

Merchiston Castle School, Edinburgh - Thursday March 15 2007 at 19:00

Where was Odysseus' homeland?



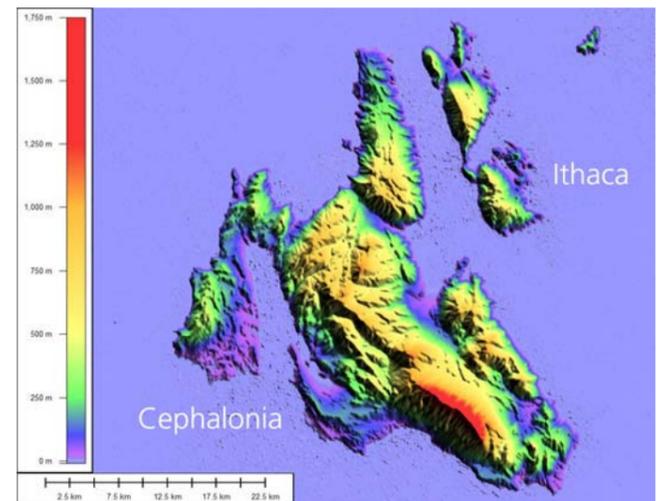
Professor John R. Underhill – Grant Institute of Earth Science, University of Edinburgh

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. 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 rather surprisingly, the island that is today called Ithaki doesn't fit this description at all: in fact it is almost exactly opposite. Ithaki is a mountainous island that faces towards the mainland on the eastern side of Cephalonia.

So did Homer simply not know his east from his west? That has been the view of many scholars for the last 2,500 years, but John Underhill thinks they may have been wrong.



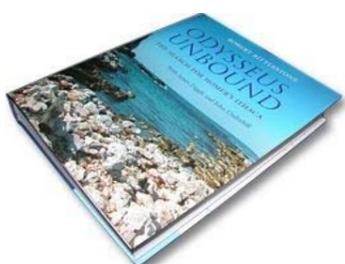
The main clue for an alternative location for ancient Ithaca came from the work of the geographer Strabo who also wrestled with the problem of these islands. In his *Geography* he makes an unusual and very specific observation of Cephalonia: "Where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea".

The application of geoscience entered the picture in 2003 in an attempt to address the all-important question: Could a marine channel, subsequently described by Strabo as a low-lying isthmus, have separated Paliki, the westernmost peninsula of Cephalonia, 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'.

John Underhill will present this argument together with the latest news and research from the former island that is believed to be Odysseus' homeland. His 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. John will answer questions at the end and he will be available for further discussions afterwards. The talk will summarise the results of the geological, geophysical and geomorphic methods that have been used over the past three years in an attempt to test the validity of Strabo's Channel as a historical reality. The results may yet provide us with an elegant solution to a 3,000 year old mystery.



JOHN UNDERHILL is Professor of Stratigraphy at the University of Edinburgh. His primary research interest lies in the use of geological fieldwork and geophysical methods to investigate the structure and stratigraphy of sedimentary basins. He has been investigating and elucidating the geology of the Ionian Islands of western Greece since 1982. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He also referees professional football matches and in 2001 was promoted to the FIFA List of International Referees.



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 at the special price of £20, signed by John Underhill.

www.odysseus-unbound.org

