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Möt våren på

Published 9 april 2006 05:30

Resourceful amateur may have found Ithaca

In the literary archaeology of academics the 'Homeric Question' has been pursued for centuries within the enigmatic texts of the Iliad and the Odyssey. But Odysseus' island of Ithaca still remains to be identified in the Greek archipelago. Perhaps this riddle is now on the way to being solved - with the unexpected help of an amateur archaeologist.

"If the scholarly pursuit of Greek literature ever dies in this country, it will have been suffocated to death by its own excessive diligence". So wrote the British classical philologist E R Dodds just over 60 years ago and his ironic words can undoubtedly be seen as a form of prophecy.

At least V D Hanson and J Heath would have agreed on this. In their magnum opus entitled "Who Killed Homer?" (2001) they made the following comment about classical studies today:

"So many doctors of philosophy in classical languages, but so few jobs! So much education about the Greeks, but so much has been written for so few!

So many new angles of approach, so many new theories, so many painstakingly prepared presentations, books, articles, panel discussions, and still almost no jobs - for there exist almost no students - because there is very little interest in the ancient Greeks either inside or outside the academy."

Hanson and Heath suggest that the business of teaching classics to university graduates has put Homer to death with too much theory and too little provision of the central concepts of classical Greek culture. Perhaps.

But one should not forget those who back in the 18th century also came close to finishing off the poet.

Those were of course very different times. The Homeric Question involved almost the whole of the intellectual elite of the day. William Gladstone - as one example - published both "Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age" and "The Dominions of Odysseus, and the Island Group of the Odyssey" during his time as Chancellor of the Exchequer and subsequently Prime Minister of England.

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Prenumerationer

The line of research which dominated the whole 18th and 19th century came to be called the Analytical school. This attempted to break up the Homeric epics into more 'authentic' smaller poetic units. The Odyssey was felt to consist, for example, of an original core (the appearance of Odysseus) and later additions.

It was therefore not surprising that Homer's literary reputation declined in line with this progressive dissection of his influence. Dietrich Müller (the author of "Die Ilias und ihre Quellen", 1910) wrote: "It is a great pity that the poet of the Odyssey should have experimented with a verse form that he neither originated nor mastered." And Homer's greatest critic of all, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, portrayed the Iliad as a 'miserable mis-mash' ("ein übles Flickwerk").

However, a new discovery was to create a rapid revolution in Homeric studies. This genuine reversal arrived in the 1920s with Milman Parry's field surveys of the oral poetic tradition and his central thesis about the formulaic nature of Homeric poetry.

Latter came the so-called Neoanalytical school's important contributions (Kakridis etc.). As Dodds wrote: "This refreshing insight from Europe's best researchers after generations of misunderstanding began suddenly to make sense to the general public shortly after the first world war." The Homeric question was not so much solved as re-stated.

So much so that today it is entirely possible for an expert researcher such as Richard Janko to argue, with good grounds and in all seriousness, that there was a single poet in the 7th century BC who was the principal author of both the Iliad and the Odyssey.

This research into the verbal tradition and methods of storytelling has shown us a way in which we can reconcile the Analytical and the Unitary theories. It has shown us, inter alia, how traditional formulas and themes that are incorporated in the poem can reflect elements of the contribution of earlier generations' poetry.

This means in turn that the Homeric poems may perhaps preserve memories from much earlier periods. Studies of the oral tradition of poetry offer a possible explanation as to how a Homeric epic from about 750 BC can contain different chronological stock - references to customs and events from Mycenaean times as well as from centuries later.

How does this relate to the archaeological evidence? Whatever one's view of Heinrich Schliemann - whether brilliant amateur archaeologist, or plunderer, or both - one must agree that his excavations towards the end of the 18th century considerably weakened the scientific foundations of the Analytical school.

By pursuing quite literally Homer's descriptions of the place names in the epic, Schliemann went to Troy and Mycenae and he found them. The results were of course not as simple as this, as later research has shown, and controversy around the interpretation of the finds continues to this day. It remains however the case that the amateur Schliemann, by following Homer's poetic instructions and with an improbable series of site visits, identified some of the most sensational archaeological exhibits that have ever been found.

Schliemann's field visits did not however solve the enigma of ancient Ithaca, the much-loved home of Odysseus. He subscribed to its identification with today's island of Ithaka but he found no traces of an ancient town on the island. However, many years after Schliemann's death some important relics were found on Ithaka.

Swartz: Den som reser har inte längre något att berätta. >

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Twelve bronze tripods from the Mycenaean era were found in a cave belonging to a certain Mr. Loizos, and there was probably also at one time a thirteenth tripod in his possession but this was melted down. In the Odyssey's thirteenth book we read that King Alkinoos donates a tripod to Odysseus. Twelve other nobles also give him presents. All of these are hidden in a cave on Ithaka later in the same book. Loizos's thirteenth tripod is therefore an improbable but interesting item in this context.

But Schliemann's closest associate, Wilhelm Dörpfeld, could never accept that today's Ithaka was Odysseus' island. He believed that nearby Lefkas was the correct island and he tried in vain to find proof for this. Why did Dörpfeld doubt the claim of Ithaka?

The problem lies in Homer's own description of the island. When Odysseus discloses himself to Alkinoos he says: "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. / A rugged isle, but a good nurse of young men; / and for myself no other thing can I see sweeter than one's own land." (Od. 9.19-26.)

One reads also the following odd information in the Iliad "Odysseus led the gallant Cephallenians, / From Ithaca and leaf-quivering Neriton, / From Crocyleia and rugged Agilips, / Men hailing from Zacynthos and from Samos, / From the mainland and the region opposite." (Il. 2.631-5.)

Today's Ithaka is hardly "low-lying" (khthamalé). The island is mountainous. It does not lie above the furthest out to the west and the nearby islands are not on its east. Its geographic situation is almost the opposite of the description above. Cephalonia is the biggest island in the archipelago of the Ionian islands and it lies three miles to the west of Ithaka.

But why is Odysseus called a "Cephalonian" in the Iliad (and in four lines in the Odyssey) while the actual island is not mentioned at all? And is it reasonable to assume that Odysseus did not rule over only Ithaca without also holding sway over a part of "the mainland and the region opposite". What in fact is meant by the "mainland" here? And where lie Same and Doulichion? Can one get any sense from Homer's description at all, or are most of his often vivid narratives of Ithaca only a product of his imagination? Questions of this kind have occupied scholars over the centuries.

Like a modern-day Schliemann, the English economist and amateur researcher Robert Bittlestone has taken on the challenge of these enigmatic riddles. He proposes to identify Odysseus' island with Paliki, the northwestern peninsula that is now a part of Cephalonia, the rest of Cephalonia with the 'mainland' and Ithaca as Doulichion.

He is not the first to have chosen Paliki as Ithaca – although his deductions were made independently of others - but he is the first to have tried to prove in a systematic way that Paliki during historical times formed its own island as identified in Homer's description of Ithaca. Bittlestone has already won enough following in the academic world to have originated the book "Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca" from Cambridge University Press (598 pages).

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5. **Trollflöjten**



➔ Språkspalten



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språket.

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The book's most important contribution to date is a captivating hypothesis about a problem posed by the antique geographer Strabo. In his description of Cephalonia Strabo mentions that "Where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea".

The description is puzzling. The exists nowhere on Cephalonia that seems to fit this identification. The low valley between Paliki and the rest of Cephalonia ascends nevertheless to a height of 180 metres above sea level. Surely there cannot have existed a marine channel there in historical times. Or could there? Bittlestone proposes a geological explanation: the Ionian islands lie in one of the most tectonically active regions in the world, where the the African continental plate presses towards Eurasia.

Only 10 km west of Cephalonia the seabed drops from 300 metres to 3 km below the surface. Almost monthly, the land trembles and approximately every three decades there may be a much bigger earthquake (the last in August 1953).

But can earthquakes and perhaps a large tsunami (which is discussed in the theory) make radical changes to an entire island? John Underhill, geologist and author of a scientific appendix in the book, has done a preliminary survey - with the aid of among other Per Wikström from the Swedish company Radarteam - and has established that a considerable amount of these changes may well have occurred.

Bittlestone uses all the available Internet resources, which is enough in itself for a few academic researchers to raise their eyebrows. But he is also evidently someone who reaches out for expert help. James Diggle, Professor in Classics at Cambridge, has written a valuable Appendix where he precisely reviews the relevant text extracts.

It is difficult not to be influenced by the evidence when Bittlestone describes how Diggle one day visits Atheras Bay in northern Paliki and suddenly realises that Homer's description may have been of precisely this spot in the lines: "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." (Od. 13.96-98).

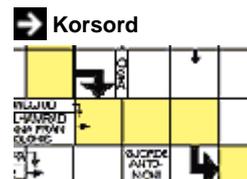
The Cambridge professor Anthony Snodgrass also allowed himself to be persuaded to visit Paliki with Bittlestone. Together they ran a fine-tooth comb over the landscape which is suggested as the location of Odysseus' palace and they detected a considerable number of pottery fragments from the Mycenaean era.

The book "Odysseus Unbound" offers an interesting read that is also at times very amusing. It is an original theory that needs to be investigated further. It will be exciting to follow this development as it unfolds – assuming that the newly focussed investigation team receives sufficient financing in order to pursue the proposed geological and archaeological studies.

One might perhaps have wished that Bittlestone's theory had been presented in a more distilled fashion. The major part of the book involves following up on all of the possible topographic clues provided by Homer. These sometimes become flawed and such false interpretations create amusement. The author's imagination from time to time runs away and finds itself with the Lotophagians in Fantasyland.



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It is in some ways remarkable that the author was given free rein to publish this book by Cambridge University Press. In the USA the book has been launched by Harvard's prestigious Center for Hellenic Studies. Perhaps it is Schliemann's legacy: the academic world does not want to run the risk of ignoring an amateur archaeologist for a second time. But it also has implications for today's somewhat gloomy situation in classical studies.

One has a feeling that some sensational news is needed in order for us to retain our deep love of Greek literature in the broadest sense "for men praise most the song that comes newest to their ears" as Telemachos says to Penelope (Od. 1.351-2).

The amateur Bittlestone is himself a product of the old classical English educational tradition. He learnt classics and read economics at university. So long as his learning of classical literature has succeeded in providing him with a deep love of Homer and with the enthusiasm that Bittlestone both burns with and needs, we need not worry that classical education has disappeared. There is a need for more such amateurs - the word means of course "lovers". Was it not Andrew Lang who said: "To have learnt to love Homer – that is the mark of a truly civilised person"?

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