

Literature. Culture.

ROBERT BITTLESTONE (with James Diggle and John Underhill), *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. XXII + 598 pp. ISBN 978-0-0521-85357-6

When we speak of Ithaca in the *Odyssey* of Homer, to what geographical reality are we actually referring? A significant body of data from Homeric scholarly literature indicates that the description of the island in the poem does not correspond to the Ithaca we visit today in any cruise around the Ionian Sea (although the island of Ithaki is not lacking in "tourist propaganda" which insists that Odysseus' kingdom is exactly where we are). At the crux of the problem are the verses where Odysseus discloses his identity to King Alcinoos, in Scherie: the hero speaks of his island as being at the westernmost end of a small archipelago, only a little raised above of the level of the sea (*Od. IX, 21-27*). However this description clearly does not fit the island called Ithaki on the modern map of Greece. Homeric philology, on the one hand, has attempted to avoid this difficulty by claiming that, unlike the poet of the *Iliad*, who knows the Troad well, the poet of the *Odyssey* never visited Ithaca (regarding it, therefore, as an imaginary land like the islands of Circe or Calypso), whereas archaeology, on the other hand, has been committed to trying to discover alternative locations since the 19th century. The core of this book's argument is the identification of Homeric Ithaca with Paliki, the western peninsula of the modern island of Cefalonia, a peninsula that is believed to have been formerly a free-standing island of Cefalonia separated by a marine channel, for the existence of which there is definite evidence in the *Geography* of Strabo (10.2.8-15-16).

With this new (and brilliant) geographic identification of Homeric Ithaca, the descriptions of the island in the poem make marvellous sense. According to the theory presented by Robert Bittlestone, modern Ithaca would be the Dulichium described by Homer, which is also referred to by Roman poets such as Virgil (*Buc. 6,76*) and Propertius (2.14.2), whose texts confirm the ambivalence of the toponyms "Ithaca" and "Dulichium" in antiquity. As we see in the modern *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae, Supplementum, Latin propria Nomina* vol. III fasc. II (1989), p. 268, for Dulichium we must understand "*insula prope Ithacam (uel Ithaca ipsa)*". According to the thesis of *Odysseus Unbound*, the reason why Dulichium came to be known as Ithaca is as a result of the mass emigration of the Ithacans from their own island to Dulichium after a sequence of major earthquakes, which also had the effect of transferring Homeric Ithaca from its previous status as an autonomous island to a peninsula of neighbouring Cefalonia. Readers of Homer will notice that in some lines of the *Odyssey* (especially in Book XXIV) there appears to be some confusion between the terms "Ithacans" and "Cephalenians".

The major scientific contribution of *Odysseus Unbound* is, therefore, to have brought together the elements that prove the existence, in antiquity, of the channel mentioned by Strabo; hence, today's Paliki was, in fact, an island when the *Odyssey* was composed. The book attempts, however, to go rather a lot further than this. Robert Bittlestone is not a classicist by profession. Like Heinrich Schliemann, he is someone who has been able to make use of financial resources in support of his enthusiasm for Homer and to embark on a journey that, from the outset, no professional Homeric scholar would undertake. This enthusiasm was fully rewarded and indeed justified by the geological tests of Strabo's Channel, but the same enthusiasm will be an Achilles' heel for many classicists who will react to the more adventurous conclusions that Bittlestone extracts from his discovery at least with reserve, if not with scepticism. The main issue here is the confidence placed by the author in the text of the *Odyssey* in relation to specific localisations in Paliki of the places mentioned in the epic: the palace of Odysseus, Eumaeus' pig farm, the farm of Laertes, etc. It would be fair to say that the proposals presented by Bittlestone are extremely attractive, illustrated with a panoply of photographs and maps that even by themselves make this book a must and a delight for any classicist. But those who are professionally linked to the study of Homeric epic know that the interpretation of many of the elements in the poems cannot be taken literally, because poetic formulae and language conventions preclude a wholly factual interpretation. Reality (whatever it may be...) appears filtered in Homeric poetry through the conventions of the words used in formulae. Here it could be said that the main defect of *Odysseus Unbound* is a somewhat reckless disregard for the contribution of both the oral transmission theories of Milman Parry and the analytical theories of the German philologists of the 19th century. But it would be a great pity if the scholarly shortcomings of this magnificently illustrated and grippingly readable book were to put off a scholarly readership, because there is no doubt whatever that, in its essence, *Odysseus Unbound* proposes something that is absolutely new and of permanent value.

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