

Odysseus Unbound - The Search for Homer's Ithaca

Preface to the Greek Edition

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 Homer 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.

Professor Peter Green, University of Iowa (New York Review of Books)

In October 2005 the English edition of *Odysseus Unbound* was published by Cambridge University Press and it now gives James Diggle, John Underhill and me great pleasure to welcome this Greek edition from Polytropon of Athens. The translation represents a truly Herculean achievement by Elias Toumasatos, Director of the Corgialenios Library in Argostoli, Kefalonia. He has been ably supported in this task by an international team of reviewers: Ioanna Sitaridou, Manolis Pantos, Vassias Tsokopoulos, George Theodorou (who personally translated Appendix 2), Nellie Constandaki-Hioni and Takis Patrikarakos. To all of them and also to Petros Stathatos and Maria Charalabi of Polytropon we owe our heartfelt thanks and appreciation.

As I explained in Appendix 5, the typescript of the English edition was submitted towards the end of 2004 but those final pages were updated with late-breaking news in the spring of 2005. Since that time there has been considerable further progress, particularly in the geological diagnosis that is being master-minded by John Underhill. The interim results of this research have been published at the project website (www.odysseus-unbound.org) and for the convenience of Greek readers a summary is presented in the newly written Appendix 6.

This scientific work has been made possible by the continuing support of the President, Director General and senior staff of IGME, the Greek geological institute. Without their facilitation the project could not continue and we are very grateful to them. The geological agenda was greatly strengthened earlier this year by means of a sponsorship agreement with the Dutch geoscientific company Fugro, and we would like to thank Steve Thomson and all his colleagues there for their commitment, generosity and enthusiasm.

On Kefalonia itself we have been fortunate to receive the support of the responsible officials: the former Mayor of Paliki, Vassilis Rouhotas and his family; the current Mayor of Paliki, Nopi Alexandropoulou; the Mayor of Argostoli, Giorgos Tsilimidos; and the Director of the Archaeological Museum, Andreas Sotiriou. They have by no means pre-judged the results of our scientific research but they await its outcome with interest.

With the benefit of these resources we hope to obtain before long a firm answer to the geological hypothesis that is presented in this book. If that answer confirms the "Strabo's Channel" proposal then it would be desirable for the focus of the project to turn to archaeology, an area in which the project team at present has no dedicated capability. But just as our present research has been

transformed by the outstanding classical expertise of James Diggle and the remarkable geological achievements of John Underhill, so we hope that the archaeological challenges that may lie ahead will be tackled by a visionary archaeologist who will volunteer to join us in the (perhaps professionally courageous) belief that ‘Homer was telling the truth’.

As I write these words the newspapers carry reports of the terrible fires on the mainland of Greece and the loss of life that has ensued. Earlier this summer there were also extensive fires on Kefalonia itself. These shocking events remind us that despite our scientific advances, mankind remains very vulnerable to the physical forces of nature. In the case of Kefalonia the recurrent danger is from earthquakes, and especially from the very strong earthquakes that can cause a whole mountainside to detach in its entirety and to thunder down into the valley below, an event that geologists call a ‘sturzstrom’. The last such earthquake was on August 12th 1953; writing on August 14 1953 the London Daily Express quoted a Kefalonian radio operator as saying “*Tonight I saw a mountain sliding into the sea*”. The evidence of such massive rockfalls remains clearly visible today: if you are caught in the path of a sturzstrom then it is almost impossible to survive.

Although the date and time of major earthquakes cannot at present be reliably predicted, we know from the historical record over the last 500 years that such events have taken place on Kefalonia at an average interval of about 50 years. Does this therefore mean that the island is overdue for another seismic catastrophe? That depends on whether the geological clock corresponding to tectonic plate tension was reset by the large offshore earthquakes of 1983 and 2003, and we do not know the answer to this question. So when I wrote in Chapter 1 “Statistically speaking the next major earthquake in Cephalonia is not due until about 2048, but there is a very wide degree of variation in these predictions” it is important that I should emphasise that qualification. The year 2048 emerged simply as an arithmetical extrapolation of the highlighted data in Figure 11.5, and such calculations know nothing of the sporadic awakening of those titanic forces that lie beneath our feet. Poseidon sleeps lightly in the Ionian Islands and the next major earthquake on Kefalonia could occur at any time. When it does, your life will depend on being well away from the path of a mountain rockfall.

Finally I would like to add a comment about the island east of Kefalonia that is today called Ithaki, because if we are able to prove that Strabo’s Channel existed over 3,000 years ago, separating the western peninsula of Paliki from the rest of Kefalonia, there will then be little doubt that Paliki was Homer’s Ithaca and today’s Ithaki was Homer’s Doulichion. Earlier this year I was asked by *Iris* magazine the question: “What are likely to be the effects of such a discovery on today’s island of Ithaki?” and this was my reply.

For thousands of years people have been looking for Homer’s lost island of Doulichion. It now looks as though we may 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.

Kingston-upon-Thames, August 2007