

How did Homer describe Ithaca?

The meaning of *Odyssey* 9.19-26.

Professor James Diggle, January 2008

These lines from the *Odyssey* have created confusion over the centuries, often as a result of mistranslation. The following text is based on Appendix 1 Section G of *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca*, with an additional discussion of the meaning of the word *panhupertate*.

εἴμ' Ὀδυσσεὺς Λαερτιάδης, ὃς πᾶσι δόλοισιν
ἀνθρώποισι μέλω, καί μευ κλέος οὐρανὸν ἵκει. 20
ναιετάω δ' Ἰθάκην **ἐυδείελον**: ἐν δ' ὄρος αὐτῇ
Νήριτον εἰνοσίφυλλον, ἀριπρεπές: **ἀμφὶ** δὲ νῆσοι
πολλὰ ναιετάουσι μάλα σχεδὸν ἀλλήλησι,
Δουλίχιόν τε Σάμη τε καὶ ὑλήεσσα Ζάκυνθος.
αὐτῇ δὲ **χθαμαλῇ πανυπερτάτῃ** εἰν ἀλλὶ κεῖται 25
πρὸς **ζόφον**, αἰ δέ τ' ἄνευθε πρὸς ἠῶ τ' ἠέλιόν τε,

I am Odysseus, Laertes' son, world-famed
For stratagems: my name has reached the heavens. 20
Bright Ithaca is my home: it has a mountain,
Leaf-quivering Neriton, far visible.
Around are many islands, close to each other,
Doullichion and Same and wooded Zacynthos.
Ithaca itself **lies low, furthest to sea** 25
Towards **dusk**; the rest, apart, face dawn and sun.

Od 9.19-26

I begin at the end. In line 26 the directions 'towards dusk (*zophos*) ... dawn and sun' refer to West and East. To refer them (as some have) to North and South (or South-East) does violence to the Greek language and to common sense. It follows that 'around' in line 23 does not mean 'all around Ithaca': because, if the islands encircle Ithaca, then Ithaca cannot be furthest west. Since 'furthest west' is an explicit and unambiguous direction, and 'around' is (in its nature) inexplicit, I take it to mean 'round about, nearby'. *amphi* regularly means 'near', with proximity its sole implication and no possible implication of encirclement. When the friends of Polyphemos are described as living 'around' him on windy heights (9.399), the meaning is not that they encircle him but that they live nearby.

The word *chthamale* means 'near the ground', in the sense 'low'. The use of the word in Homer is remarkably uniform. It is used of low beds on the ground (*Od.* 11.194); of a rock which is low in relation to another rock (*Od.* 12.101); of a low wall (*Il.* 13.683). Most significantly, it is used to describe the island Aiaia (*Od.* 10.196) as seen by Odysseus from a high vantage-point: it 'lies low', which evidently means that the body of the island is not marked by high ground and lies notably lower than his vantage point. Applied to Ithaca, I take the adjective to mean that Ithaca lies low in relation to the islands nearby. Their mountains dwarf its own. Strabo's interpretation (10.2.12) 'close to the mainland' must be rejected.

Panhupertate means ‘furthest of all’, not (as some translators render it) ‘highest of all’, a sense which it does indeed have in later Greek (pseudo-Aristotle and Hellenistic poets), but which is impossible here. Similarly, the much commoner *hypertatos* means ‘highest’ (either literally or figuratively). These adjectives are formed from the preposition ‘huper’, which is related to German ‘über’, English ‘over’. The preposition has various applications, most of them connected with distance or space or motion. Thus (with a noun in the accusative) one can travel ‘over’ the sea’ (*Od.* 3.73), step ‘over’ a threshold (7.135), go ‘over’ the proper limit (1.34-5), and (with a noun in the genitive) one can stand head and shoulders ‘over’ someone (i.e. ‘above’, ‘higher than’ them, 6.107), sail ‘above’ (i.e. north of) an island (14.300), or be ‘over the sea’, i.e. ‘overseas’ (13.257). So, when later writers use (*pan*)*hupertatos* in the sense ‘highest’, they are giving it a quite natural meaning. But it does not follow that this is the basic meaning. The notion of ‘height’ is simply one development from the basic notion of going beyond a base point. You can go beyond it vertically or horizontally.

There is also a comparative form, *huperteros*, which regularly means ‘higher’ but is also used of a spatial relationship which does not involve height: *Od.* 3.65, 3.470, 20.279 *kre’ hupertera*, ‘outer flesh’ (as opposed to the innards). Furthermore the word which *panhupertate* follows is *chthamale*. If *chthamale* means ‘low lying’ (which it certainly does, as explained above), then *panhupertate* cannot mean ‘highest’.

Liddell and Scott correctly translate *panhupertate* as ‘most remote or farthest from land’. So too does Cunliffe, *Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* p. 311, ‘furthest out to sea’. And Heubeck, in the *Oxford Commentary Vol. 2* p. 14, says ‘the rest of the description can only mean “the most remote and furthest towards the west”’.

In line 21 ‘bright’ is a non-committal translation of an adjective (*eudeielos*) whose meaning is uncertain. It may have something to do with visibility (the literal sense may be ‘well-visible’). It is used almost exclusively of Ithaca, and we should expect it to refer to an aspect of Ithaca which distinguishes Ithaca from other islands. It is often translated ‘sunny’. But what Greek island is sunless? Line 25 suggests a possible aspect. If Ithaca ‘lies low’, its mountains may not be high enough to be much troubled by clouds. So perhaps, the idea is ‘always fully visible’.