



ULYSSES: In search of legendary Ithaca

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A remarkable publication originated by Robert Bittlestone proposes a radical new location for the island of Ithaca and the city of Odysseus, deploying stratigraphy, geology and satellite photography as well as other techniques. *Adolfo Domínguez* reviews this stimulating hypothesis and the new avenues that it opens.

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An important part of the attraction that the classical world holds for us involves the resolution of the mysteries (some real, others invented) bequeathed by ancient civilisations. The identification of the exact locations of these mysteries, especially where they are previously unknown, has always occupied an important place in history, or at least within the textual tradition.

The Homeric poems called the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the oldest literary manifestations of Greek civilisation. From antiquity they have represented an inexhaustible source of references and situations that throughout history have nevertheless amounted to little more than this: placenames that appear incapable of being tied down to a definite location. Where was Ogygia, the island of Calypso? And the island of Aiolos? And that of Polyphemos, the Cyclops? And where is the entrance to the shady world of Hades? And where can we find the country of the Phaiacians? The ancient scholars were aware of these controversies and they sometimes responded to them in ways that in many cases we now find counter-intuitive. That is precisely why they must be considered little more than prescriptions for tourists, both old and new.

However, by applying radical criteria, some of which were not too distant from those of the ancient commentators, Heinrich Schliemann was able to locate the site of Troy. And even though Mycenae was already identified, he was also able to excavate one of its rich burial sites and announce that he had found the tomb and the face of Agamemnon himself. In the same way, Sir Arthur Evans, following in the footsteps of the German polymath, was able to find and excavate the no less mythical "labyrinth" of King Minos at Knossos in Crete.



Odysseus, tied to the mast of his boat in order to resist the song of the Sirens without imperilling himself (Krater of the 3rd century BC, Berlin, Staatliche Museum).

Alongside these places, it seemed that the Ithaca of Odysseus, the island to which he took twenty years to return, was surely also capable of being located. Anyone looking at a map of Greece today (overleaf) will see quite clearly how after sailing out of the Gulf of Patras, there lies an island called Ithaki, basking in the heat of the Ionian Sea in a small archipelago that also includes the islands of Cephalonia and Zacynthos. So if Ithaca is already located on the map, where then lies the mystery?

The issue is not that simple. The identification of Homer's Ithaca with the island that today bears the same name, which from antiquity almost everyone has regarded as the right candidate, nevertheless gives rise to certain problems if we rely on the description in the *Odyssey* itself that is given to us when Odysseus (who after all ought to know) explains the location of his mother country:

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,
 Doulichion 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 (trans. Diggle)

If we look at the map of Greece, we will see that the island that today bears the name of Ithaki does not relate to this description in the *Odyssey*, neither in its position nor in its topography. This problem was noted in antiquity and numerous scholars over the ages have tried to reconcile the present geographical data with that which is presented in the *Odyssey*, providing interpretations that have ranged from the ingenious to the absurd. For some researchers it has been easier to suggest that the Homeric poems were simply unconcerned with a real geography and that that the fortunate discoveries of Schliemann mentioned above, among others, simply cannot be repeated.



Satellite photographs of the southern Ionian Islands at the present time (left). On the right, the author's proposal for the ancient identity of the islands. Grid: 50 km. Colour interpretation: vegetation = green; water = black; urban zones = lavender; bare ground = magenta (© R. Bittlestone and NASA).

The problem therefore remains: is today's Ithaki the Ithaca of Odysseus? Since it seems from the above passage that the answer must be no, the immediate question that arises is: where else must we look for the mother country of Odysseus? Or do we have to abandon the quest altogether? These questions and their possible answers are formulated in a book that appeared at the end of 2005 with the title *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca*, accompanied by substantial media announcements. Its author, Robert Bittlestone, is an enthusiast whose professional activities and company are located in the world of business management, but who also studied classics in his youth.

The book presents the development of the author's original "What-if?" idea on the subject: his initial hypothesis is followed by some subsequent setbacks, by the progressive development of the theory and by its final articulation. Presented alongside are the contributions of two eminent specialists, James Diggle, Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Cambridge, and John Underhill, Professor of Stratigraphy at the University of Edinburgh.

This narrative approach has the effect of increasing the length of the book rather substantially. From a specialist's perspective this can be somewhat time-consuming, since it is in the nature of the scientific method to emphasise positive results and the arguments that sustain them and to refrain from presenting blind alleys. However, in considering the objectives of Bittlestone's book, which is aimed at the intelligent public as well as the specialist, the approach is actually rather attractive, because the reader can follow the author's thought processes, his doubts, his

dead ends, their routes and, finally, the elaboration of the main line of investigation. There is no doubt that this subjective exposition provides a much closer match between the experiences of the author and the eyes of the reader.



NASA false infrared image of Strabo's Channel. To the left, image with optimized contrast and brightness. To the right, the area corresponding to the lightest colour of this image that may represent the ancient course of the channel (© R. Bittlestone and NASA).

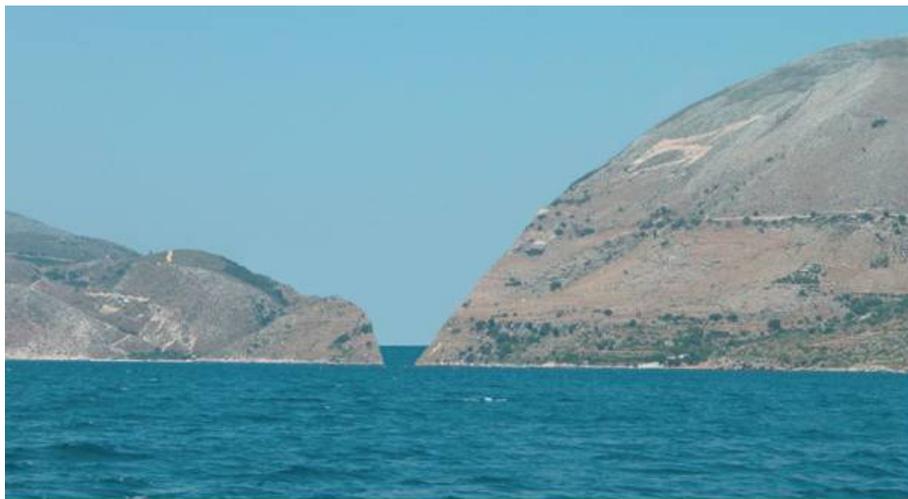
Let us now examine the main hypothesis that Bittlestone proposes in this book. In his opinion, ancient Ithaca must be located in the peninsula of Paliki that forms the western part of the present island of Cephalonia. In ancient times, Bittlestone suggests that it was an island separated from the rest of Cephalonia by a marine channel. Even though it might appear at first sight that we have returned here to a 'catastrophe' theory that explains differences between ancient and modern geographical realities by the action of various natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, etc.), there are certain elements of this case that do seem to support this interpretation. Most significant of these is an ancient description transmitted by the Greek geographer Strabo. While documenting the Ionian archipelago and also trying to reconstruct Homeric geography, he makes an observation about Cephalonia that is of singular interest:

“Where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea.” *Strabo 10.2.15*

The isthmus to which Strabo refers measures in fact only 6 km in length and this news become one of the main planks in support of Bittlestone's hypothesis.

The main difficulty, at first sight, turns out to be to try to demonstrate that in ancient times this seaway that the author has christened “Strabo's Channel” actually existed. His initial idea, to which he dedicates a significant part of the book, with the objective of sharing with the reader his line of thought, is aimed at trying to determine whether the frequent earthquakes that the

island of Cephalonia has experienced since antiquity (such as the terrible and devastating one of 1953) could have caused an uplift of the island sufficient to elevate to dry ground a marine channel that could never have been very deep nor very wide.



Upper image: Today's view from the sea of the proposed southern exit of Strabo's Channel (the bay of Agia Sotira is to the left). Below: A reconstruction of the former southern exit of the channel. This is an indicative simulation only, produced simply by eliminating material from the upper image (© R. Bittlestone).

That the island has undergone these elevations is beyond doubt, as much by the studies of seismologists and also by observable tests in the coastal zones that show how they have been uplifted over their previous levels that had in former centuries been submerged. However, a solution based only on uplifting turns out not to provide a wholly convincing explanation. Rather than giving up the quest altogether, Bittlestone then explores another possibility, for which the collaboration of the geologist Underhill becomes crucial.

Another consequence of earthquakes, in addition to the elevation of the land, involves major rockslides from the steepest slopes. The geological analysis of the slopes that lie on both sides of the presumed channel finally demonstrates the existence of very significant such earth landslides

during the last two or three thousand years. If these were accompanied by a general uplifting of the area as a result of seismic thrust, this could then explain the disappearance of the ancient channel to which Strabo referred.



Telemachos' disembarkation at Agni Cove. The arrows show how Telemachos manages to outwit Penelope's suitors and arrive at the ancient harbour of Ithaca by circumnavigating the island via Strabo's Channel, as related in the *Odyssey* (© Bittlestone and Freytag-Berndt).

The hypothesis that the author develops is without a doubt achieved with great brilliance and with the benefit of all of the capabilities of modern technology. These include at their simplest the digital photography that provides an almost exhaustive degree of documentation of possible landscapes, to at their most complex some high resolution satellite photographs, effectively supported by software programs that were in many cases provided without charge by their manufacturers. And this is one of the strongest points of the book, the thorough graphical documentation that enables the reader to identify with the points that the author considers vital for the understanding of his hypothesis.

According then to Bittlestone's reconstruction, Homer's island of Ithaca corresponds to the present peninsula of Paliki, that is today part of the island of Cephalonia. The island of Same that is also mentioned by Homer is the remaining part of this same Cephalonia, while the present island of Ithaki corresponds to Homeric Doulichion. With this reconstruction the problems created by Homer's description in the *Odyssey* start to dissolve. Once Ithaca has been identified

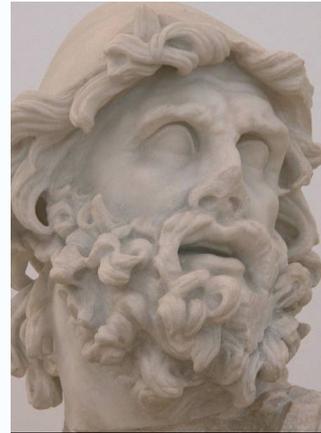
with Paliki, the next step is therefore to see whether the geographic data about this island that is contributed by Homer finds a match in today's topography of the region.

As any reader of the *Odyssey* can verify, the poem contributes a great deal of information about the island of Odysseus, since the same areas are described with significant precision on several different occasions. One of these is when Telemachos returns to Ithaca after his visit to Pylos and Sparta, escaping the ambush of Penelope's suitors who are eventually thwarted by him. Another is when Odysseus himself sets foot on Ithaca and after visiting the pig-farm of Eumaios, prepares for his arrival at his palace. After undergoing the ridicules and humiliations of the suitors, he ends up by massacring them to recover his palace, his wife and his throne. With the help of this data, and supported by the new translation and observations on the Homeric text that is provided by Professor Diggle, the other main collaborator in this work, Bittlestone reproduces with the aid of satellite images and their landmark identifications as much of the journey of Telemachos through Ithaca as that of Odysseus.

An Olive-tree at a Harbour's Head

On Ithaca there is a bay of Phorcys,
The old man of the sea: in it, two headlands,
Projecting, sheared off, crouching from the harbour,
Shield it from waves whipped up by blustering winds
Outside. Inside well-timbered ships can ride
Unanchored, when they reach the mooring-place.
There is a leafy olive at its head,
And nearby a delightful misty cave,
Sacred to the nymphs who have the name of Naiads.
Inside are mixing-bowls and double-handled
Jars made of stone, and here the bees store honey.
Inside are long stone looms, at which the nymphs
Weave sea-blue webs, a wondrous sight, and streams
Of ever-flowing water. It has two doors,
One to the north, by which men may descend,
The other to the south, for gods. This way
Men enter not: it is the immortals' path.

Odyssey 13.93-115 (trans. Diggle)



Head of Odysseus from the Grotto of Tiberius at Sperlonga (photograph of R. Bittlestone). With the permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Roma.

In his close mapping on this island of the hand of the poet of the *Odyssey*, the author sometimes allows himself to be seduced by an excessive optimism. He is quick to identify any element on the land with a corresponding Homeric location in a manner that is perhaps attractive for the layman, but which from the viewpoint of the specialist can from time to time appear contrived. For example, some buildings that are later in the book attested as of a probably mediaeval date are initially considered as perhaps corresponding to the time of Odysseus. Overtaken by emotion, the author even suggests that an old olive tree at one of the key locations could have given shade to Odysseus himself, although to be fair he later recognizes that olive trees do not generally live to an age of three thousand years. Homeric interpretations are from time to time lent to the simple enclosures of modern shepherds, as if the last three thousand years had not affected the landscape.

But beneath these preliminary observations, which have perhaps somewhat surprisingly remained in the book despite the later clarification and advice of experts in archaeology and geology, there is nevertheless an interesting lesson in Homeric topography. According to the author's reconstruction, the city of Odysseus should be located at the hill of Kastelli, which is just to the west of the southern exit of "Strabo's Channel" in the present bay of Argostoli and dominating an old port that has now been uplifted above sea level. In one of the excursions made by the author, accompanied by Anthony Snodgrass, Professor Emeritus of Classical Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, Mycenaean pottery was observed on the surface. This location would represent a wonderful candidate for the city of ancient Ithaca.

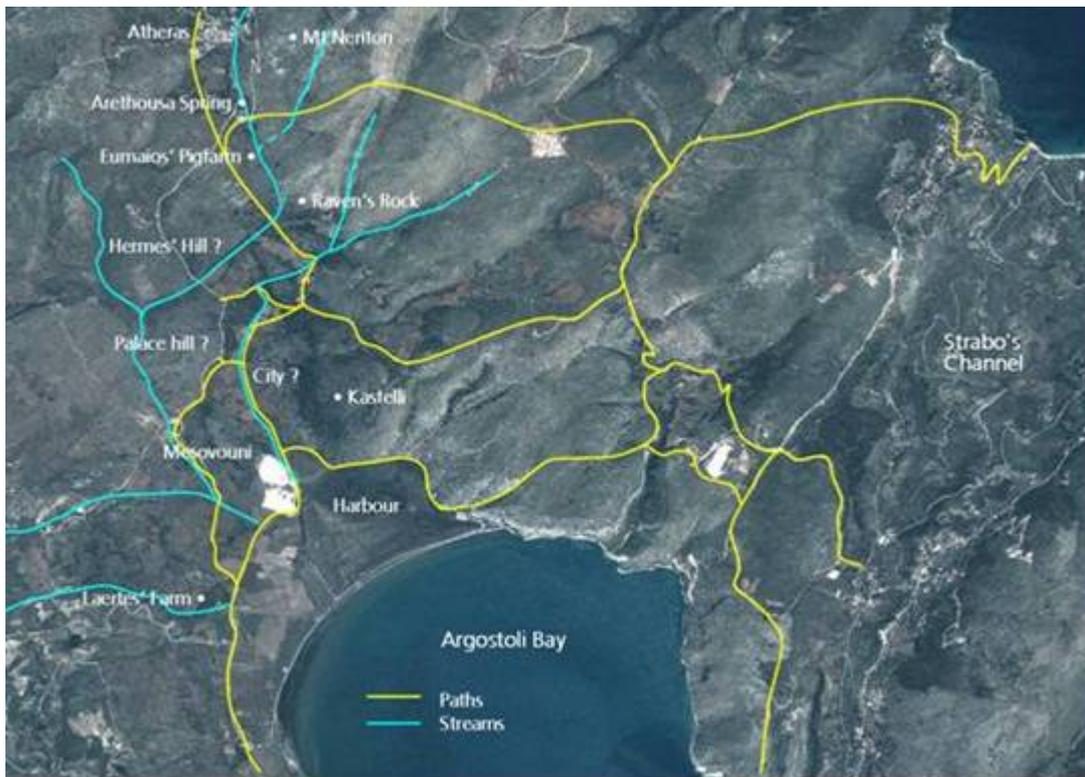


The hill of Kastelli that may have been the location of Odysseus' palace and city, in a photograph taken from the silted-up ancient harbour from a southwesterly direction. If John Underhill's diagnosis regarding coastal uplift is confirmed, then in the time of Odysseus the sea would have reached the foot of this hill (© R. Bittlestone).

If we are to be confident about the hypothesis and the reconstruction that Bittlestone raises, it follows that the *Odyssey* must have conserved the exact memory of a topography that can still be followed today on the land. Without a doubt this is another of the problems that materially affects our ability to accept this work. It requires us to assign to Homer a cartographic exactitude in a poetic tradition that was established well before writing was introduced some time between the 8th and the 6th centuries B.C.. This traditional poetry was circulated in oral form for about four or five hundred years and modified, interpreted and refined by multiple generations of travelling poets.

This presents us with a dilemma that the author also considers. Although his solution does not solve all of the difficulties, it nevertheless takes into account some of our most recent knowledge about the mechanics of transmission of the Greek epic tradition. The solution would consist of admitting that at the moment when the Mycenaean world enters a decline and begins to fall apart, from the 12th century B.C. onwards, these oral traditions would have in a certain sense been "encapsulated" within the poetic story and could have arrived more or less intact through time and space, until the point at which the elaboration of Homeric poems took place and they were subsequently committed to writing.

Undoubtedly many aspects of this reconstruction will need to be elaborated or replaced. But it is becoming more and more evident that the Homeric tradition resembles in some ways an archaeological stratigraphy, within which we can distinguish diverse “layers” or levels that correspond to very different times. These layers have been amalgamated – generally in a satisfactory way from the artistic point of view – by the different poets who have created that tradition. The endpoint of this process would correspond to the time of the composition of the work that we know today and that the ancient scholars attributed to the “blind poet Homer”.



Ancient roads and streams in the north of Paliki, with the location of the scenes mentioned in the *Odyssey* superimposed on a present day satellite image of the area in natural colour (© Robert Bittlestone and Digital Globe).

Be that as it may, this book provides not so much a closed hypothesis but, on the contrary, more of a departure point in an investigative project of impressive potency. This augurs well for its future acceptance: it is an approach that is well suited towards solving the different hypotheses that are raised within the work and to verifying their viability or, on the contrary, seeing whether they lead to an eventual impasse.

What does the book contribute to the world of *Odyssean* studies? In a strict sense, it provides us with only a single well constructed and well argued hypothesis, that represents a good guess which may yet turn out to be correct. But in a fuller sense it is a study that reveals an overwhelming passion for the Homeric world, for its personages and their landscapes. Finally, it is a story (sometimes a little lengthy) of the ponderings of its author and of his difficulties, that in the end are solved in brilliant form.

But it is also a song to the possibilities that the new technologies – in particular the Internet – can offer in the accomplishment of any such work of investigation. It is this tool that enables the

author to make direct contact with any specialist willing to respond to his questions and to solve his doubts, and also one that enables him to access a satellite image of his zone of study or the information from any library or University department. Perhaps by way of a tribute to this powerful tool, the author has placed on the project's website (see below) a page on which are published the reactions that the book has provoked, as well as the new considerations that its proposals are now stimulating.



Robert Bittlestone (centre), the author of the study, has cooperated in the production of this article. John Underhill, Professor of Stratigraphy at the University of Edinburgh (left) and James Diggle, Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge (right) collaborated with him in the preparation of *Odysseus Unbound*.

Those who are especially concerned with the Homeric world will without a doubt find this an interesting book to read. Specialists in Greek literature will sometimes find themselves smiling a little at the treatment of certain passages, whereas those who are skilled in archaeological techniques cannot be less than surprised by the declared (and demonstrated) lack of familiarity of the author with that world. Experts in geology and seismology may also be surprised from time to time by the author's readiness to develop conclusions from data that is not always clear and explicit.

However, interested members of the cultured public – those who are professionally unfamiliar with these fields and who also constitute the main audience for the book – will feel a strong empathy with the author's work. This is because he has correctly identified the crucial questions and he has made up for his real or apparent ignorance by visiting the actual locations and consulting with the cited experts. If we are also assessing a literary work, then ultimately the question of truth or reality is not the only consideration, because in this book Bittlestone has succeeded in captivating the reader throughout in his search for the Ithaca of Ulysses.

Further reading:

BITTLESTONE, R., *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca* (with James Diggle and John Underhill), 2005, Cambridge University Press.

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GRIFFIN, J., *Homero*, Madrid, Alianza, 1984.

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Project website: <http://www.odysseus-unbound.org/>