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James P. Holoka

### Review of

Robert Bittlestone, *Odysseus Unbound. The Search for Homer's Ithaca*. With James Diggle and John Underhill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xx +598. Cloth (ISBN 0-521-85357-5) \$40.00.

James Holoka is Professor of Classics and Ancient History at Eastern Michigan University. His publications include *Simone Weil's The Iliad or the Poem of Force: A Critical Edition* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), a translation of Joachim Latacz' *Homer: His Art and His World* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996) and many articles and reviews.

Further information about the search for Homer's Ithaca is available at <http://www.odysseus-unbound.org/>

Like nearly all things Homeric, identifying not only Odysseus's ultra-exotic ports of call, but even his home island has always been, Siren-like, both hazardous and irresistibly alluring - and about as likely as, in Eratosthenes' *bon mot*, identifying the cobbler who sewed up the bag of winds (Strabo 1.2.15). But that improbability has not stemmed the flow of published speculation, scholarly and popular, even one whit. I confess that I agreed to review what (given the telltale *Search for* subtitle) I expected to be another coffee-table adornment, brimming with dramatic full-color photographs of locales Mediterranean and farther a-sea, but not likely to convince where so many others have failed. At a casual glance, *Odysseus Unbound* appears to fit the genre: it is indeed a large-format, heavily illustrated tome, written by an author who is neither a classicist nor an archaeologist but a successful businessman whose interest in the subject began with a family holiday on Cephalonia. This superficial impression does not survive even the "Acknowledgements" pages, which feature names familiar to readers of this journal: Anthony Snodgrass, John Bennett, Gregory Nagy, and James Whitley, as well as those of a host of scientists. Moreover, the estimable James Diggle, mentioned on the title page, was neither a ghost-writer nor, as I had half-imagined, along like a don on a Swan tour to lend *gravitas* to a leisure-time activity, but an active on-site participant and contributor of a substantial review of relevant textual evidence.

Bittlestone, who studied classics while earning a Cambridge degree in economics, is (according to the dustjacket) the founder of Metapraxis Ltd., a consulting firm "specialising in the detection of early warnings for multinational companies." He is a noted authority on the use of visualization to solve complex problems. Bittlestone has used his organizational and analytical talents to great effect in producing a wonderful book based on a copious array of literary, historical, linguistic, geographical, geological, and archaeological evidence.

First, the problem: Homer does not appear to know where Ithaca is or what it looks like. To be sure, many of the details of geography and topography that he reports may be seen as either (a) consistent with the island known since the classical era as Ithaca or (b) unproblematic in any case because part of an entirely fictional narrative. But in one place, the poet puts into Odysseus's mouth a very precise description glaringly at odds with classical Ithaca in its content and, in the certainty of its tone, tempting to regard as nonfictional (*Od.* 9.21–26, trans. Diggle):

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.

Present-day Ithaca is neither low lying nor the westernmost of the Ionian islands. What to do? One can ignore the inconsistency and, like Schliemann himself, seek Odyssean sites on today's Ithaca. Or one can identify the same sites on another island, as, for example, Wilhelm Dörpfeld did on Lefkas.

Bittlestone, proceeding from a hint in Strabo, follows a somewhat different tack. The Augustan-era geographer, writing of Cephalonia, observes that “where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea. Both Paleis and Cranioi are on the gulf near the narrows” (10.2.15). Bittlestone locates this topographical feature, which he dubs “Strabo’s Channel” (52 and *passim*), in the northwest of Cephalonia, in an area known as Thinia, now an isthmus joining the Paliki peninsula to the rest of the island. The detaching of Paliki from the remainder of Cephalonia indeed provides us with the requisite low-lying, westernmost island in the Ionian Sea. But actual inspection of the terrain makes the “Schizocephalonia” thesis a rather hard sell, for the putative Bronze Age channel identified by Bittlestone is now infilled to a height of 180 meters at its highest point. Can geologic forces have operated over the course of a mere 3000 years to bring about such a change in the lay of Cephalonian land? Bittlestone posed just that question to John Underhill, professor of stratigraphy at the University of Edinburgh. Based on preliminary surface examination and soundings of the site, the answer appears to be “yes.” Here Bittlestone does a masterful job of presenting in some considerable detail a mass of scientific information about plate-tectonics, seismic uplift (most recently, a full two feet in the major earthquake of 1953), changes in sea level, ground-penetrating radar, soil compaction, etc. Finding Strabo’s Channel is the first, indispensable step in Bittlestone’s subsequent search for many particulars of Homer’s Ithaca on the Paliki peninsula of Cephalonia.

Having cleared the ground for a new Ithaca, Bittlestone devotes the bulk of his book to proving that “almost all the locations on Ithaca that are described in the *Odyssey* can be identified today in northern Paliki” (482). In his orderly, businesslike way (here is a man clearly a maestro of the spreadsheet), he itemizes every discrete physical feature of Ithaca attested in Homer. He then takes his readers on a thoroughly engrossing tour of the Paliki peninsula in search of these venues — the palace of Odysseus, the deep harbor, Phorcys Bay, Eumaeus’s pig farm, Raven’s Rock, etc. It is not possible in a short review to convey how methodically both textual and topographic evidence are harmonized in Bittlestone’s riveting argument. His case for equating Paliki with Ithaca is breathtakingly cogent. Site after site is shown to jibe with the details of Homer’s narrative. A luxuriant assortment of maps, on-site photographs, stratigraphic charts, and satellite imagery reinforces the lines of reasoning throughout.

With due caution, Bittlestone sometimes ventures beyond geographic matters to speculate, for example, about authorship:

The case for the OCO [Original Composer of the *Odyssey* in the late Bronze Age] residing on Ithaca itself rests on the detail and accuracy with which he describes the island. There is a very close correspondence involving well over fifty descriptions and the chances of all these being conveyed to the poet so accurately over a gulf of many centuries and kilometres are regarded as very small. (483)

Such departures from the *terra infirma* of Paliki into the outright quicksand of “The Homeric Question” do not detract from the central thesis of *Odysseus Unbound*.

Substantial appendices address textual issues (Diggle); matters of geology and geomorphology (Underhill); technological ancillaries employed in the project (Bittlestone); and the history of competing theories of Homer’s Ithaca—replete with a four-page spreadsheet (Bittlestone). A postscript includes a few items of “late-breaking news.” Not surprisingly, given the entrepreneurial genius of its author, *Odysseus Unbound* has its own slick and informative website: <<http://www.odysseus-unbound.org>>.

Bittlestone sees the evidence gathered and theories proposed in his book as Phase A in the identification of Bronze Age Ithaca. Phase B will entail much more extensive scientific evaluation in fields like geomorphology, microbiology, dendrochronology, sedimentology, speleology, and gravimetric and seismic analysis, among other specialties. In Phase C, work will proceed to actual archaeological excavation. Bittlestone booked his family’s summer holiday on Cephalonia in February 2003; *Odysseus Unbound* was published in 2005. One can only hope that Phases B and C are prosecuted with similar dispatch.

Finally, I must stress how enjoyable this book is to read. Bittlestone infects the reader with the same excitement he and those he enlisted in his search felt in delightful vistas of Odyssean lands and seas.