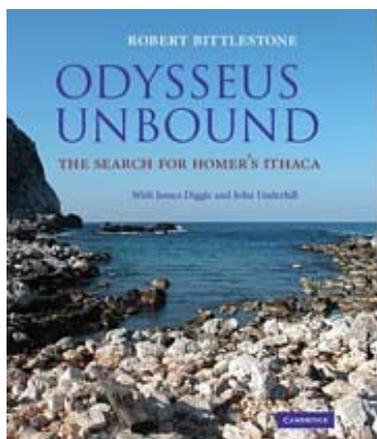


# All at (wine-dark) sea

A-list Hellenists and stratigraphers, a convincing argument, opulent illustrations and jokes — and the classics are boring?



## Odysseus Unbound

The Search for Homer's Ithaca

Robert Bittlestone, with James Diggle and John Underhill

Cambridge University Press, 2005

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Amateur in the traditions of Schliemann and Ventris, Bittlestone (henceforth B), guided by premier league Hellenists and scientists, principally James Diggle and John Underhill, revives the parochial notion that Odysseus's Ithaca was not modern Thiaki but Paliki in western Cephalonia, its ancient prop the geographer Strabo's statement that the two were cut off by a low-lying, frequently submerged isthmus.

B's theory has not convinced (notably) the expert John Luce, who sticks to Ithaca = Thiaki, based on the buildings, pottery and 'Prayer to Odysseus' text excavated in the 1930s by Sylvia Benton, who is omitted from B's bibliography. Meanwhile, Luce has announced the discovery on Thiaki of the "well-wrought" ('krene tukte') spring near his presumptive siting of Odysseus's palace, supposed by Lorimer to be a "poetic flight of fancy". Neither Lorimer nor B remembered the Byzantine historian Anna Comnena where a local tells

Robert Guiscard's Normans: "You see the island of Ithaca yonder. There used to be a spring which always gave cold drinkable water."

Other sources are ignored or abused. B wants Asteris not to be insular, but Pliny states it was, describing Ithaca as an island 15 miles from mainland Araxus. Wondering about Homer's knowledge of it, B misses a *Greek Anthology* epigram that lists Ithaca as one claimant to his birthplace. There is also emperor Julian's statement that Penelope's suitors "came from Ithaca, Same, and Dulichium," perhaps implying a different island kingdom. B wonders why there is no post-Homeric mention of Ithaca, missing Artemidorus of Ephesus (c.100 BC), quoted in Porphyry's highly-relevant Cave of the Nymphs 4. It was simply not important, being ignored both in classical and Byzantine times by enemies raiding neighbouring islands. B is misled by Diggle into thinking Roman writers no longer associated Odysseus with Ithaca, because Virgil and Propertius sometimes assign him to Dulichium. These same poets elsewhere revert to Ithaca, with which he is regularly linked by (e.g.) Cicero, Tibullus, and Juvenal. More interesting is the topographical muddle made by Virgil and that great traveller Pausanias. The latter's remark, "the Chersonesos is an island lying offshore; you reach it by a bridge", should have featured in the Bittlestone-Diggle dialogue over the meaning of 'nesos' and 'Chersonesos'.

In a key verse, Odysseus describes Ithaca as 'chthamale' and 'panupertatos.' B takes these adjectives to mean 'low-lying' and 'furthest out to sea'. Strabo, however, understood the first as 'closest to land', as in modern Greek. The second regularly means 'most-renowned', a natural boast for Odysseus to make. 'Furthest out to sea' is just an invention of the Liddell &

Scott *Greek Lexicon*. The only Englisher to get it right was George Chapman (1616).

A sumptuous production, this, with thousands of illuminating illustrations, likewise opulent in valuably synthesising charts of historical and scientific data. The special Homeric index is particularly handy, the general one ranges impressively from 'buttocks diseased' and 'testicles' to James Bond and Pink Floyd. The bibliography, albeit extensive and *au courant*, leaves out much earlier work. Furthermore, Dörpfeld (Schliemann's successor) developed his Ithaca = Leucas theory from the unmentioned H Draheim's *Die Ithaka Frage* (Berlin, 1903).

B is outstandingly fair-minded towards rival theorists. Eschewing academic Newspeak, he writes with clarity, verve and humour - my favourite jokes are his defining of ferried-in food as "meals on keels" and Circe's porcine transmogrifications as ancient genetic engineering. Some reviewers deride B for his sitings of Eumaeus's piggeries and so forth - "gossamer fantasy", sneers Peter Jones (*Sunday Telegraph*), but the amateur's romantic imagination beats academic dustiness any day. B reacts to Greece in the manner of Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller - doubleplusgood in my book.

It hardly matters whether you agree with this stupendous work. A non-scientific neutral, I find the geological arguments impressive to overwhelming. And, like the Number 9 Bus, there'll be another theory along soon. Some would say it hardly matters anyway. As Homer's editor WB Stanford put it: "For appreciation of the poem, it makes little difference whether Ithaca is Thiaki or the Isle of Man or Rhode Island."