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The Identity of Ancient Ithaca: A Response

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Professor Luce refers to a 'massive and shattering disproof' of our hypothesis concerning the identity of ancient Ithaca (*CA News 37*) but unfortunately he has based his conclusion on a document that has no bearing on the central geological issue. In *CA News 35* I explained that Professor John Underhill is currently investigating three alternative explanations for the derivation of the Thinia isthmus that separates the Paliki western peninsula from the rest of Kefalonia:

(a) Around 1200 BC the terrain at the isthmus was well above sea level, as it is today;

(b) There was a thin strand of connecting terrain, such as between Lefkas and the mainland;

(c) There was no terrain at that time above sea level and so Paliki was a 'sea-girt' island.

Professor Luce states that a geological study conducted by a research team from Athens University at the prompting of the Association of Ithakans Worldwide has already identified (a) as the correct answer. He has kindly provided us with a copy of this unpublished document[1] which purports to disprove the possibility currently being tested by John Underhill and his team that either (b) or (c) may instead apply.

However this document describes only a surface study, and as John Underhill has explained in his published work, the hypothesis that Paliki was a free-standing island as recently as 2000-3000 years ago cannot be established or disproved by a surface survey alone. It requires instead the use of geophysical and geological techniques (gravity surveying, seismic acquisition, resistivity analysis and electromagnetic methods) which in combination can diagnose the buried terrain down to sea level and below.

These technologies will enable us to determine whether the loose rockfall material that is visible on the surface extends below sea level at every point along this isthmus, or whether the solid bedrock on each side of the isthmus intersects above sea level. Such analyses must then be calibrated by drilling boreholes, the cores from which can be dated using micropalaeontology, palynology and radiocarbon techniques. Only once these methods have been successfully deployed and the dates of the sediments that lie beneath the isthmus determined will we know which of the three explanations listed above is correct.

Such a study represents a major research initiative for which a 3-year PhD project has now been established at The University of Edinburgh, backed by sponsorship from the geotechnical company Fugro and the UK's Natural Environment Research Council. The interim results of the research have been published in *Geoscientist*[2] and *Geotimes*[3] (available at *www.odysseus-unbound.org/results.html*) and these papers include John Underhill's diagram of the alternative rock strata that may lie below the surface. The project is technically demanding, involving the use of land, sea and helicopter-based equipment, and we expect to have a scientific answer to this question within the next few years. The first borehole was drilled in October 2006 and its findings were found to be consistent with explanations (b) or (c), but until the research is finished we are keeping an open mind about the outcome.

The Ithakan Association study was conducted without the benefit of these interim findings and the interpretations drawn are based on a misunderstanding about the predicted channel route. Curiously the study also fails to evaluate the evidence from Strabo (10.2.15) that "where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea". It does, however, contain a reference to Thucydides' description of Kefalonia (2.30.2) which Luce cites as evidence in support of explanation (a). I agree with Thucydides but not with Luce's inference. In *Odysseus Unbound* I refer to this passage[4] and conclude "So by the end of the fifth century BC it is clear that Thucydides also thinks of Cephallenia as a single island."

The previous authority that I quote is Herodotus, who describes "two hundred [men] from Pale in Cephallenia" (9.28.5). Both of them evidently regarded Kefalonia as a single island in the 5th century BC and their observations therefore represent a useful indication of the latest date for a catastrophic channel

infill event that may have taken place previously. If that was the case then they alluded to one island rather than two because by the 5th century BC the landscape of Thinia was substantially the same as that which Strabo described several centuries later. On this basis other 1st century BC writers such as Virgil and Propertius would have faced the same geological enigma.

At the end of his article Professor Luce questions the evidence adduced from Latin poets by Professor James Diggle in his Appendix on Doulichion[5]. James Diggle tells me (i) that he is puzzled that Professor Luce should base any argument on a passage of such hazy and lazy geography as Virgil, *Aeneid* 3.270-3, a mish-mash of Odyssean and Iliadic names for whose rationale the poet had so little concern that he succeeded in creating out of them an island called "Neritos"[6], and (ii) that he is even more puzzled that Professor Luce should think that Propertius would have had difficulty in fitting "Ithacae" into a pentameter.

Why are John Underhill, James Diggle and I, together with Fugro and other members of the *Odysseus Unbound* project team, tackling this classical enigma? We find the status quo (in the form of modern Ithaki = ancient Ithaca) profoundly unsatisfactory, and perhaps I may remind readers of the reason for this. At *Od.* 9.22-26 we read[7] "*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.*" Any proposals which identify the Ithaca of the *Odyssey* with the island called Ithaki today are therefore faced with the bizarre implication that Homer allegedly confused four islands with three, high with low, furthest out to sea with nearest to the mainland and also sunset (west) with sunrise (east).

This is a motiveless crime: if a poet is familiar with a landscape then he will hardly choose to falsify its description, while if he is unfamiliar with it he has no incentive to misdescribe it so specifically that he invites immediate criticism from those who know it well. Furthermore any such mistake would be rapidly corrected after the caustic response from public recital: can we imagine a play in which one of the main characters proclaims without irony "*I come from New York, a beautiful city built on a steep hill on the west coast of America*"? However, if we can uncover an ancient marine seaway described by Strabo that separated Paliki from eastern Kefalonia then all of these difficulties will simply disappear.

In science this is called the principle of Occam's Razor: that if you are presented with several competing theories you should focus on the simplest. In the case of Ithaca this means that rather than regarding Homer as a poet given to incoherent geographical description, or resorting to tortuous translations of his poetry, we may instead consider that his account of this landscape was entirely accurate at the time of its original composition, but that high-volume earthquake-triggered rockfalls (called *sturzstrom*) generated from the unstable hillslopes that line the eastern side of a key valley have subsequently altered its appearance.

Massive rock avalanches of this type are well-established events in other major earthquake areas[8] and Kefalonia happens to be the most earthquake-prone region in the whole of Europe. Indeed the Ithakan study anticipates this exceptional geological mechanism with the words "*the timing is crucial as geomorphological processes are often very slow and last for thousands of years (apart from those associated with extreme natural phenomena)*"[9]. If outcome (b) or (c) is demonstrated we will therefore be able to vindicate Homer by establishing that his description of ancient Ithaca never wavered from the truth. Otherwise all of us - including the Association of Ithakans Worldwide - will have to go back to the drawing board to work out why a world-class Greek poet appears to have been a geographical ignoramus hell-bent on perpetrating a motiveless crime.

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[1] Maroukian H., Gaki-Papanastassiou K., Papanastassiou D., Karymbalis E. 2006. *The Geomorphological-Palaeogeographical evolution of N.W. Kefalonia with special reference to the area between the Gulf of Argostoli and the Harbour of Hagia Kyriake in the Upper Holocene Period.* Faculty of Geology, University of Athens, unpublished paper (Greek).

[2] Underhill, J.R. 2006. Quest for Ithaca. *Geoscientist* Vol. 16 No. 9. See also: Ithaca theory gains support. *Geoscientist* Vol. 17 No. 2.

[3] Sever, M. 2007. Finding Ithaca. *Geotimes, 52 (1), 18-21.*

[4] Bittlestone R., Diggle J., Underhill J.R. 2005. *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca.* Cambridge University Press pp. 275-6, 485.

[5] *op. cit.* pp. 515-6.

[6] James Diggle recommends the commentary of R.D. Williams on the problems of this passage.

[7] James Diggle's translation: for his explanation of its derivation see *www.odysseus-unbound.org/discovery.html*

[8] Hewitt K., Clague J., Orwin J. 2008. Legacies of catastrophic rock slope failures in mountain landscapes. Earth-Science Reviews 87 p. 33 "*What seems to be happening now is a convergence of several, formerly separate approaches amid growing evidence that catastrophic landslides are more common than previously thought.*"

[9] Maroukian H. et al., *op. cit.* pp. 5, 54.