

International project team announces discovery of location of Homer’s Ithaca

- **Dramatic geological shifts hid solution to mystery of Odysseus’ island for 3,000 years**
- **Peninsula in western Kefallinia believed to have been a separate island**
- **Catastrophic earthquakes triggered massive landslides that joined islands together**

What is potentially one of the most exciting classical discoveries for over 130 years was revealed in London today (Thursday September 29 2005).

At a conference held at the Foreign Press Association, Robert Bittlestone¹ (Chairman of management consultancy Metapraxis Ltd), James Diggle² (Professor of Greek and Latin at Cambridge University) and John Underhill³ (Professor of Stratigraphy at Edinburgh University) announced that they had found new and compelling evidence in support of the location of ancient Ithaca, the island described in great detail in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

By deploying computer-based technology, advanced satellite imagery and 3D global visualisation techniques developed by NASA, as well as intensive field expeditions, the project team was able to analyse and visualise a mass of data, including literary, geological and archaeological clues.

Their conclusion is that Homer’s Ithaca was not the Greek island now called Ithaki but was instead located on what is believed to have been the previously separated western peninsula of today’s island of Kefallinia, an area now called Paliki (see map).

Major geological changes in landscape

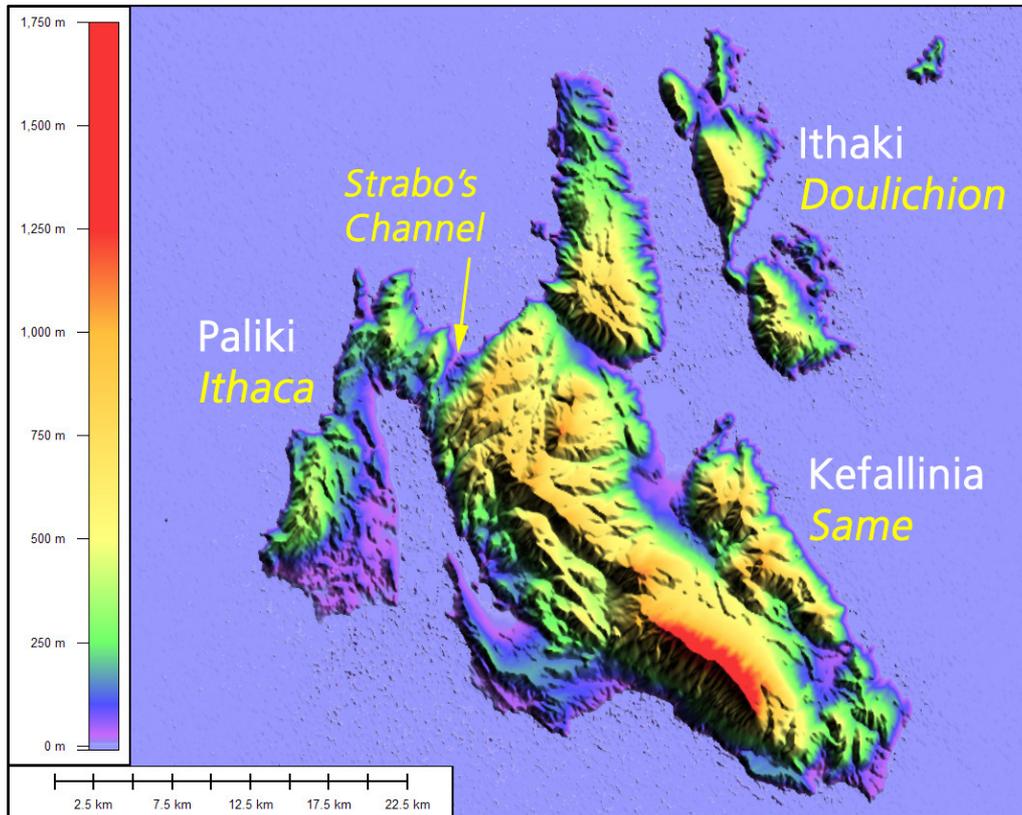
This conclusion is based on a radical geological hypothesis first proposed by Bittlestone in 2003. He noticed that Homer’s description of Ithaca has puzzled scholars for millennia because it does not agree with the location of today’s island of Ithaki:

“Around are many islands, close to each other,
Doulighion and Same and wooded Zacynthos.
Ithaca itself lies low, furthest to sea

Towards dusk [i.e.west]; the rest, apart, face dawn and sun [i.e. east].”

Odyssey 9.23-26

This presents two contradictions because today's island of Ithaki lies to the east of the other islands, not to the west, and it is not low-lying but mountainous. Over the centuries there have been many previous attempts to explain this mismatch, including a learned treatise by William Gladstone. The consensus has been that the contradictions occurred because Homer lived much later than the events of the *Odyssey* and several hundred kilometres to the east in what is now western Turkey, so perhaps he was either ignorant of or uninterested in the actual geography.



Map of Kefallinia and Ithaca, two of the Ionian islands off the western coast of Greece. The colour of the landscape corresponds to its altitude above sea level. Today's placenames are in white text: ancient names are in yellow italics.

This map has been computer-generated from digital elevation model data obtained from satellite radar altitude scans. Very low-lying areas (less than about 3 m above sea level) may merge into ocean wavetop reflections.

Image credits: DEM data was obtained from the NASA Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM-90). Horizontal accuracy: 90 m. Processing: Global Mapper – custom elevation shading. To download a print-quality version of this map, refer to the Project Website details below.

Bittlestone asked instead the question: “What if Homer has been right all along? What if this mismatch has occurred not because of geographical errors by the poet, but because of geological changes in the landscape? Could something unprecedented have altered the layout of these islands since the time of the Trojan War around 1200 BC?”

Since 2003 an international project team of geologists, classicists and archaeologists in the UK, in Greece and worldwide has been advising on this hypothesis and the results that have emerged are astonishing. The team has been able to reconstruct the former layout of these islands and it provides a compelling solution to the long-established enigma of the location of Homer's Ithaca.

Reconciliation of the *Odyssey's* geographical descriptions – Odysseus' homeland “No longer a mystery”

Homer's descriptions of Ithaca in the *Odyssey* indicate that at that time there were two separate islands called Same and Ithaca. Bittlestone, Diggle and Underhill believe that Same was the main part of today's island of Kefallinia and ancient Ithaca was its western peninsula, now called Paliki. At that time they were probably separated by a narrow seaway which they have called “Strabo's Channel” after the geographer Strabo (64BC-AD21), who also sought to identify Homer's Ithaca and who in fact described this marine passage without realising its significance.

Over the last three millennia land-mass uplift and catastrophic rockfalls due to periodic earthquakes have filled in this region, which is now an isthmus called Thinia. This is believed to have made the single island of Kefallinia out of the former islands of Ithaca and Same. The name of Ithaca was subsequently transferred to today's island of Ithaki, which was formerly the “lost island” of Doulichion mentioned above.

Furthermore, almost all of the 26 locations that are described in detail in the *Odyssey* can be identified today in Northern Paliki and its neighbourhood. James Diggle and John Underhill have been working with Robert Bittlestone since 2003 in the development of these radical new findings and their explanation is set out in the forthcoming book from Cambridge University Press: *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca*.⁴ The book records the contribution and advice of over 40 individuals, including academic experts from all over the world.

Formation of charitable foundation to carry work forward

The *Odysseus Unbound* authors recognise that the identification of this new location for ancient Ithaca is likely to be regarded as a matter of international interest and of national significance within Greece itself.

They are cooperating closely in this research with the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and with the Athens-based Institute of Geology and Mineral Exploration (IGME). Deputy Minister of Culture Petros Tatoulis issued the following statement on September 26th:

“The Hellenic Ministry of Culture welcomes the release of the book *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca* (Robert Bittlestone, with James Diggle and John Underhill: Cambridge University Press, 2005). The book opens exciting prospects for future research regarding the location of Homeric Ithaca. The Ministry eagerly follows Mr. Bittlestone's hypothesis and looks forward to staying informed about any future developments”.

IGME issued the following statement on September 28th:

“The Institute of Geology and Mineral Exploration in Athens has facilitated the geological researches of Professor John Underhill in the Ionian Islands since 1982. The results of his recent investigation of the Holocene geomorphology⁵ of western Kefallinia are unexpected and thought-provoking. We are pleased to be working closely with him and his team at the University of Edinburgh with the joint objective of furthering our understanding of the geological history and the tectonic setting of these islands. We have already started on a program of collaborative marine surveys and we look forward to advancing our knowledge of this region together.”

The new charitable Foundation will form the basis for international fund-raising and sponsorship. Referring to the research conducted so far as Phase A, the team proposes a Phase B project from 2006-2007 with the objective of definitive geological assessment and non-invasive archaeology, to be followed by a Phase C project from 2008-2012 to involve archaeological excavation of the key sites, including Odysseus' palace and Ithaca city.

In the new book Robert Bittlestone asks us to consider “Are there priceless archaeological treasures to be found in Paliki? Could there be Linear B tablets? Might the Gold of Homer’s Troy be complemented by the Gold of Homer’s Ithaca? We shall learn only if we have the courage and the confidence to look.” He adds today:

“This project represents a unique opportunity for philanthropic individuals and organisations to make a permanent contribution to society by funding research into our Bronze Age ancestors: they represent the unknown architects of our western civilisation”.

ENDS

Project Website

<http://www.odysseus-unbound.org>

The website includes an online Forum to enable all those who are interested in this discovery to discuss the project and to contribute to its progress.

High resolution print quality images can be downloaded directly from this site at the Press page by logging in to the restricted area - contact Amy Wilson for details.

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BACKGROUND

The oldest books in Western literature are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, both attributed to a poet called Homer. They describe the Trojan War and the return of Odysseus (the hero of Troy who devised the trick of the wooden horse) from the battle to his palace on Ithaca, an island somewhere to the west of Greece. These events are dated to around 1200 BC and the poems are so ancient that they were composed before the introduction of writing in the Greek alphabet itself. But the stories had a massive influence on philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Socrates and they shaped the intellectual and cultural development of Greece throughout the classical era. This in turn has been the cornerstone of western culture, and for that reason Homer is regarded as both the earliest and the foremost architect of our western civilisation.

Despite Homer's immense influence, for three thousand years it was thought that the *Iliad* was a work of fiction and that Troy as Homer described it had never existed. Then in the 1870s Heinrich Schliemann conducted excavations in north-western Turkey which led to the discovery of the ancient city and, buried beneath it, the gold of Troy.

¹ Robert Bittlestone was educated in classics and science before reading economics at the University of Cambridge. He is the founder of Metapraxis Ltd, a company specialising in the detection of early warnings for multinational companies. He has advised the CEOs, CFOs and other directors of over 250 global enterprises on how best to define, diagnose, predict and present Board-level management information. He is the author of many articles about the importance of visualisation and he has applied these principles to the enigma described in this book. He is married with four children and describes himself as an enthusiastically incompetent skier, sailor and windsurfer.

² James Diggle is Professor of Greek and Latin at Cambridge and a Fellow of Queens' College. His publications include *The Oxford Classical Text of Euripides* (Oxford, 1981–94), *Euripidea: Collected Essays* (Oxford, 1994) and *Theophrastus: Characters* (Cambridge, 2004). He was University Orator at Cambridge for eleven years and has published a selection of his speeches in *Cambridge Orations* (Cambridge, 1994).

³ 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.

⁴ *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca* will be published by Cambridge University Press on October 6th 2005 for international distribution. It is printed in full colour with 618 pages and 340 illustrations and has been written both for general readers with no prior knowledge of the *Odyssey* and also for experts in classics and geology. Further details and worldwide ordering information are available at the following website:

www.odysseus-unbound.org

⁵ The Holocene period is the last 10,000 years before the present day: geomorphology is the study of the evolution and configuration of landforms.

Advance reviews for *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca* :

‘This curious, spellbinding book is a masterpiece of writing for the general public. The geological argument in particular is first-class and leaves me in no doubt about the possibility of the theory being proposed.’

Professor Tjeerd van Andel, Honorary Professor in Earth History, Quaternary Science and Geoarchaeology, University of Cambridge

‘This book is a gem. Its reconstruction of prehistoric Ithaca has a convincingly Homeric ‘look and feel’ to it. Reading the *Odyssey* is unlikely ever to be the same again.’

Professor Gregory Nagy, Francis Jones Professor of Classical Greek Literature, Harvard University and Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington DC