

TO BHMAonline

Interview with Kelly Sokou of BHMagazino: Athens, 30 December 2007

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This is the full text of the English interview: the published Greek translation is much shorter.

Mr. Bittlestone, you are a successful businessman, you are the founder of a management consulting firm. What prompted you to undertake this project?

Once the hypothesis occurred to me it was impossible to resist. How could one ignore the chance of finding a radical new solution to a 3,000 year old enigma?

How many years have you been involved in this project and to what extent have you sacrificed the interests of your own business?

I started part-time involvement with the *Odysseus Unbound* project in 2003. I gave up watching television and that enabled me to work on both the project and the business without sacrificing either of them. It was wonderful to gain all that extra time but I have since discovered a drawback: you can give up watching television only once.

What obstacles did you meet? Is it easy for someone who has a theory to be given permission for excavations?

We are not at present conducting any excavations, we are doing geological research, and in this respect we have had excellent support from all the relevant Greek authorities. This is largely because my colleague Professor John Underhill, who is based at Edinburgh University and is a world expert in the geology of the Ionian Islands, has been performing geological research in Kefalonia for over 25 years.

At this moment research in Kefalonia is still going on. What are the latest findings?

The latest findings are provided in detail at our website, which is now being translated into Greek at <http://www.odysseus-lyomenos.org> as well as the English version at <http://www.odysseus-unbound.org>. There is a wealth of scientific information there and so let me tell you about one particular finding that I find especially intriguing.

Using marine seismic sonar in a joint project with IGME, Greece's Institute of Geological and Mineral Exploration, John and his team have analysed the depth from sea level to the bedrock that lies below the seabed in the Gulf of Livadi, which is the large enclosed bay that separates Argostoli and Lixouri. What they have found is that at the southern end of this bay, the bedrock profile is in the form of a submarine channel that runs parallel with the shores on each side, as you would expect. However, as one proceeds towards the north something very surprising happens: this ravine-like submarine valley suddenly makes a sharp turn to the east and appears to collide abruptly with the steep hillside of Kefalonia.

Now at first this doesn't seem to make any sense. Underwater ravines of this nature were usually formed as a result of rivers creating surface erosion many thousands of years ago. For example, around 22,000 years ago, global sea levels were much lower than they are today because the Earth was in the midst of the last ice age, and so this area was then above the sea. But how can a river suddenly emerge from a steep hillside? At first sight this is a real puzzle.

However, if you look at the land-based survey that John and his team have also performed, what you see is truly fascinating. You realise that this hillside collision happens to take place at the exact location of the predicted outflow

of the buried channel that may formerly have bisected eastern and western Kefalonia. So this is a case of a marine scientific result that has been obtained quite independently of a terrestrial result, but when you put the two of them together the overall pattern is both thought-provoking and persuasive.

John Underhill will explain to you that he has spent the last four years trying to *disprove* the hypothesis, because that is the scientific method. Despite these efforts, he is cheerful to admit that so far he has been unsuccessful in disproving it, so he retains an open mind on whether the theory will turn out to be true or false. My own view as an economist would be that on the basis of probability alone it is beginning to look as if it may be true. Certainly the odds are narrowing.

Please give me some details about the technology that you used in your research.

From 2003 until 2007 we used whatever technology we could finance on an academic budget or via supportive organisations and individuals. So this mainly involved Edinburgh University undergraduates using academic or loaned equipment to perform a surface survey of the valley that today separates Paliki, the western part of Kefalonia, from the east. But in March 2007 we concluded a crucial sponsorship agreement with FUGRO, who are major providers of geotechnical services to the world's oil and mineral industries, and this has increased the scale of technology provision by several orders of magnitude.

Over the last few months expert teams from FUGRO have conducted land, sea and air-based surveys of this area with the objective of probing deep into the ground to search for a buried marine seaway. An unprecedented array of gravity, seismic, marine and helicopter-based electromagnetic techniques are being used to perform a "whole body scan" of this 6 kilometre long, 2 kilometre wide isthmus. This should enable us to provide a definite answer to the question of whether Paliki was once cut off from the rest of Kefalonia, and if so, when.

This project is based on the hypothesis that the area of Paliki was a separate island that is probably what Homer calls Ithaca. Your research has proven that no solid limestone bedrock is encountered between the surface

and sea level, which strengthens Strabo's channel scenario, but still there is no clear evidence that Paliki was indeed an island. Why did you publish your work before scientific evidence was found?

The decision to publish the English edition of the book in October 2005 was not a difficult one. By then we had accumulated a considerable amount of scientific evidence and some of it was very striking. John Underhill's geological surface survey of the valley between Paliki and eastern Kefalonia, which is called Thinia, had identified that the hypothesis of a buried marine seaway was possible. It was by no means proven either way, but it was possible, and this added interpretative insight to the work of the great geographer Strabo, who wrote of Kefalonia some 2,000 years earlier '*Where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea*'.

So this was justification enough to bring these facts into the public domain, and a year later the evidence was considerably strengthened. We drilled a test borehole in October 2006 at one specific location at the southern end of this isthmus just opposite the submarine valley I have described. After submitting the results to an independent laboratory for analysis, this research delivered two remarkable results.

The first result was that instead of finding solid mountainside beneath one's feet, it turns out that this section of the landscape consists of loose material all the way down to sea level and below. We drilled from an elevation of 107.60 metres above sea level and the drilling continued for 122.25 metres without encountering solid limestone bedrock. So this means that there is no limestone bedrock there to a depth of 14.65 metres below today's sea level.

Furthermore, we know that the whole of Kefalonia has been pushed upwards by continental plate collision over the last few thousand years. During the last catastrophic earthquake of August 1953, most of the island was elevated by 0.60 metres, so our borehole probably penetrated to a depth of as much as 20 metres below the ancient sea level of 3,000 years ago.

The second result was that a tiny recent marine fossil (*Emiliana huxleyi*) happens to be caught up in the rubble that is found in the top 40

metres of the borehole, at a height of between 107 and 67 metres above sea level. Taken together, these two findings are consistent with the scenario of a major earthquake that triggered a very high volume rockfall event. This rockfall would have fallen at great speed into a narrow enclosed body of seawater, ejecting a large quantity of it vertically out of that channel. Tiny marine organisms in the displaced seawater may then have been mixed up with millions of tons of rubble that descended from the 1 km-high mountainsides above and buried the channel.

There is a geological name for this rockfall phenomenon: it is called a 'sturzstrom', a very high volume landslide in which pulverized rock can flow almost as if it were a river. Such events have happened elsewhere in Greece as well as in other mountainous countries such as Austria and Pakistan, and this may explain how a former sea channel could have been filled in.

However, a single borehole is by no means enough to confirm this proposal: we have to test the entire length of this isthmus. In order to do this we clearly needed to attract industrial sponsorship, but there would have been little point in any company making this commitment if our first test result had proved negative. So our initial research has not only delivered important new data in its own right, it has also acted as a catalyst for external sponsorship.

You wrote a book that anyone could read and understand. A book about your adventure, full of narrative and scientific elements. Why – since you collaborated with scientists – didn't you write a strictly scientific book? I assume that you do wish your theory to be accepted by the academic circles...

First I should explain that I am not qualified to write a strictly scientific book, at least not in this field. My University degree is in economics, not geology or classics, so such a book would have been beyond my capabilities. Second, you will understand that the book describes a journey, with some achievements from time to time but also with some setbacks.

So the book is an invitation to readers to accompany me on this journey and to retain an open mind about its destination. And I hope that Greek readers in particular will find the book more interesting as a result. I have

written it for members of the public who have no special knowledge of this subject, but there are also detailed Appendixes that have been composed by my expert colleagues that are intended for the academic community.

During this journey we meet various remarkable people. Some of them are Greeks from Athens, Thessaloniki, Patras and Kefalonia itself. We also meet experts from America, Australia and all over the world. One of them is my other co-writer James Diggle, who is Professor of Greek and Latin at Queens' College, Cambridge and our greatest living expert on Euripides.

James has helped me to understand that much of what is written about the composition of the *Odyssey* in standard textbooks lacks any solid foundation. One often reads a sentence such as "*The Iliad and the Odyssey were composed in the 7th century BC by Homer, a blind poet living on the eastern coast of the Aegean on an island such as Chios*". But James reminds us that such statements have no basis in historically verifiable facts. We don't know when or where Homer lived and we don't know if he was singular or plural, male or female, sighted or blind.

To borrow James's summary "*we do not know when and in what circumstances the Odyssey was composed*". Indeed, the core of the poem could have been composed hundreds of years earlier in a different place, because as he says "*One thing is certain and of first importance: although the Odyssey was written down several centuries after the events which it describes, it has its origin in a poetical tradition which continued unbroken during those intervening centuries*".

How then did James Diggle become so closely involved in this project? Because his talents include the rare combination of expert classical knowledge and exemplary open-mindedness. All of this is explained in the book, together with the reactions of my long-suffering wife and four children, who initially thought they were going on an ordinary summer holiday.

How many copies have been sold in Great Britain and what were the reactions of the academic society? What was the criticism from those who were not persuaded?

I am not sure of the Great Britain statistics but Cambridge University Press tell me that many

thousands of copies have been sold world-wide. In fact they ran out of copies within a few months and a second printing was arranged, which was encouraging. I understand that the highest level of sales have been in the USA, where there is great interest in Homer and also of course a major town in New York State that is called Ithaca, the home of Cornell University.

Academic classicists around the world have generally been very positive about the proposition that Paliki may have been an autonomous island 3,200 years ago. After all, this would make Homer's description of the location of ancient Ithaca absolutely correct, whereas at present it appears to be a massive contradiction.

Homer says (at *Odyssey* 9.21-26) that Odysseus' Ithaca is low-lying, furthest out to sea, facing west and one of four neighbouring islands. By contrast, today's island of Ithaki is mountainous, closest to the mainland, facing east and one of only three nearby islands. The missing island, which Homer called Doulichion, allegedly either never existed or has completely disappeared off the map.

Any patriot is entitled to feel uncomfortable about a world-class Greek poet who appears to be such a geographical ignoramus. It would clearly be much more satisfactory if it turns out that Homer was absolutely correct all along, and so most academics seem to be open-minded about the possibility. Those who are not persuaded find it all a bit too radical to digest, but a growing number of experts have now become supporters.

For example, last year Peter Green, an eminent American professor of classics at the University of Texas, wrote in the *New York Review of Books* "*Bittlestone's theory is fundamentally simple, and starts, as did those of Schliemann, from the firm assumption that Homer was telling the truth...This, in a nutshell, is Bittlestone's solution to the 'Ithaca Question', and it is almost certainly correct*". That was an encouraging verdict and you can read the full text of it and many other reviews on our website.

Could this book be a new 'Da Vinci Code'?

I think that is most unlikely. *Odysseus Unbound* is about fact not fiction, and it is fiction that seems to fill the bookshops.

Perhaps I should have called it *The Odysseus Code*.

Is it in your future plans to film a movie or a documentary based on your book?

To date we have received 19 proposals to make a full-length documentary film about the project. So far we have declined them all because we are not ready for this step yet. After all, if the geological tests should prove negative then it would be reckless to have embarked on a major film. However, we have a very good relationship with the UK programme *Channel 4 News* who have made some short film sequences about the project so far, and you can watch these on our website.

How the romantic, amateur archaeologist coexists with the businessman in your everyday life?

I may sometimes be romantic but I am not an archaeologist, even an amateur one. My role in this project is driven by scientific curiosity, which coexists happily with the world of business.

If your hypothesis comes true, what would the consequences be for the academic society, the teaching of *Odysseia* and for the people of Ithaki and Kefalonia?

If my hypothesis is true then the academic world will need to face the realisation that the "Original Composer of the *Odyssey*", whoever and whenever he was, must have somehow acquired detailed knowledge of the landscape of Paliki before it was massively altered by catastrophic earthquake-triggered landslides. Since some of these geological events may have taken place as early as 1100 BC, this notion does not fit easily with the conventional idea of a Homer composing the *Odyssey* in the eastern Aegean several hundred years later. This may therefore trigger a reassessment of the identity and origins of the poet of the *Odyssey*.

In that case the people of Ithaki would also need to consider that their own island must in fact be Homer's lost island of Doulichion. For thousands of years people have been looking for this island, but perhaps it has been under our noses all the time. In Homer's poems it was more important than Odysseus' island. It sent

far more ships to Troy and it was the home of many more suitors for Penelope.

Ithaki is a stunningly beautiful island and it is rightly proud of its landscape and its heritage. If my hypothesis proves correct then it will take time for a 3,000-year legacy to be reappraised, and I appreciate that this will not be an easy period for its inhabitants. But the Greeks as a nation, and those who dwell in the Ionian Islands in particular, are far too intelligent to allow tradition to stand in the way of common sense.

And if my hypothesis is true, the people of Kefalonia will also have solved the long-standing enigma of why there are still so many striking differences between the characteristics of those who live in Argostoli compared to the residents of Lixouri and its surrounding villages.

For 2,500 years many have believed that Odysseus' island of Ithaca is a figment of Homer's imagination and so is Odysseus. Do you think that after your work will have terminated we will be able to answer the question: 'Did Odysseus actually exist'?

That is a difficult question. After all, as I discuss in the book, the fact that Ian Fleming locates the James Bond stories in real cities such as London, Paris and Monte Carlo does not make Bond a real person. But Fleming is thought to have modelled Bond on real personalities (including himself) so perhaps Homer did the same.

What fascinates you in Homer's work? After so many years of studying his work how do you imagine him (as a person and a poet)?

Apart from during my schooldays I had not studied Homer at all until recently: others have devoted their lives to him. But Homer fascinates me because he represents the start of everything that we value in Western civilisation. When Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and all the other great Athenian intellectuals went to school in their youth, what did they study? The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. When they became adults, they and their peers went on to define democracy, art, sculpture, architecture, mathematics, theatre, sport - they became the well-spring of all that we now revere.

So Homer's epic poems were absolutely fundamental in moulding the world-view of those great Greek individuals who have since moulded our own. Where then did Homer derive his extraordinary inspiration? What kind of people were those that he described? And what kind of man was he? How could one not be fascinated by such a mortal - or perhaps immortal?

Which was your goal when you started writing this book? Was it to find the lost Ithaca? Was it to become a new Homer? Or to change the way Homer has been taught?

My goal was to demonstrate that Homer was speaking the truth. For hundreds of years the apparent contradiction in Homer's description of Ithaca has been explained by saying that he was a poet, not a geographer, and that he simply made a series of elementary mistakes. I find this idea very unlikely, because it is what an economist would describe as a motiveless crime. Let me explain.

When you compose a story about a landscape, then you are clearly either familiar with that landscape or you are not. If you know it well then you will describe it accurately and there will be no significant errors in your description. But if you do not know it well then you are most unlikely to risk your reputation with the sailors and travellers in your audience by confusing east with west, high with low, and four islands with three. It would be like writing a play in London for an open-air performance in Covent Garden in which one of your characters says without irony "I come from New York, a beautiful city built on a steep hill on the west coast of America". You would be ridiculed by your audience and there would be no contributions to your dinner when you passed the collection hat around afterwards.

If you don't know or don't care about the geography, it is far safer to invent an imaginary landscape that cannot be denied by your audience, like *Lord of the Rings*. So I hope to vindicate Homer in this respect by demonstrating that he never wavered from the truth. This would mean that his description of these islands was entirely accurate at the time, but that a freak of nature has subsequently disguised them from our view.

You describe yourself as a keen, albeit inadequate skier and wind-surfer. Is this your life motto in a way? Could love and great interest in something be more important than knowledge and specialization?

I am not sure that I can define my life motto, but I do think it is important to take advantage of both the generalist and the specialist perspectives. You need to be a generalist to see the patterns that may link apparently disparate material from disciplines such as geology and classical studies, and you then need to work with world-class specialists to evaluate and to challenge the proposals that emerge. An important part of my role in this project has been to bring together a number of very eminent people who would not normally expect to collaborate in this way.

Is this book another 'business' of yours?

The book is undoubtedly not a business. If my intention had been to make money I can assure you that there are many far easier ways.

"Argumentation is stronger than truth": Do you agree? Even if your hypothesis won't come true, is it strong enough for many people to believe in it?

Some people may feel that your maxim touches the Greek soul, but on this occasion I must disagree, because this project is about finding out the truth.

If it turns out that Paliki was not a separate island during the Bronze Age then we shall have to go back to the drawing board, because that would be a very puzzling result indeed. You see, what we have here is an accumulation of many pieces of awkward evidence that hitherto did not fit together, like a jigsaw puzzle that could not be solved. But if there was an ancient marine seaway between Paliki and eastern Kefalonia then all of these difficult problems will simply disappear. In science this is called the principle of Occam's Razor: that if you have several competing explanations for the truth, you should choose the simplest one.

So if the results of the forthcoming geological tests confirm the former existence of the seaway that I have called "Strabo's Channel", then as I have written in a new Appendix to the book, this will not then simply *solve* the problem of Homer's Ithaca; it will instead

dissolve it. We shall come to realise that actually, there never was a real problem at all. We were distracted by an accident of geology, and this caused some of us to pursue phantoms for a while, but we may now regain the confidence to believe that Homer never wavered from the truth.

What were you taught in your business and has this been proven to be useful in your project?

I have learnt in business that if you believe that a goal is important then you should persevere in trying to reach it. But sometimes a goal can prove illusory or misconceived. I don't think that is the case for Homer's Ithaca but I may be wrong.

In what ways can a businessman's way of thinking can help a scientific work and in what ways could a scientist contribute to a business plan?

I don't view the personalities of a businessman and a scientist as wholly distinct. Most businessmen exist somewhere on the spectrum between arts and sciences and this enables them to enter the scientific debate even though they are not experts. My own role in this regard is sometimes to challenge a scientific opinion, not because I think I know more than the expert, but because I want to encourage the expert to reassess the evidence from first principles.

I think scientists can in turn contribute a great deal to a business plan, but in order to do this they need to have some understanding of the rules of business. Those rules are primarily financial and it is a great pity that this knowledge is often confined to specialists, because this prevents the scientists from entering the financial debate. I am interested in finding ways of helping them to do so.

In what ways have you become a "richer man" after this adventure?

You cannot work on a project such as this without becoming richer in your spirit, richer via the friendship of your new colleagues and richer in your growing understanding of their remarkable expertise. But you do not become richer financially, this work is nothing to do with that. When my wife learnt that we were drilling into the bedrock of Kefalonia she

described it as a hole down which to pour the royalties from the book.

Would you advise an entrepreneur to do something similar? Could you describe your initiative as an action of corporate social responsibility?

You pay me the compliment of presuming a degree of planning and self-determination which has never in fact applied. You see, I didn't choose this project: it chose me. Once the idea occurred to me I found it impossible to let it go, but I wasn't striving for social

responsibility or seeking a worthy *pro bono* venture. Homer and Odysseus beckoned, and that was that.

They are elusive, your god-like ancestors: they have eluded us for millennia and they elude us still today. Indeed there is much more work to be done before we can announce any results with certainty. And there is always the possibility that this research may prove me wrong, but we will never learn the answer unless we persevere in our search for Homer's Ithaca.

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For further details of the research, visit the project websites:

www.odysseus-lyomenos.org (Greek), www.odysseus-unbound.org (English)

The authors will be visiting Athens in 2008 for book signings and lectures. To arrange author interviews please email anne.stephenson@metapraxis.com