

ODYSSEUS UNBOUND

R. Bittlestone, with J. Diggle and J. Underhill

Cambridge University Press £25

Just when it seemed that the *Odyssey* had lost its *nostos*, drowned in the flood of recent interest in the historicity of the *Iliad* (helpfully summarised in Joachim Latacz's *Troy and Homer*), it has reclaimed centre-stage. I doubt that there will be any reader of the A-HR who does not already know of this book, and so my summary of the argument can be skeletal. Homer's Ithaca is Paliki, the westernmost part of Cephalonia, and thus 'low-lying and furthest to the west' of a group of islands which include 'Doulichion, Same and wooded Zacynthos', as Odysseus says; between the Bronze Age and the archaic period, earthquakes, to which this whole area is notoriously prone, rearranged the coastline and filled up the channel which, in Homer's time, separated Paliki from the island of Same (i.e. the main part of Cephalonia) and of which Strabo is still able to give us a precious clue. The *Odyssey*, in pretty much the shape we have it, was composed by a Bronze Age poet from Paliki all but contemporary with the (real) events it describes, and then travelled eastwards with the Ionian migration where it was credited to the figure we call Homer (c. 700 BC). A detailed topography of the Ithacan events of the *Odyssey* can still be traced in extraordinary detail on the landscape of Paliki ('we can see the small quarry from which Eumaios may have hewn his blocks of stone' etc., etc.).

This is a remarkable book by any standards, and its preparation has already led to the finding of significant Bronze Age activity (pottery and very sturdy wall-construction) on Paliki. B and his collaborators (who, to declare an interest, include more than one of my colleagues) make a case for identifying Homer's Ithaca with Paliki which is difficult to ignore; for every weak argument (*why*, for example, is 1.173 'not remotely amusing' if Ithaca is modern Ithaki?) there is another which made me ponder things - such as the provisioning of the suitors - afresh. It is also a remarkably produced book, and CUP is to be congratulated on its appearance (in both senses) and its price. It is, however, also a very difficult book to review. The fact that I found the scientific arguments intriguing and more or less persuasive means nothing; the book ends with a geological *non liquet* from B's principal scientific adviser and clearly more research is needed, as B himself is very properly the first to urge (this is very much the start of an on-going project). It is easy for the ignorant, such as myself, to be swept away by science, and B's obvious fascination with technology urges caution, where caution may not in fact be the right response. As for the detailed topography of Cephalonia, an island which I have never visited, the Anglo-Hellenic League did not, alas, offer to sponsor a two-month research trip, and so there is very little that I can usefully observe. Scepticism may again be both the natural and the wrong reaction. Here I must also confess that B's rather breathless prose style - James Diggle 'agrees to a confidential meeting', 'a shiver runs down my spine as I consider what would have happened to Telemachus ...' - is not my cup of tea; others may, like the Phaeacians, be held spellbound.

B does not engage at all with the obvious difficulties in the way of believing that the detailed narrative and geography of a poem composed on Ithaca in, say, the 13th century BC survived virtually intact to be written down some 600 years later and, by any counting, several centuries after its geography must have ceased to make any sense. So too, there is no engagement with the large scholarly discussion of the last decades about the linguistic and narrative affiliations of the poem, which points much further east than Paliki; for such an adventurous book, there is a strangely dated feel about the Homeric arguments it pursues. The implications of the hypothesis are not really on B's agenda. Perhaps, however, B was right in this judgement also; he has opened up a fascinating path for others to follow further, and we should be both grateful and full of admiration for what B has managed to teach himself and us. 'We are entitled', writes B, 'to use our imagination (provided we realise that to do so is not the same as research)'; this project, however, is in its conception and execution a wonderfully comforting illustration of just how illusory such a dichotomy proves to be.

*Richard Hunter Trinity College, Cambridge*