



British School at Athens - Inaugural fundraising lecture at the British Museum - June 28 2007 at 18:30

Where was Homer's Ithaca ?



Robert Bittlestone - Chairman, Metapraxis Ltd.

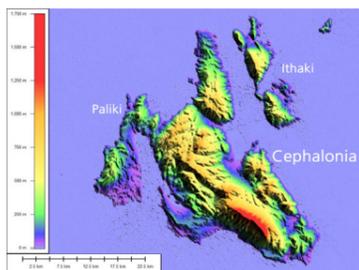
James Diggle - Professor of Greek and Latin at Cambridge and Fellow of Queens' College

John R. Underhill – Professor of Stratigraphy at the Grant Institute of Earth Science, University of Edinburgh



Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are two of the world's oldest texts. The *Iliad* describes events at the end of the Trojan War, believed to have taken place in the 12th century BC during the Mycenaean era, while the *Odyssey* tells the story of the subsequent return of Odysseus from Troy to his palace on the island of Ithaca. But was Homer's Ithaca a real place? For centuries many scholars have regarded it as fictitious, but recent geological discoveries on the Greek island of Cephalonia now provide strong support for the idea that Odysseus' homeland may have been a reality all along.

Although Troy was discovered by Schliemann in the 1870s, the geographical description of Ithaca in the *Odyssey* has long provoked controversy and remains very puzzling: "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." *Odyssey* 9.19-26 (trans. James Diggle).



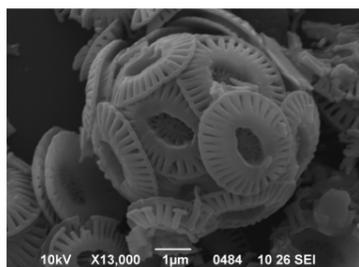
The natural interpretation of the phrase 'towards dusk' is west-facing, while dawn is clearly east-facing. So Homer described Odysseus' Ithaca as a low-lying island that is furthest out to sea on the west of Greece, with three other islands nearby: Doulichion, Same and Zacynthos. But surprisingly, the island that is today called Ithaki doesn't fit this description at all: in fact it is almost exactly the opposite. Ithaki is a mountainous island that faces towards the mainland on the eastern side of Cephallonia.

So did Homer not know his east from his west? That has been the view of classical scholars for almost 2,500 years. But in October 2005 Robert Bittlestone, James Diggle and John Underhill published a radical new solution to this age-old enigma in their award-winning Cambridge University Press book *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca*. An unexpected clue came from the work of the geographer Strabo, who also wrestled with the problem of these islands. In his *Geography* he makes this unusual observation about Cephallonia: "Where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea".



Geoscience entered the picture in 2003 by addressing a key question: Could a marine channel, subsequently described by Strabo as a low-lying isthmus, have separated Paliki, the westernmost peninsula of Cephallonia, from the rest of the island during the late Bronze Age? Because if it did, then Paliki would then have been a free-standing island that precisely met Homer's description 'lies low, furthest to sea and towards dusk'.

The **British School at Athens** was founded in 1886 with the support of the Prince of Wales and William Gladstone. Its primary mission is to promote the study of Hellenic Studies in all their aspects, covering all periods from the Palaeolithic to the present. As a research institute, its principal emphasis is on empirical studies that shed light on the prehistoric, classical and medieval past and present condition of Greek lands.



On Thursday June 28 2007 at 18:30 the authors of *Odysseus Unbound* will present their proposal and the latest discoveries from the island of Cephallonia. Their topic will be illustrated throughout with slides, satellite photography and computer animations. The content is aimed at a non-specialist audience as well as those who are studying or lecturing in ancient history, languages, geology, classics or archaeology. The authors will answer questions at the end and will be available for further discussions at the book-signing afterwards.

This is the inaugural lecture in a series of public events organised by the British School at Athens to broaden its outreach in London and raise funds for its activities in Greece. The presentation will take place at the BP Lecture Theatre in the Clore Education Centre at the British Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG. Refreshments sponsored by **Metapraxis Ltd.** will be provided after the lecture. Tickets £15; Friends of the British Museum £12. For tickets and further information, contact **Carol Bell:** treasurer@bsa.ac.uk



Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca by Robert Bittlestone, with James Diggle and John Underhill. 618 pages, 340 colour illustrations. Cambridge University Press ISBN 0521853575. RRP £25.00. The book will be available for purchase from the British Museum bookshop at a discounted price, signed by the authors.

www.odysseus-unbound.org

