, Strabo wrote many centuries after Homer. However, this account is based on Strabo's sources, geographers who lived 2 to 3 centuries earlier".

Asteris

"If we look carefully at the Homeric text it will be seen that Homer describes an island called Asteris located in the channel between Ithaca and Sami. We are confident that Sami is Kefalonia. But if you believe that Homeric Ithaca is the current Ithaca and you look at the map today, there is no island that meets the description of the one that Homer calls Asteris. What there is instead is simply a small islet. Many Homeric scholars believe that this islet is Asteris, but it cannot be because the poet explains that Asteris is the island where suitors had set up an ambush for Telemachus. It must therefore have been an island of some size, with a port capable of concealing a ship."

Paliki - Sami

"Robert's idea is that Paliki was previously separated from the rest of Kefalonia by a narrow marine channel ("Strabo's Channel"), which has now been filled up with earth, and has become an isthmus covered by land as a result of landslides triggered by earthquakes. Asteris is in fact the peninsula of Argostoli. Robert asked me at an early stage if the ancient Greek word for an island, "nesos", could also refer to a "chersonesus" or peninsula. I confirmed that indeed it could: "nesos" is sometimes used to refer to a peninsula. As an example there is the Peloponnese, which is not an island, but is linked to the mainland by a narrow strip of land. The astonishing thing is that when I went to see the sites and stood at the point where we believe was the palace of Odysseus, we looked towards the peninsula of Argostoli and it appeared just like an island!"

The translation

“Only a geologist could test the existence of this theory, and so John Underhill joined the challenge. We decided together to test this theory to its limits. As far as I am concerned, I have tried to see if it is possible to identify in the Homeric text all those components of the landscape that we can now observe. Prior to that point Robert was using a very good English translation, but its objectives were poetic rather than literal and it was aimed at the general reader. So I suggested that the needs of the book would be better served by a translation that more exactly reflected the original version. I therefore decided to translate all the quoted passages as accurately as possible, and all of these passages are now included in the book alongside our conclusions.”

Homeric scholars

“Homeric scholars have generally welcomed the book, but we must remember that theirs is a very conservative profession that does not readily accept change and new ideas. For most of them the most natural and economical solution is that Homeric Ithaca is today’s Ithaki. But when this is considered alongside the poet’s descriptions of different islands and seaways, it is not a credible solution.

If geologists are able to confirm our proposals then I think that scholars will come to accept them. The book, therefore, was the first phase of this great project that will be completed in a few years’ time.

Even if we are ultimately wrong on some of the details, for example, the exact location of the palace of Odysseus, I believe we will be able to demonstrate that Paliki was Homeric Ithaca and this will be a finding of great importance.”

The funding for Odysseus

The three authors of *Odysseus Lyomenos* are supported by FUGRO (who specialise in geotechnical, geophysical and geoscientific services) and they cooperate with IGME (Greece’s geological institute.)

Funding from FUGRO brings industrial-scale geophysical techniques to the project, enabling the team to make a full ‘body-scan’ of the isthmus of Paliki for a length of 6 km. FUGRO (www.fugro.com) is a world leader in collecting and interpreting data from the sea, land and air, and from the earth's surface, the sub-soil and the underlying rock. The company advises mainly the oil, natural gas, mining and construction industries and it is based in the Netherlands.

IGME (www.igme.gr) is the Greek Geological Institute, based in Athens, and was established in 1976. Under Greek law it performs the role of technical adviser to the Greek state on geological issues. Professor John Underhill has been cooperating with IGME via their authorisation of geological research permits. He completed his doctoral degree on the tectonic plates of the Ionian Island region in 1985.

Archaeological investigation is not proposed until the existence of Strabo’s Channel has either been proven scientifically or ruled out. However, both FUGRO and the *Odysseus Unbound* team are eagerly awaiting the opportunity of the project focussing on this aspect in future years, in cooperation with the Greek authorities, if the results of the geological tests support this.

Interested parties can refer to the website at www.odysseus-lyomenos.org.