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- › Bilår N24
- › Bildspecial
- › Bokrecensioner
- › Bragdguldet
- › Brännpunkt
- › Börs&finans N24
- › Dejt
- › Dialektarkivet
- › Ditt jobb N24
- › Evenemangsguide
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- › IT/Telekom N24
- › Jobb24
- › Kolumnister
- › Kommentera artiklar
- › Konst
- › Korsord
- › Krogguide
- › Kultur/Nöje
- › Kulturdebatt
- › Kulturkommentar
- › Ledare
- › Magasinet
- › Mat & Dryck
- › Matskolan
- › Nyheter
- › Nyhetsbrev
- › Nyhetsdygnet
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- › Recept
- › Resor
- › RSS-feed
- › Scenrecensioner
- › Skivrecensioner
- › Sport
- › Sportresultat
- › Språkspalten
- › Stockholm just nu
- › Stockholm24
- › Stockholmstrafiken
- › Sudoku
- › Synpunkt
- › Sök/Arkiv
- › Tecknade serier
- › Tv-guide
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- › Företagsinformation
- › Annonsmaterial

Prenumerationer

The line of research which dominated the whole 18th and 19th century came to be called the Analytical school. This attempted to break up the Homeric epics into more 'authentic' smaller poetic units. The Odyssey was felt to consist, for example, of an original core (the appearance of Odysseus) and later additions.

It was therefore not surprising that Homer's literary reputation declined in line with this progressive dissection of his influence. Dietrich Müller (the author of "Die Ilias und ihre Quellen", 1910) wrote: "It is a great pity that the poet of the Odyssey should have experimented with a verse form that he neither originated nor mastered." And Homer's greatest critic of all, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, portrayed the Iliad as a 'miserable mis-mash' ("ein übles Flickwerk").

However, a new discovery was to create a rapid revolution in Homeric studies. This genuine reversal arrived in the 1920s with Milman Parry's field surveys of the oral poetic tradition and his central thesis about the formulaic nature of Homeric poetry.

Latter came the so-called Neoanalytical school's important contributions (Kakridis etc.). As Dodds wrote: "This refreshing insight from Europe's best researchers after generations of misunderstanding began suddenly to make sense to the general public shortly after the first world war." The Homeric question was not so much solved as re-stated.

So much so that today it is entirely possible for an expert researcher such as Richard Janko to argue, with good grounds and in all seriousness, that there was a single poet in the 7th century BC who was the principal author of both the Iliad and the Odyssey.

This research into the verbal tradition and methods of storytelling has shown us a way in which we can reconcile the Analytical and the Unitary theories. It has shown us, inter alia, how traditional formulas and themes that are incorporated in the poem can reflect elements of the contribution of earlier generations' poetry.


This means in turn that the Homeric poems may perhaps preserve memories from much earlier periods. Studies of the oral tradition of poetry offer a possible explanation as to how a Homeric epic from about 750 BC can contain different chronological stock - references to customs and events from Mycenaean times as well as from centuries later.

How does this relate to the archaeological evidence? Whatever one's view of Heinrich Schliemann - whether brilliant amateur archaeologist, or plunderer, or both - one must agree that his excavations towards the end of the 18th century considerably weakened the scientific foundations of the Analytical school.

By pursuing quite literally Homer's descriptions of the place names in the epic, Schliemann went to Troy and Mycenae and he found them. The results were of course not as simple as this, as later research has shown, and controversy around the interpretation of the finds continues to this day. It remains however the case that the amateur Schliemann, by following Homer's poetic instructions and with an improbable series of site visits, identified some of the most sensational archaeological exhibits that have ever been found.

Schliemann's field visits did not however solve the enigma of ancient Ithaca, the much-loved home of Odysseus. He subscribed to its identification with today's island of Ithaka but he found no traces of an ancient town on the island. However, many years after Schliemann's death some important relics were found on Ithaka.

Swartz: Den som reser har inte längre något att berätta. >

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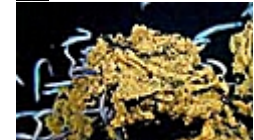
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Twelve bronze tripods from the Mycenaean era were found in a cave belonging to a certain Mr. Loizos, and there was probably also at one time a thirteenth tripod in his possession but this was melted down. In the Odyssey's thirteenth book we read that King Alkinoos donates a tripod to Odysseus. Twelve other nobles also give him presents. All of these are hidden in a cave on Ithaka later in the same book. Loizos's thirteenth tripod is therefore an improbable but interesting item in this context.

But Schliemann's closest associate, Wilhelm Dörpfeld, could never accept that today's Ithaka was Odysseus' island. He believed that nearby Lefkas was the correct island and he tried in vain to find proof for this. Why did Dörpfeld doubt the claim of Ithaka?

The problem lies in Homer's own description of the island. When Odysseus discloses himself to Alkinoos he says: "I am Odysseus, Laertes' son, world-famed / For stratagems: my name has reached the heavens. / Bright Ithaca is my home: it has a mountain, / Leaf-quivering Neriton, far visible. / Around are many islands, close to each other, / Doulichion and Same and wooded Zacynthos. / Ithaca itself lies low, furthest to sea / Towards dusk; the rest, apart, face dawn and sun. / A rugged isle, but a good nurse of young men; / and for myself no other thing can I see sweeter than one's own land." (Od. 9.19-26.)

One reads also the following odd information in the Iliad "Odysseus led the gallant Cephallenians, / From Ithaca and leaf-quivering Neriton, / From Crocyleia and rugged Agilips, / Men hailing from Zacynthos and from Samos, / From the mainland and the region opposite." (Il. 2.631-5.)

Today's Ithaka is hardly "low-lying" (khthamalé). The island is mountainous. It does not lie above the furthest out to the west and the nearby islands are not on its east. Its geographic situation is almost the opposite of the description above. Cephalonia is the biggest island in the archipelago of the Ionian islands and it lies three miles to the west of Ithaka.

But why is Odysseus called a "Cephalonian" in the Iliad (and in four lines in the Odyssey) while the actual island is not mentioned at all? And is it reasonable to assume that Odysseus did not rule over only Ithaca without also holding sway over a part of "the mainland and the region opposite". What in fact is meant by the "mainland" here? And where lie Same and Doulichion? Can one get any sense from Homer's description at all, or are most of his often vivid narratives of Ithaca only a product of his imagination? Questions of this kind have occupied scholars over the centuries.

Like a modern-day Schliemann, the English economist and amateur researcher Robert Bittlestone has taken on the challenge of these enigmatic riddles. He proposes to identify Odysseus' island with Paliki, the northwestern peninsula that is now a part of Cephalonia, the rest of Cephalonia with the 'mainland' and Ithaca as Doulichion.

He is not the first to have chosen Paliki as Ithaca – although his deductions were made independently of others - but he is the first to have tried to prove in a systematic way that Paliki during historical times formed its own island as identified in Homer's description of Ithaca. Bittlestone has already won enough following in the academic world to have originated the book "Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca" from Cambridge University Press (598 pages).

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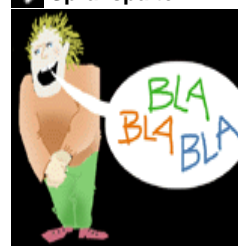
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It is in some ways remarkable that the author was given free rein to publish this book by Cambridge University Press. In the USA the book has been launched by Harvard's prestigious Center for Hellenic Studies. Perhaps it is Schliemann's legacy: the academic world does not want to run the risk of ignoring an amateur archaeologist for a second time. But it also has implications for today's somewhat gloomy situation in classical studies.

One has a feeling that some sensational news is needed in order for us to retain our deep love of Greek literature in the broadest sense "for men praise most the song that comes newest to their ears" as Telemachos says to Penelope (Od. 1.351-2).

The amateur Bittlestone is himself a product of the old classical English educational tradition. He learnt classics and read economics at university. So long as his learning of classical literature has succeeded in providing him with a deep love of Homer and with the enthusiasm that Bittlestone both burns with and needs, we need not worry that classical education has disappeared. There is a need for more such amateurs - the word means of course "lovers". Was it not Andrew Lang who said: "To have learnt to love Homer – that is the mark of a truly civilised person"?

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