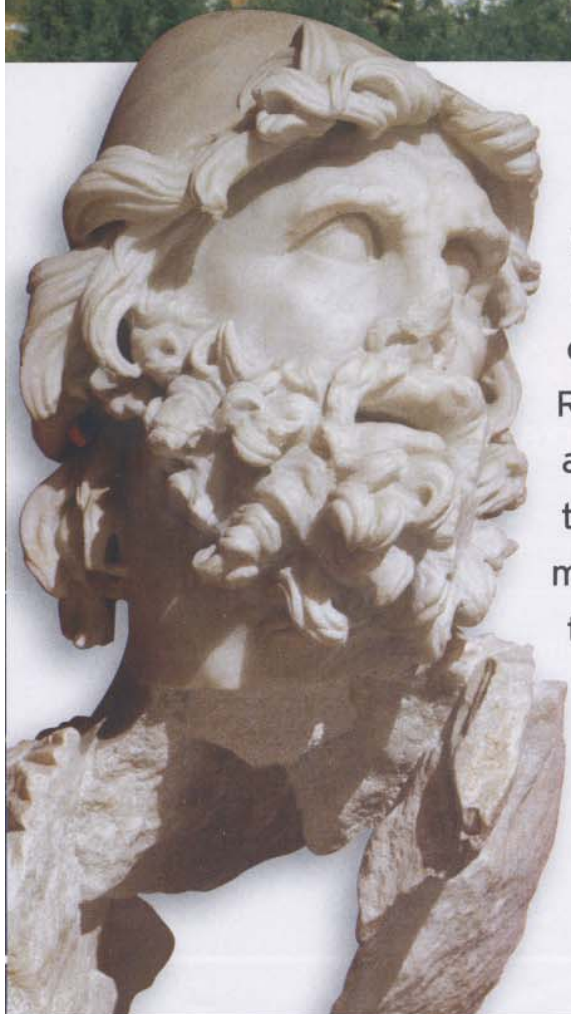




# Odysseus's lost island



An amateur historian has just published his ground breaking theory on one of the major controversies in classical scholarship: the location of Homer's Ithaca. The author of the new book, **ROBERT BITTLESTONE**, talks to **PETER JONES** about how he made the discovery and managed to convince the academic heavyweights

Roman copy of a c 170 BC Greek bust of Odysseus. The location of his home, Ithaca, is hotly disputed

**R**OBERT BITTLESTONE declares "My book makes the case that there is strong evidence for a channel once existing between Paliki and the rest of Cephalonia, that made Paliki an island. If I turn out to be right – and I am 95 per cent certain I am – then we will have produced an elegant solution to the age-old problem of where Ithaca was and where Odysseus lived. If I'm wrong, I don't know, I'll probably retire to the Cotswolds".

Bittlestone is boss of his own management consultancy in one life, and passionate amateur ancient historian and author of the controversial *Odysseus Unbound* in the other.

The problem is simple. Odysseus, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey* is on his way back home from Troy to Ithaca. En route he arrives among the Phaeacians, who ask him where he comes

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'If I am right, we will have produced an elegant solution to the age-old problem of where Ithaca was and where Odysseus lived' ROBERT BITTLESTONE



from. Homer makes Odysseus reply that his home is the island of Ithaca, which is "furthest west" of a group of islands consisting of Dulichium, Cephalonia and Zacynthus.

But the island that we call Ithaca today (modern Ithaki/Thiaki) is not "furthest west" of those islands. That description fits Cephalonia.

"I became aware of the problem when I was on holiday with my family in nearby Leukas seven years ago, reading Tim Severin's *The Ulysses Voyage*", said Bittlestone "We talked about the way world sea-levels had risen [this happened about 10,000 years ago], which must have reshaped whole landscapes. Then in 2003 we were holidaying on Ithaki and I was re-reading the *Odyssey*. I looked at the map, wondering about Ithaca being 'furthest west' when it obviously wasn't, and the memory of Leukas flashed back and suddenly I thought 'What if the western peninsula of Cephalonia [Paliki] had once been cut off from the sea – once been an island?'"

It was Bittlestone's "heureka" moment. Since then, he has devoted every minute of his spare time to investigating the hypothesis that Odysseus's Ithaca was not modern Ithaki, but modern Paliki. To prove the case, he needed to show that there was once a channel separating Paliki from the rest of Cephalonia. Typing "geology Cephalonia" into Google, Bittlestone came up with the name of John Underhill, professor of stratigraphy at Edinburgh and leading authority on the geology of that part of the world. When Bittlestone phoned up Underhill, he introduced himself with the words "I am not a crank, you know". Underhill immediately thought "Ah. A crank". He was soon disabused.

But Bittlestone also needed to know if there was any hint in the ancient literature about a channel between Paliki and

Cephalonia. To his amazement he found the following statement in the ancient geographer Strabo (first century AD), who was himself wrestling with the problem of which was which of the four islands mentioned by Homer: "where the island [Cephalonia] is narrowest, it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea". The narrowest part of the island is where Paliki joins Cephalonia. So Strabo knew that at that very point there was a connection which in his day was sometimes submerged and sometimes not. Bittlestone commented "I could hardly believe my luck".

### Finding the crucial evidence

Bittlestone now contacted James Diggle, professor of Latin and Greek at Queens' College, Cambridge. Bittlestone had met him at a graduate recruitment drive and knew him to be one of the most powerful scholars of his generation. In a masterly appendix to the book, Diggle confirms and expands on Bittlestone's observations about what came to be called Strabo's Channel. Diggle tells me "I have never had the slightest doubt that Paliki was Homer's Ithaca. Everything that has happened since has simply confirmed my belief".

Underhill again: "I came into this operation rather sceptically, but nothing I have done so far disproves Bittlestone's theory. I am fairly confident that we shall find evidence of a channel in the right place, but now we need definite proof of

### ISLANDS IN THE STREAM

Paliki, if an island, would fulfil Homer's description of Ithaca as 'furthest west' of the island group

Dr Peter Jones is an adviser to *BBC History Magazine* and has written commentaries on Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*

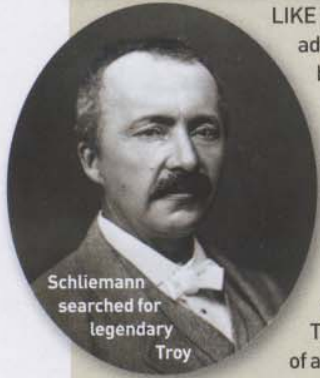
ODYSSEUS'S ISLAND HOME? Ithaki has been assumed to be ancient Ithaca despite its position east of Cephalonia



BIG MAP: HANDMADEMAPS.COM



## HISTORY AND HOMER: SCHLIEMANN'S POSSIBLE TROY



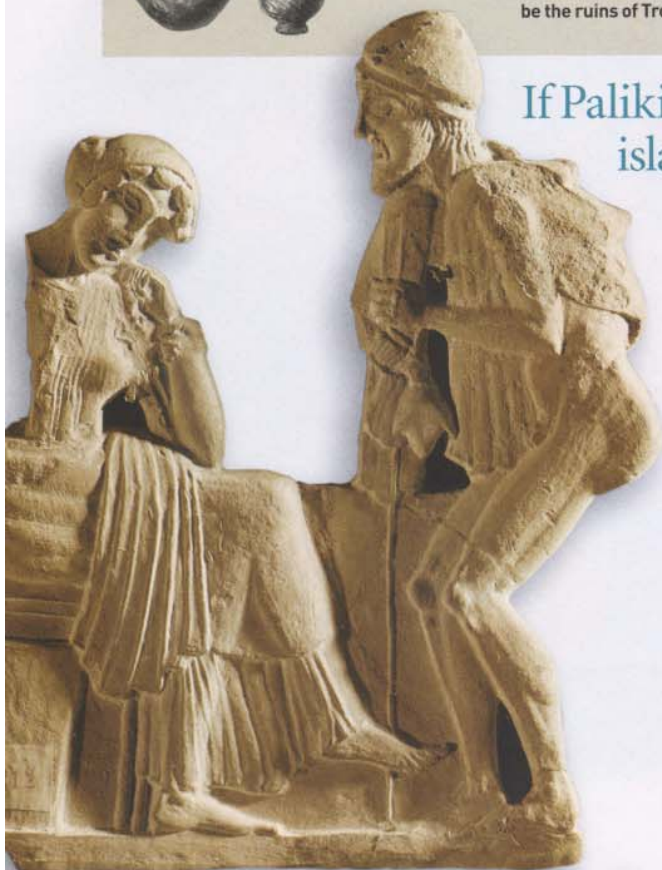
Schliemann searched for legendary Troy

LIKE THE ANCIENTS, the German adventurer Heinrich Schliemann believed in the historical basis of the *Iliad*. Excavating at Hisarlik in north west Turkey in 1870, he uncovered multiple layers of a city that we now know existed as a wealthy and active trading-post from 3000–1000 BC, and which later Greeks and Romans certainly thought was Homer's Troy. If Greeks did besiege it, a date of about 1200 BC would fit; 13th-century BC Hittite documents certainly talk of a

Greek presence and general unrest in the region; but archaeology provides no evidence of a Greek siege. Yet even if there had been a Trojan war, and an oral poetic tradition about it had survived from 1200 BC for Homer to inherit c 700 BC, he was a creative poet, using the tradition as he saw fit, not a historian. "History" in the *Iliad* remains highly conjectural.



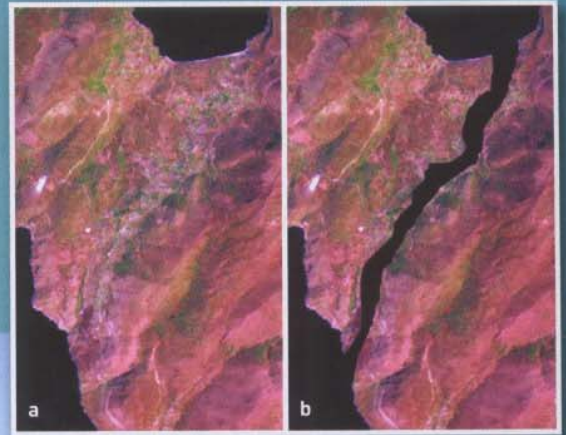
Artefacts from the city Schliemann believed to be the ruins of Troy



**WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL MY LIFE?**  
c 450 BC relief of Odysseus with Penelope, his wife who waited 20 years for his return to Ithaca

## The evidence for Paliki being Ithaca island

▶ Satellite photos using NASA infra-red imagery. Image (a) has a whiter area denoting land-slipped material. Image (b) has been manipulated to show the white area cut away demonstrating the possible former location of Strabo's Channel



◀ Did Penelope watch for Odysseus from here? View south from Paliki's Kastelli hilltop, which Bittlestone puts forward as the location of Odysseus's Palace

dates and rates – how and when it was formed and when it was filled in. Since work on the geochronology, which can date an event to within a hundred years or so, has now begun, we should have an answer one way or another by Christmas."

### Getting the dates right

The dating is crucial. Bittlestone hypothesises that the *Odyssey* was composed on Paliki as an oral poem (no writing was involved) almost as the events happened, around 1150 BC (immediately after a possible Trojan war). Soon after, earthquakes rocked Paliki, filling in Strabo's Channel. The channel lies on a huge geological fault-line and the whole region is dangerously earthquake-prone. Its inhabitants fled to Homeric Dulichium, which they renamed Ithaca. That is how modern Ithaki got its name. Within a few generations (say by 1000 BC), all memory of Paliki as Homer's Ithaca had been erased. At about this time, many Greeks migrated to the coast of western Turkey 500 miles away, including "new" Ithacans, taking the *Odyssey* with

them. There the poem was preserved by oral poets (still no writing) until the version of Homer we have today was developed in around 700 BC, when writing was becoming widespread.

This is why dates are crucial: Underhill has to show that the channel was navigable in the 12th century BC, then earthquake activity caused the channel to become unnavigable, and in Strabo's time it was an isthmus that was "often submerged". So watch this space.

Bittlestone, however, has not been satisfied merely with proving that Paliki was once an island. Most of *Odyssey Unbound* is taken up with arguing that Homer's description of Ithaca maps so precisely onto Paliki's landscape that Bittlestone can identify the location of Odysseus's palace, his pig-man Eumaios's farm, and so on. James Diggle is cautiously impressed by Bittlestone's findings here: "I thought it was far too good to be





▲ The site on Paliki that Bittlestone has identified as Eumaios's pig farm on ancient Ithaca as described by Homer



▲ Bittlestone plotted Homer's locations onto relief maps of Paliki

true to be able to identify original Homeric sites on Paliki, but when I went there, I found Bittlestone's analysis tremendously persuasive. I am prepared to say that I cannot controvert Bittlestone on any of his proposed locations". It will be fascinating to see what any future excavations on Paliki might reveal.

If it seems incredible that the structure of the region, with all its earthquakes, has not changed radically since 1150 BC, John Underhill comments: "Big changes occur only along steep valleys, earthquake fault-lines and coastal and river areas. None of the areas that Bittlestone fits into Homer's 'map' of Ithaca come within these categories".

To summarise the case so far: if Paliki proves to have been an island in 1150 BC that was shortly afterwards re-united with Cephalonia by powerful seismic forces, there is a case for saying that it is Homer's Ithaca, the home of Odysseus. But it is important to stress that it will not be absolute *proof*. Enough



**SIRENS' CALL**  
A c 450 BC Greek vase painting showing Odysseus braving the sirens on his long voyage

scholars, doubting the accuracy of Homer's geography anyway, will not be worried by him calling Ithaca "furthest west"; some will be sceptical about Bittlestone's mapping of Homeric sites ("you can probably map Homer's sites on to any Greek island if you try hard enough", one commented to me); and would creative oral poets have preserved the work so accurately over 400 years?

The most sceptical of all will, naturally, be the inhabitants of Ithaki. As a renowned Greek Homeric scholar recently said on hearing news of Bittlestone's work, "This will lead to war!" **II**

## JOURNEYS

### BOOKS

**Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca** by Robert Bittlestone, James Diggle and John Underhill (Cambridge University Press, October 2005) **BOOK CLUB** This book is available from History Books Direct, price £22.50, with free p&p. Tel. 01763 263074;

**Celebrating Homer's Landscapes: Troy and Ithaca Revisited** by John Luce (Yale 1998)

## AN OPPOSING VIEW: EVIDENCE FOR MODERN ITHAKI AS ITHACA REMAINS STRONG

**JOHN LUCE**, whose knowledge of the topography of modern Ithaki is unparalleled, argues that Homer's location of Ithaca is "basically a sailing direction for reaching Ithaca-Ithaki from the mouth of the Corinthian Gulf. The gist of the whole speech is: sail north-west if you want to find me at home, and do not go to the other islands (including Cephalonia)".

Luce identifies three objections to Bittlestone's identification:

**1 No match to "Raven's Crag"** First, Paliki offers nothing to match the close conjunction in Ithaki of Homer's Raven's Crag and the perennial watering place that Luce takes to be Homer's Fountain of Arethusa. Here one can see

the Sharp Islands, with which (Luce points out) Athena tells Odysseus' son Telemachus to mark the route of his return home, "keeping well away from the islands" (which must include Cephalonia).

**2 No match to "Cave of the Nymphs"**

Bittlestone cannot match in Paliki the Cave of the Nymphs at Marmarospilia in central Ithaki, where "sherds dedicated to the Nymphs have been found, and whose double entrance precisely matches Homer's description".

**3 The evidence of "Tripod Cave"**

Polis Bay in the north of Ithaki bears a very unusual name which suggests that the chief settlement of ancient Ithaca was in that area.

There is the Tripod Cave, where 13 magnificent bronze tripod cauldrons (9-8th century BC) were dedicated, strongly reminiscent of gifts given to Odysseus on his travels. "Whoever dedicated them must have had at least a proto-Odyssey in mind which located the hero in Ithaki".

**John Luce** is Emeritus Professor of Greek at Trinity College, Dublin and author of *Celebrating Homer's Landscapes: Troy and Ithaca Revisited* (Yale, 1998)

