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Review: Finding Ithaca

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Rediscovering Homer: Inside the Origins of the Epic

by Andrew Dalby

Norton, 266 pp., \$26.95

Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca

by Robert Bittlestone with James Diggle and John Underhill

Cambridge University Press, 598 pp., \$40.00

Archaeology and the Emergence of Greece

by A.M. Snodgrass

Cornell University Press, 485 pp., \$85.00; \$39.95 (paper)

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Further information about the search for Homer's Ithaca is available at
<http://www.odysseus-unbound.org/>



*Maps of the southern Ionian Islands of Greece, from Robert Bittlestone's *Odysseus Unbound*. According to Bittlestone, the top map shows the ancient identities of the islands, with Ithaca separated from the isle of Samê, present-day Cephalonia; the map below shows the modern islands. Seismic activity has filled the narrow channel that separated ancient Ithaca and Samê, turning them into the single island of Cephalonia. Ancient Doulichion has become modern Ithaca.*

1.

In 1911 the Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy circulated a long–meditated poem extolling the many benefits of travel as against those of arrival. The theme was no novelty (it had found its way into at least one proverb): indeed, the most striking thing about it was the particular journey that Cavafy had chosen as a model for his readers. He assumed, rightly, that they would instantly recognize and identify with the postwar return to his island kingdom of a warrior who, if he ever in fact existed (which many scholars doubt), set out nearly three millennia ago, and for much of his trip, even on his own account (possibly a tall story to entertain his hosts), was off the map in fairyland. As Andrew Dalby reminds us in his combative new survey, *Rediscovering Homer*, the immortalizing of Odysseus and his action–and–sex–filled progress from Troy to Ithaca was the work of an elusive genius, poised between the oral tradition and the advent of writing, who may or may not have been called Homer, whose dates and homeland are quite uncertain, who just possibly was not a person but a guild—but whose epic poem chronicling the return of Odysseus remains as fresh today as when it was first composed, and continues to spawn innumerable translations, many of them best sellers.

Joachim Latacz recently summed up this phenomenon admirably:

The Greeks have looked upon Homer as not only their first, but their greatest poet. The history of the reception of both works [the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*] justifies this. The extent, duration, and intensity of this reception have no parallel. Greeks, Romans, and the European modern age have all fed on Homer, learnt from him, used him to develop their own poetry and poetic studies, imitated him, sought to outdo him and to shake him off—and admired him. Poetry which lacks substantial quality can have no such reception.^[1]

In that sense no one would argue with Cavafy's claim that "Ithaca gave you the beautiful journey": from Joachim du Bellay to George Seferis, from Dante to Tennyson and Joyce, the image of Odysseus as the archetypal wanderer has persisted down the centuries, with Ithaca and Penelope as his ultimate, if long–delayed, goal (Cavafy's delights en route include jewelry, perfume, and Egyptian learning, but not – perhaps predictably – the ministrations of Circe or Calypso). As Latacz saw, Homer's most potent magic lay in his poetry. But there has also always been an equally persistent determination – mistrusted, and often with good reason, by academics – to locate Homer's events, sites, and characters in an actual historical setting, that of the late Bronze Age, in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE.

It has not helped that the best–known proponent of such theories, Heinrich Schliemann, was, when he took up archaeology in the late 1860s, a rich amateur

outsider, whose notions of excavation left much to be desired, who was suspected, perhaps with justice, of "planting" some of his most sensational finds, and who (most irritating of all to skeptical professionals) took Homer as his guidebook at Troy and got solid results.

There is a fascinating psychological problem here that has seldom received the attention it deserves. Too many academic classicists and ancient historians work very hard (always with a barrage of scholarly objections, and sometimes citing Thucydides as an exemplar) to exclude from their findings anything too redolent of life as actually lived, anything too *ad hominem* or, worse, *ad feminam*, particularly anything, when discussing historical characters, that could be construed as overromantic or, in a Churchillian vein, as *this-was-their-finest-hour-ish*. The so-called Troizen Decree, commemorating Themistokles' stirring fleet orders before the Battle of Salamis against Persia in 480 BCE, is still often dismissed as a late forgery for propaganda purposes. (Forgery, about which those who invoke it usually know very little, is a popular all-purpose recourse for dismissing unwelcome evidence.) One ingenious German scholar, Detlev Fehling, while granting Herodotus literary genius, claimed that he invented all his material wholesale, thus at one stroke doing his best to nullify him as a historical source.^[2] Though the famous love affair between Catullus and Clodia Metelli ("Lesbia") is better documented than many other episodes in Roman history, there are still distinguished Latinists determined to treat it as fiction.^[3]

I would not pretend for a moment that there is only one side to this problem: academics can cite evidence in plenty, from both the popular tradition in ancient historiography and the wild speculations of modern amateurs, to justify their skepticism. Ktesias of Knidos, a Greek physician at the Achaemenid court of Artaxerxes I, wrote an account of the Greco-Persian wars in which the Battle of Plataia preceded that of Salamis. Samuel Butler believed until his dying day that the author of the *Odyssey* was a woman,^[4] a view congenial to feminists if not supported by hard evidence, and now vigorously resurrected by Andrew Dalby. The so-called "biographical fallacy" – that of relating a poet's creations, and the persona narrating them, directly to events in his or her life – did indeed lead to a number of embarrassingly anachronistic fantasies, as students of Sappho or Shakespeare must be well aware. Scholars thus see themselves, very reasonably in principle, as holding the pass of reasoned research and firm evidence against the barbaric inroads of uncontrolled imagination and (a telltale pejorative) *bellettrism*.

Homer, because of his (or her) elusiveness, has, inevitably, inspired more over-the-top theories (Samuel Butler's and now Dalby's being among the more benign), and provoked more hard-line academic conservatism in response, than any other ancient author. It is also an observable (and not wholly unrelated) fact that whereas the notion of multiple authorship, however conceived, is strictly the product of

scholarly analysis, virtually every non-classical literary figure who has ever ventured an opinion on the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* sees confidently, in each case, a single creative genius at work.

But the most divisive issue of all has always been that of historical truth vs. romantic fiction. To what extent, if at all, are the locations, events, and characters populating the two epics based, however remotely, on Bronze Age (or later) realities? Did Troy (or Ilion) in fact exist? Was there ever a Trojan War except in some poet's imagination? Were the various claims, by Ionian aristocrats and others, to be descended from Agamemnon, Achilles, Menelaos, Odysseus, and others conceivably justifiable? Could there have been a real-life Mycenaean princess named Helen,^[5] whose adulterous escapade with the Trojan playboy Paris Alexander became a famous *casus belli* and the stuff of legend?

By now it should come as no surprise that these are matters where the clash between academic skepticism and historical speculation has been, and remains, acute. The last century or so has witnessed a slowly weakening rear-guard action against the steady accumulation of new evidence, mostly archaeological and linguistic, all pointing in the same direction: that the world recalled by Homer, however poeticized, rested on a solid historical basis in the late Bronze Age.^[6] Schliemann's settlement at Hissarlik is confirmed as Homer's Troy. Objections to the Hittite towns of Wilusa, Achijawa, even Taruwisa being identified with Homeric Ilion, Achaia, and Troy are losing ground, partly owing to the discovery of the remarkable "Alaksandu Treaty" in about 1920, soon after the decipherment of cuneiform Hittite, and its analysis by scholars during recent decades. This treaty, drawn up around 1280 BCE between the Hittite King Muwattalli II and the leaders of four nearby states, including Alaksandu, ruler of Wilusa, has been important in helping to establish the historical basis for places and events described in the *Iliad*. It not only hints that the Trojan War actually took place but invites us to identify Alaksandu himself with Helen's abductor.

In the matter of Troy, then, serious scholars are moving cautiously toward acceptance of a basic core of historical facts. With the *Iliad* being thus dragged, step by step, into ascertainable history, conservatives are likely to remain more convinced than ever that the *Odyssey*, at least, is pure imaginative romance. This is terrain where the odds against a heterodox outsider getting a sympathetic hearing are very long indeed.

2.

Thus when the amateur Robert Bittlestone felt an urge to tackle – and then became convinced he had solved – one of the most vexed Homeric problems in the entire canon, he must have had a good idea of what he was up against. What Herodotus

would have termed his *apodexis*, or display of research, *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca*, confirms this. In more than one way Bittlestone is the Schliemann *de nos jours*. Trained as an economist, he rose to become the founder and managing director of Metapraxis Ltd., a consultancy and software group specializing in the detection of early warnings of the economic and political problems ahead for multinational companies, by means of what the firm's publicity describes as "Predictive Performance Visualization." Metapraxis does business worldwide with clients that include Unilever and Cadbury Schweppes. In other words, Bittlestone very probably has the same solid financial base as Schliemann did as a result of his trading in gold dust and indigo and his dealings as a military contractor during the Crimean War.

The resemblances do not stop there. Schliemann used Homer's text as an excavation guide, thought the first gold mask he saw at Mycenae was Agamemnon's, and wondered whether the burial ashes he unearthed at modern Ithaca might not be those of Odysseus and Penelope. Bittlestone has the same romantic instincts. *Odyssey* in hand, he identifies the site of the pig farm of Eumaios, whom Ulysses encounters when he first returns to Ithaca in disguise. Bittlestone also uses Homer's direct, and repeated, formulaic apostrophe of Eumaios himself – "In reply to him then you said, swineherd Eumaios..." – as an argument for the swineherd's historicity. This real-life Eumaios, having survived the contest with Penelope's suitors, was (Bittlestone speculates) an honored guest at recitals by the "Original Composer of the *Odyssey*" (whom he acronyms, in good business style, as OCO), and directly addressed by him. Bittlestone even hopefully identifies a possible stone "auditorium" where all this took place.

Though he makes all the proper caveats, there can be little doubt what Bittlestone really wants to believe. A man who has identified – often, be it said, convincingly – every location in Ithaca (including the Raven's Rock with ravens actually circling above it), and tracked and timed every walk, by Odysseus and others, from palace to farmstead, from harbor to hilltop, is unlikely to buy such dull explanations as that the direct apostrophe may well have been owing to the metrical difficulty of fitting "Eumaios", nominative, into the second half of a formulaic hexameter, or that the "auditorium" (as seems clear from Bittlestone's illustration) is simply a characteristic piece of natural limestone terracing. In all this Bittlestone comes across as a typical post-Schliemann romantic; and at first sight his central theme, what for a couple of centuries has been known to German Homerists as *die Ithaka Frage*, "the Ithaca Question," seems likely to encourage all his most extreme speculative instincts, as it has done to countless others before him.

The question, briefly put, is this. When giving an account of himself to King Alkinoös on Scheria in Book IX, Odysseus describes his homeland of Ithaca. The island, he says, is clearly visible (*eudeielos*). "Round about it are many islands close

to one another, Doulichion and Samê and wooded Zakynthos; [Ithaca] itself lies low in the sea, furthest out towards the dark quarter [i.e., the West], while the others lie away toward the dawn and the sun [i.e., the East]." Clear enough, you might think. Now look at the relevant group of islands on a modern map. Zakynthos (modern Zante), the southernmost of the group, is the only one that presents no problems. There is no sign anywhere of Doulichion. Samê has been identified, ever since the Augustan geographer Strabo's day, as the large island of Kephallenia (also known as Cephalonia).

But the real crux is the fact that modern Ithaca (Ithake/Thiaki) lies directly *east* of Kephallenia, in the lee of its northern peninsula. It is at once apparent that by no stretching of terminology can Homer's description be made to fit Thiaki.^[7] For those who see the Homeric stories as pure fiction, this presents no problem: Homer made the whole thing up, and anyway he was an eastern Greek who knew nothing about the topography of the western islands beyond the Aegean (Dalby is characteristic, remarking that "few Greeks go to Ithake ...and it would be surprising if the poet had done so").

But even modest historicists, who make no claims for the characters or events of the *Odyssey*, are bothered by this fundamental inconsistency in the evidence for its setting. Greece, after all, as those who sail its waters have always known, is a small country. If Thiaki cannot be Homer's Ithaca, what was it in antiquity? What has happened to Doulichion? And where, today, is Odysseus' missing kingdom?^[8] (One reason that Cavafy, ever the quiet ironist, insisted that a traveler should not hurry the journey to Ithaca may well have been because no one seemed at all certain about its location.) These are not minor or even purely academic questions. Not only has a great deal of time, money, and expertise been invested by archaeologists and others on the assumption that Thiaki is indeed Homer's Ithaca, but the island's very profitable tourist trade depends primarily on maintaining that identification.

To judge from his book, Bittlestone is not only (as was to be expected from the head of a large international corporation) a shrewd and subtle psychologist in the field of marketing and public relations; he also, on the face of it, and much less predictably, would seem to have got the academic world's number with uncommon precision. He knew very well, when he began, just what kind of a hornets' nest he proposed to upset, and took a number of unprecedentedly sophisticated steps to insure himself against the inevitable fallout. Like Schliemann, he had the financial resources to pursue his dream: while Schliemann paid hundreds of diggers to uncover Troy, Bittlestone could command the services not only of an array of experts, but also of infrared satellite cameras, global positioning systems, ground-penetrating radar, and modern seismological techniques. Like Schliemann, he has a healthy respect for intuition. But here the resemblance ceases. Schliemann's instinct was to meet potential opposition head-on and pulverize it. Bittlestone's, to judge

from his own account, has always been to defang it with generous charm, invite it to Greece, and profit by its advice.

His title page lists two coauthors: John Underhill, a distinguished professor of stratigraphy, and James Diggle, the formidable Cambridge classical philologist, editor of Euripides and, most recently, Theophrastus.^[9] Consultants who throng his pages (many also accompanying him during his explorations on Ithaca) include, in addition to various scientific pundits, no-nonsense archaeologists such as John Bennet, James Whitley, and the redoubtable Anthony Snodgrass (responsible for the remark, reprinted in *Archaeology and the Emergence of Greece*, and perhaps noted by Bittlestone, that the sentence "This is the tub in which Telemachus took the bath described in the *Odyssey*" is a proposition "not merely false but, on closer analysis, devoid of actual meaning"). Yet all of them, Snodgrass included, while gently curbing Bittlestone's wilder flights of fancy, take him seriously. This represents no mean achievement on Bittlestone's part.

Perhaps his most impressive coup, however, was persuading Cambridge University Press not only to bring out his long treatise under its impeccable imprint – thus at one stroke conferring on the whole enterprise the guarantee of respectability – but to do so in a large format, on glossy photographic paper, with color illustrations on virtually every page, and at the amazingly low price of \$40.00. Those condemned to pay two or three times that for some of Cambridge's unillustrated texts may be forgiven a twinge of envy and the temptation to wonder how the trick was turned. Bittlestone comes across as a delightful family man (his wife is the company secretary, his four children contribute sharp ideas throughout), armed with the charm of a skilled diplomat and the ability to win enthusiastic cooperation from the unlikeliest sources, and he seems, at least, in a position to help with expenses.^[10] But one last thing, and that the most important, he learned from Schliemann: that nothing will get you further than being triumphantly right. None of his careful cultivation of experts would have got anywhere had he not offered them a persuasive, and dramatic, solution to the "Ithaca Question." Most of the enormous, and carefully exploited, publicity generated by his book is owing to this.

3.

Bittlestone's theory is fundamentally simple, and starts, as did those of Schliemann, from the firm assumption that Homer was telling the truth. Thus when he says that of the island group comprising Ithaca, Samê, Doulichion, and Zakynthos, Ithaca was low-lying and furthest to the west, furthest to the west is where we must look for it, and not (for example) go off northward to Leukas, as Schliemann's assistant Wilhelm Dörpfeld did, or torture Homer's Greek into saying something other than its plain meaning. Now today the place that is furthest west (unless we make the vast

jump across the Ionian Sea to southern Italy) is the peninsula of Paliki on Kephallenia (Samê). Toward the end of the first century BCE, Strabo noted that "where the island is narrowest, it forms a low-lying isthmus, so that it is often submerged from sea to sea." Bittlestone, already convinced that the peninsula called Paliki in modern times *must* have been Homer's Ithaca, but faced with the fact that the modern isthmus was anything but low-lying, let alone capable of being submerged, set about investigating the possibility that the transformation – on a notoriously earthquake-prone island – had somehow been caused by a series of seismological upheavals.

Once the island of Ithaca came to be regarded as part of Kephallenia (Samê), as clearly it was already long before Strabo's day, it would quickly lose its identity and name (there are, significantly, no historical references to Ithaca in the classical period). Hellenistic scholars and editors seeking Ithaca (placed by Homer close to Samê) were confronted by one island only in that location. It lay east rather than west of Samê, but no matter. This, of course, is modern Ithake/Thiaki. What was it in antiquity? The Augustan elegist Propertius identified Odysseus' home as Doulichion.^[11] A persistent tradition arose that Doulichion and Ithaca were identical, confirmed by several post-Renaissance travelers such as Tommaso Porcacchi and Jacob Spon, who claims that the modern port of Vathy was once known as Dolicha. If we accept this identification (and there is ample reason to do so) then Homer's islands all fall neatly into place: pre-seismic Ithaca (the modern Paliki peninsula) immediately west of Samê, with Doulichion (modern Ithake/Thiaki) to the east, and Zakynthos away in the south. (See the maps on page 62.) This, in a nutshell, is Bittlestone's solution to the "Ithaca Question," and it is almost certainly correct.

Credit for the original basic concept, as Bittlestone scrupulously notes, must go to a Greek researcher, Gerasimos Volterras,^[12] who over a century ago both identified Paliki as Homer's Ithaca and treated it as an island separated from Samê by a narrow channel. Bittlestone's real achievement – and by far the most interesting aspect of his book – is the methodical way in which he marshals scientific and philological expertise to examine and, with luck, confirm his central thesis. With admirable honesty he chronicles the way in which most of his early amateur guesses were confounded by the hard facts of geology and seismic activity; yet in the end Underhill the stratigraphist (with a plethora of fascinating colored plans) moves toward accepting Strabo's channel and its disappearance. The fact that it's not where Bittlestone thought it was, and that his original guess about how it was destroyed turned out to be not only wrong but impossible, makes the final outcome all the more satisfying. What he at first underestimated, and pays awed tribute to in his investigation, is the titanic power generated by seismic upthrust during a series of major earthquakes from antiquity to the present day, affecting Kephallenia. The most recent of these, in 1953, raised the level of the entire island by almost a yard,

and caused gigantic landslides of cascading rock and scree. One ancient victim of the earthquakes – leaving telltale inland saltwater pockets to be plumbed centuries later by modern boreholes – was, of course, Strabo's channel, separating Homer's Ithaca, modern Paliki, from the main body of Kephallenia (Samê).

This confirmation of literary inference by the heavy weapons of modern science and technology is a major triumph, and Bittlestone deserves full credit for it. World experts in both science and literature are cited as concurring. "Reading the *Odyssey*," says that eminent Homerist Gregory Nagy of Harvard, "is unlikely ever to be the same again."

Indeed. The trouble is, so much of the rest of the book, as we trail through a whole string of plausible but speculative identifications, from pig farm to palace,^[13] leaves one wishing that Bittlestone had had the good sense to leave well enough alone. But you can't keep a good obsessional romantic down, especially when he has worked his magic on such excellent scholars as James Diggle (who joined the topographical search with enthusiasm) and, above all, Anthony Snodgrass, who as the groundbreaking and often brilliant papers collected in *Archaeology and the Emergence of Greece* amply testify, is committed to common sense, quantification, and limited conclusions. "Laymen," Snodgrass remarks sniffily, "naturally prefer a clear-cut narrative account to a series of fragmented archaeological observations." He criticizes the infusion of heroic myth into the findings of Aegean Bronze Age archaeology. Above all, he reprints his measured and devastating 1974 attack on the unity and historical coherence of Homeric society, seeing in Homer a creative artist, one who borrows from many periods of the past, adds in his own experience and imagination, selects, conflates, idealizes. In other words, the antithesis of Bittlestone's beliefs.

Yet in *Odysseus Unbound* he remains remarkably mild and sympathetic throughout. He encourages Bittlestone to make archaeological contacts. He helps identify the possible site of Odysseus' "palace" on Kastelli. He adds shrewd comments during the topographical hunt. He even keeps an open mind about the suggestion that Bittlestone's limestone terracing may have been a primitive auditorium. When we add in Diggle's on-the-spot identifications of the hill of Hermes and Homer's double harbor, then the whole quest for historicity, narrated by Bittlestone with much panache, takes on the atmosphere of a sober, if excitingly illustrated, academic inquiry. It even glosses over (with much factitious linguistic backup) what is by far the weakest major argument here presented: that Asteris, the mysterious island located, very specifically, by Homer between Ithaca and Samê, should be identified (no sizable island in fact being available there) with the peninsula on which modern Argostoli stands, which from some angles at least looks like an island. And in the last resort, of course, the nay-sayers cannot prove that the topography of Ithaca was not drawn from life, or even that there was not a real

Trojan War veteran named Odysseus whose return home – bow-stringing, vengeance, marital reunion, and all – is evoked in the later books of the *Odyssey*. For Bittlestone to leave us even considering the possibility of this is a minor triumph in its own right.

Notes

[1] Joachim Latacz, *Troy and Homer: Towards a Solution of an Old Mystery*, translated by Kevin Windle and Rosh Ireland (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 152–153.

[2] Detlev Fehling, *Die Quellenangaben bei Herodot: Studien z. Erzählkunst Herodots* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), translated by J.G. Howie and updated as *Herodotus and His "Sources": Citation, Invention and Narrative Art* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1989).

[3] The most brilliant of these, T.P. Wiseman, puts the case as well and thoroughly as I have ever seen it done in *Catullus and His World: A Reappraisal* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), but I remain unconvinced. See my remarks in *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition* (University of California Press, 2005), pp. 4–9.

[4] Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (London: Longmans, 1897).

[5] As argued by Bettany Hughes, whose *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (Knopf, 2005) is a far more scholarly and well-documented book than its catchpenny title would suggest.

[6] For an excellent and up-to-date summary of progress in research, readers are recommended to Latacz, *Troy and Homer*.

[7] That, of course, has not stopped efforts to do so. For a characteristic (and easily available) instance see J. V. Luce's *Celebrating Homer's Landscapes: Troy and Ithaca Revisited* (Yale University Press, 1998) pp. 166–184.

[8] Bittlestone had great fun (incidentally thereby reasserting the seriousness of his own theory) surfing the Internet for way-out hypotheses, *inter alia* running the Cyclops down in Ultima Thule, Calypso on Bermuda, the souls of the dead at Culloden Moor in Scotland, and Odysseus himself everywhere from Estonia to the Crimea.

[9] Theophrastus, *Characters*, edited and translated by James Diggle (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[10] Discussing Quickbird high-altitude satellite photography, Bittlestone claims that custom-ordering Quickbird shots "is outside the scope of an amateur exploration budget," but the cumulative impression given by *Odysseus Unbound* is that most amateur explorers—and indeed not a few academics on grants—would regard Bittlestone's overall budget and resources with envy.

[11] The substitution was common in Latin poetry: see pp. 40–64 of Gilles Le Noan's *À la Recherche d'Ithaque* (Paris: Tremén, 2001), which discusses the identity of Ithake/Thiaki with ancient Doulichion in detail, providing copious documentation from all periods. In the Loeb Classical Library's edition of Propertius' *Elegies* (Harvard University Press, 1990), Professor G.P. Goold, without comment, changes "Doulichion" to "Ithaca" in his translation.

[12] Gerasimos Volterras, *Kritiki Meleti peri Omerikis Ithakis* [Homeric Ithaca, or, a critical study in which it is demonstrated that Paliki is Homer's Ithaca...] (Athens: Vasilike Typographia, Raptane-Papageorgiou, 1903). Both Nikolas G. Livadas, *Odysseus' Ithaca: The Riddle Solved* (Athens: Efstathiadis, 2000), and Le Noan (pp. 124–132) settle for Paliki as Ithaca, but regard it as having always formed part of Samê/Kephallenia.

[13] One thing Bittlestone wisely refrains from discussing in detail is the fact that equally plausible identifications of Homer's sites have been made on Doulichion/Thiaki (which as the late, and predictable, location of an Odyssean cult also benefits from dedicatory remains): see, for example, the arguments in Luce, *Celebrating Homer's Landscapes*, pp. 191–230.