

**Eleutherotypia Athens - July 16 2006  
(Epsilon colour supplement)**

**Penelope waited for Odysseus near Lixouri!**

**You set out for Ithaca and you find yourself in Cephalonia! It's not you that changed your plans, it's the scientific research that has changed for you: that which is now being conducted by Robert Bittlestone and his colleagues, trying to prove that Homeric Ithaca coincides with Lixouri! It's a long way for the "prospective new Schliemann" and his journey is uncertain: just like that of Odysseus.**

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For centuries, classicists, researchers and historians have argued about the geographical location of Homeric place names. If we believe that the mystery of the *Iliad* was resolved with the discovery of the palace of Troy by Heinrich Schliemann, then the mystery of the *Odyssey* still remains. Where did Odysseus actually aim for? To which island did he return after his 10-year-old journey? Even today, the mainstream scientific community has not been convinced that the current island of Ithaki (Thiaki as it is called locally) coincides with Homeric Ithaca, the homeland of Odysseus.

There have been many alternative proposals for the site of ancient Ithaca, ranging from the feasible (Lefkada, Cephalonia) to the improbable (the Baltic, Scotland). The 50-year-old British businessman and fervent lover of antiquity, Robert Bittlestone, is now testing a radical approach to the "Ithaca" enigma. He argues – and aims to prove – that the peninsula of Paliki in Cephalonia, Lixouri, was once an island, separated from the rest of Cephalonia by a narrow channel. If that is true, then Paliki must really be "the island closest to the West", as Homer describes Ithaca. "Reading the *Odyssey* is unlikely ever to be the same again" says Gregory Nagy, Harvard professor and Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies. But what then is the difference between "Odysseus Unbound" and the previous theories, and why it is prompting such great interest, publicity and debate?

Robert Bittlestone has accomplished something rather unusual: he has looked to some very eminent representatives of the scientific community for their objective help and advice. His book, which was published by the prestigious editorial house of the University of Cambridge, was co-written by the classicist James Diggle, Professor of Classics at Cambridge, and by John Underhill, Professor of Geology at the University of Edinburgh. The first print run of the book sold out in just a few months, having received favourable and enthusiastic comments from the international press, while the "Odysseus Unbound" affair turned into a mini-phenomenon within academic circles, firing off intense discussions and inspiring television coverage from the BBC as well as the History Channel.

Roughly one year after the initial publication of the book, the writer returns to Cephalonia in order to continue his researches: this time with an interdisciplinary staff of scientists with official authorisation from the Institute of Geological and Mineral Exploration (IGME). The aim of the mission is clearly geological: “You cannot start on the archaeology until you have worked out the geology” says Bittlestone, introducing us to Professor John Underhill, the expert who is in charge of geological research.

On one boiling hot day of hard field-work we meet them on location, down craggy alleys and steep slopes. “You claim that Odysseus was born here in Lixouri?” I ask the writer, who more and more reminds me of Indiana Jones. “In the book I make no claims. I present the data that exists, and I try to find elements that might support or deny the hypothesis. Up to now we have found a lot of evidence that the proposal is valid, and no data so far that refutes it.”

As a matter of fact, he has identified 26 key locations with matching Homeric descriptions, while the geological research so far supports his theory that “The topography of Homeric Ithaca fits exactly with the morphology of Paliki”, a view that James Diggle reinforces in his own contribution to the book.

"It is as if you were trying to solve a jigsaw, but you do not know whether your pieces are from the right puzzle, nor if you have all of them in your hands", says Bittlestone. This summer is particularly important for the “Odysseus Unbound” project, since the geological research is accelerating. If it is confirmed on a geological basis that Paliki was once an island, then it is hoped that the “green light” will be given for archaeological studies to begin. As the researchers tell us, “there has already been some important progress”, but the details are being drawn together for a more detailed scientific briefing in the autumn.

The field researchers, as expected, are setting the agenda at present. John Underhill shows us around the field-work, where he and his geological team are studying the rocks in order to discover if they are landslides or instead bedrock. “Look opposite, see that landscape, see these mountains... Their geography has changed many times over as a result of the earthquakes. We are standing on terrain that could once have been on the edge of a steep precipice that dropped down to the sea.” It sounds plausible: the steep rocks that frame the valley are even now looming as if ready to fall down on us and crush us, so why not also imagine that there was historically sufficient rockfall on this mountain to fill the marine channel with rubble?

While we are wandering in these Lixouriot paths, Bittlestone restlessly comes and goes between “team one” and “team two”, armed with water, sandwiches, ice creams and a GPS. “Next, let’s go to the other team to meet Dan”. Dan Welch is American, from a company specialising in geological studies, and he has with him a heavy and complex instrument - the very thoughtful project contribution of Geophysical Survey Systems International. It is a radar unit that measures the subsoil with beams and depending on the density of the rocks, it can indicate their age. 30-year-old Dan is silent and very effective. We learn that he is knowledgeable in archaeology and that one of his previous missions was in Armenia.

“Given the valley’s length, it is almost impossible for us to perform a geological search of the whole region using these current techniques”, says Bittlestone. “So as a next step we want to use the methods of aerial geo-prospecting that are provided to the major petroleum companies”. Are they then looking for a sponsor? “I would not describe such a firm as a sponsor, more as a helper and collaborator. We have already been in contact with certain companies, but it would be inappropriate to mention names at this point. However, you can see that this project represents a very good way for them to demonstrate their equipment, to be in the public eye and to combine

publicity with a fundamentally important scientific aim". Bittlestone is transformed from romantic lover of antiquity into an ingenious businessman and his light blue eyes sparkle with enthusiasm.

That afternoon, having completed the scientific leg of the research, at least enough for one day, the writer continues undaunted. "You have seen how we are trying to collect the geological data: now I will take you on a tour of the Homeric locations". Thus begins the second part of our journey in space and time, with the help of a 4x4 jeep that Bittlestone drives rapidly and aggressively. Through his eyes we relive the descriptions of the *Odyssey*: the harbour into which Telemachus sailed, the woods through which Odysseus strode before his meeting with the suitors, the pigfarm of Eumaios, even the palace itself, that according to the writer is found in the hill of Kastelli near the current location of Livadi. Listening to him, following with my eyes his gestures, I try to "tele-transfer" myself back to Homeric Ithaca.

And what if my companion is only a Don Quixote in search of Homeric windmills? As if he can read my mind, he asks: "Did Odysseus really exist – did Homer invent it all, and was the *Odyssey* a complete fantasy – a 'Lord of the Rings' of antiquity? Perhaps. But then again we know that many of the places that Homer described really did exist – the poet's audience knew what he was talking about: we know for example that the Trojan war and Troy existed..."

There is no need for him to continue. So Ithaca may therefore also have existed, and as Schliemann found the palaces of Troy, the same possibility cannot be excluded, that Bittlestone may one day find the palaces of Odysseus. The oldest mystery is combined with the most modern elements: Odysseus is located in his Ithaca via NASA, petrochemical companies, satellites and radar. The epic poem comes to life with the help of technology, of scientific research and three British writers - a businessman, a classicist and a geologist – who are trying to release Odysseus from the bonds of fable and lead him back once again to his real homeland.

- *Robert Bittlestone's book "Odysseus Unbound" will be translated into Greek by the publisher Polytropon*