

# WHERE WAS HOMER'S ITHACA?

An interview with Robert Bittlestone for *iris* magazine.

*Odysseus is shattered. He's spent 10 years fighting the Trojans alongside Agamemnon, Menelaos and the rest of the Greeks. He sails away from Troy with his henchmen and instead of getting home to his loyal Penelope on Ithaca, he's blown off course past Cape Malea on the southern tip of Greece.*

*And that's where his fantastic adventures begin. The Lotus-eaters, who peddle a prehistoric version of Ecstasy. Polyphemos the one-eyed Cyclops, who eats his crewmen for breakfast, washed down with a gallon of organic milk. Aiolos, who sends fair winds to blow Odysseus home – until his shipmates open the bag and he's blasted straight back again. A battle with more cannibals, and then he meets a genetic engineer called Circe who turns his crew into pigs.*

*He visits the dead in Hades, he escapes from the whirlpool of Charybdis and the she-monster Scylla, he's shipwrecked by Zeus because his crew have eaten the sacred cows – and then he is stranded on a remote island with an immortal mistress called Calypso. Eventually he sails away on a raft to the island of the Phaiacians, where eco-friendly orchards bear fruit all year round. He tactfully turns down a marriage proposal from the beautiful princess Nausicaa and then at last her father's sailors return him home to Ithaca.*

*It's the oldest marine adventure in the world. It was already ancient history when Aristotle and Socrates were in the cradle. It has spawned a hundred spin-offs and inspired writers and artists, philosophers and poets, statesmen and soldiers for the last three thousand years. It's the original Odyssey: a Bronze Age blockbuster and a cornerstone of Western civilisation. And not surprisingly, most people have presumed that Odysseus' homeland of Ithaca is as imaginary as Ithilien in the Lord of the Rings.*

*Robert Bittlestone thinks they're wrong. iris interviews the man who wants to put Odysseus' homeland back on the map.*

### Isn't Homer's Ithaca just another of his inventions?

I don't think so. After all, for thousands of years people thought that Troy was imaginary. Then the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann excavated it in the 1870s. It's south-west of Istanbul: you can go there today, and its location matches Homer's description in the *Iliad* precisely. Other cities that he describes have also been discovered: Knossos in Crete, Mycenae south of Corinth; and in 2005 Ajax's palace was located on Salamis, near Athens. So why shouldn't Homer's Ithaca be real as well? After all, there is an island called Ithaki off the western coast of Greece today: you can go there on holiday.

**But people have been looking for Odysseus' palace on Ithaki for years, and so far they haven't found anything impressive.**

That's true, and there's a very good reason why not. Look how carefully Homer's hero describes his island in the *Odyssey*:

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,  
Doullichion and Same and wooded Zacynthos.  
Ithaca itself lies low, furthest to sea  
Towards dusk; the rest, apart, face dawn and sun.  
*Odyssey 9.19-26, translated by James Diggle*

He says that there are three other islands nearby, "Doullichion and Same and wooded Zacynthos", but Ithaca is low-lying and furthest out to sea towards the dusk – i.e. furthest west. You can't get much clearer than that.

**So what's the problem then?**

Well, take a look at the map (*Modern Names*). Is the island called Ithaki furthest to the west?

**No, it's furthest to the east**

And is it low-lying? (*Ithaki*).

**Well no, it looks pretty mountainous to me.**

Exactly. So it simply cannot be the island that Homer was describing



Hold on. Wasn't he supposed to have lived hundred of years later on the western coast of what is now Turkey? Supposing he just made a mistake?

We don't actually know the first thing about Homer. We don't know when he lived, or where, or if the poet was female, or if there was a whole bunch of them. But we do know that the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are based on traditions that were handed down over centuries by word of mouth and that they originated at a time before writing as we know it was invented.

Surely that would make it even easier for a mistake to be made?

Imagine that you're Homer. You've got to the bit in your poem where you need to describe Ithaca, and tomorrow you're going to recite it at the marketplace down by the harbour. There'll be all sorts of people there – local townsfolk, strangers, soldiers, sailors. And like every poet, you're flat broke, so after the recital you'll be passing round the hat to collect money for your lunch. Now here comes the crunch. Do you actually know where Ithaca is?

## *Ithaki*



### Well, supposing you don't?

In that case you're going to be a bit vague about it, aren't you? With all those sailors in the audience, you're hardly going to risk saying "Ithaca itself lies low, furthest to sea / Towards dusk" when you haven't got the faintest idea where it is. Otherwise there's going to be a chorus of "Rubbish" and a hail of rotten olives coming your way – and you can certainly kiss goodbye to that lunch. You're not going to risk it. You'll play it safe instead and say something simple like "Ithaca is a lovely place, the nicest in the land". It's just one line out of 12,000 in your poem: why set yourself up for unnecessary criticism?

### And if you do know where Ithaca is?

Then you will obviously describe it correctly. And I am convinced that that is just what Homer did.

### But in that case, why is it in the wrong place on the map?

Look again at that map. Which island is the furthest to the west?

**Cephalonia.**

Precisely. However, that has a town on it today called Sami, and Homer referred to “Doulichion and Same and wooded Zacynthos”. So today’s Cephalonia must be Homer’s Same. But look at its western peninsula, at the region that is today called Paliki. It’s low-lying (*Paliki*). And it’s furthest out to sea. And it faces west.

## *Paliki*



**Yes, but it’s not an island.**

Not now. But we believe that it was a separate island 3,000 years ago. I have been working with Professor James Diggle, the eminent classicist from Cambridge, and Professor John Underhill, the expert geologist from Edinburgh, and together we have been able to reconstruct this ancient landscape at the time of the Trojan War. And we think that Paliki was then separated from Cephalonia by a narrow seaway.

**How is that possible?**

The seaway was only about 6 kilometres long and probably less than 100 metres wide. Towering up above it on each side are mountains reaching up to 1 kilometre high. Catastrophic rockfall from these mountains filled in this valley, which is today called “Thinia”, until the two sides of the seaway joined up and covered over the sea.

### **Surely mountain rockfall can't fill up an entire seaway?**

Normally it can't. But these mountains are very special, for two reasons. First, they are unstable. They are not simply solid blocks of rock. Instead they are made up of many parallel slabs of limestone, each of which is only about 1 metre thick. These slabs used to be horizontal, but over millions of years they have been tilted upwards by continental plate collision until they are now pointing downwards at an angle of 60°.

### **Like a pack of playing cards that you slowly tip up at one end?**

Exactly. The other reason is that a seismic fault line runs right through the Thina valley. So when there is a large enough earthquake, sometimes an entire slab of this mountainside detaches from the rest and hurtles down the mountain, filling up the seaway below.

### **Has this happened anywhere else?**

Yes. Do you remember the terrible earthquake in Pakistan on October 8<sup>th</sup> 2005? The newspapers described whole mountainsides collapsing and descending into the valleys below. It's the same effect, except that in this case there was a narrow seaway below.

### **But that would have made a massive change to the landscape, so surely there must be some historical record of it happening?**

There is. The geographer Strabo wrote about Cephalonia 2,000 years ago and he said "*Where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea*". That is a perfect description of what happens when a former seaway is progressively fills up by a series of massive rockfalls.

### **So let me get this straight. You're saying that Paliki was Homer's Ithaca, a low-lying island furthest to the west. Then the rest of Cephalonia was Homer's Same, while Zacynthos presumably was the same island then as it is now?**

Spot on.

### **But in that case, what was the name of the island that today we call Ithaki? And where is the island that Homer called Doulichion?**

Doulichion has been a mystery as long as Ithaca itself. Nobody has been able to find it. Some researchers even thought that it might have disappeared beneath the waves. But the answer is actually very simple. It is the island that today we call Ithaki, and it has been staring us in the face for the last 3,000 years.

### How can you be sure of that?

You don't have to go back very far to find out. In 1675, when Ithaki was visited by Jacob Spon and Sir George Wheler, they were told that its main town, now called Vathy, had the name Dolicha. James Diggle has traced this connection right back to Latin poets such as Virgil and Propertius. So this provides us with strong historical evidence in support of the proposal that Ithaki used to be called Doulichion. (*Ancient Names*)



### When did all this happen?

One or more of these catastrophic landslides probably took place some time between 1200 and 500 BC, because we know that by the time of the battle of Plataia between the Greeks and the Persians in 479 BC, the historian Herodotus refers to "two hundred men from Pale in Cephallenia" – in other words, Paliki and Cephalonia were one island by then. We think that the former marine seaway was initially replaced by low-lying marshland, which would account for Strabo's description of the isthmus about 500 years later. After Strabo's time further landslides caused it to fill up to today's very substantial elevation above the sea.

### Why would the name Doulichion be replaced by Ithaca?

That's a very interesting question. Let's wind back the clock to Herodotus. It is the great period of classical Greece. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates, Thucydides are all in circulation, and not long afterwards come Plato, Aristotle and Alexander the Great.

And when these very remarkable people went to school themselves, the books that they read were Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Odysseus himself was a national hero, a semi-mythical figure from a small island called Ithaca in Western Greece, and a massive source of Greek pride. So the ancient Greeks simply had to have a real Ithaca. They knew it was next door to Cephalonia, and by then there was only one island left to choose. The fact that it was on the wrong side of Cephalonia, and that by calling it Ithaca they confused everybody about its real name of Doulichion, was less important than the idea that they could now claim a real homeland for Odysseus.

### Could ancient Ithaca's population have emigrated there after the earthquake?

Yes, they could have, and that would be another reason why they might have brought the name along with them. This happens all the time – you've only got to look at the town called Ithaca in New York State for a modern example.

### Have you proved that "Strabo's Channel" was once under the sea?

Not yet, but it's looking more and more likely. John Underhill has been conducting geological tests in the area and we have recently drilled a deep borehole to well below sea level. The evidence is getting stronger all the time, but it will probably take another year or two before we have scientific proof or disproof.

### Will we find Odysseus' Palace and the ancient city of Ithaca on Paliki?

That depends on whether you think that Odysseus was a real person. The fact that Homer can correctly describe the location of ancient Ithaca doesn't necessarily mean that Odysseus actually existed. For example, Ian Fleming describes London and other real cities in the James Bond books, but that doesn't make Bond himself real. So at this stage of the investigations we are being very cautious. We would like to get a definite answer from the geology before making any proposals for new archaeological research.

### But what is your personal view?

If Agamemnon lived in Mycenae and Menelaos lived in Sparta, I see no reason in principle why Odysseus should not have lived in Ithaca. In fact there have already been many archaeological discoveries on Cephalonia corresponding to the

Mycenaean period around 1200 BC. So I think we should keep an open mind about the possibility that we may indeed excavate his palace and city one day.

### What are likely to be the effects of this discovery on today's island of Ithaki?

For thousands of years people have been looking for Homer's lost island of Doulichion. It now looks as though we have found it, and it has been under our noses all the time. In Homer's poems it was more important than Odysseus' island. It sent far more ships to Troy and it was the home of many more suitors for Penelope.

Ithaki is a stunningly beautiful island and it is rightly proud of its landscape and its heritage. It will take time for a 3,000-year legacy to be reappraised, and we appreciate that this will not be an easy period for its inhabitants. But the Greeks as a nation, and those who dwell in the Ionian Islands in particular, are far too intelligent to allow tradition to stand in the way of common sense.

### How can we find out more about the discovery and stay in touch with the news?

You can read the book that I have written with James Diggle and John Underhill. It is called *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca*, published by Cambridge University Press, and it takes the form of a family adventure story. Perhaps I should have called it *The Odysseus Code*, except that it is not a work of fiction.

You can obtain it online at Amazon or direct from the publisher at <http://www.cambridge.org/uk/0521853575>, where a special discount has been set up for iris readers if you enter the code "11869Z". And you can visit the project website, which is at <http://www.odysseus-unbound.org>. There is a lot of information there and also a forum where you can discuss these new proposals with other people.

### Will you come and talk about the project at our readers' schools?

James Diggle, John Underhill and I have given talks at some schools already and we would be happy to do so again. We use satellite computer technology and other audio-visual material during our talks, and this takes some effort to set up, so it makes more sense for us to do this for an audience of a few hundred people rather than a small group. So if several schools in the same area would like to cooperate on organising a joint event, they are very welcome to get in touch with us through iris.