



QUEENS' COLLEGE RECORD · 2006

Odysseus Unbound - The Search for Homer's Ithaca

A review of a new book by Robert Bittlestone with James Diggle and John Underhill, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 618 pages, £25.

Although the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* form an integral part of our cultural heritage, what are the historical facts (if any) on which they are based? The poems were part of a bardic tradition from 1200-900 BC and were not written down until 800-600 BC when the written language became available. Although ascribed to 'Homer', authorship is unclear; current scholarship suggests that Homer should be thought of as plural and that the authors of the two books were not the same. Moreover, the stories of the death of Hector at the siege of Troy and Odysseus' journey home from the war were often viewed solely as myth. This changed 130 years ago when Heinrich Schliemann, using only his copy of the *Iliad* as a map, decided that Troy was at present-day Hissarlik in Turkey and bulldozed his way through various levels to reveal Bronze Age settlements including a candidate for Troy. Modern opinion is that the Greeks did indeed invade this region of Turkey about 1200 BC and burnt a city at Hissarlik.

What then of the *Odyssey* telling the return of Odysseus to Ithaca from Troy? Anyone attempting to repeat Schliemann's discovery is met with an immediate obstacle: Homer describes Ithaca as low lying, the westernmost Greek island; yet modern day Ithaca is mountainous and the island of Cephalonia is west of it. Moreover, Cephalonia is probably mentioned in the *Odyssey* under the name of Same (a city of that name still thrives on Cephalonia). So did Homer make a mistake with his geography? Did his account get changed as it was passed down through the ages (Chinese Whispers) and not get detected by the writers? (After all, they were writing hundreds of miles away after a mass emigration to the Ionian isles near Turkey.) This has been the general opinion, though various alternative theories have been put forward as to where Odysseus' Ithaca really was. Unfortunately, these also fail to fit many of Homer's geographical descriptions.

In this fascinating book, Robert Bittlestone puts forward another theory altogether. Cephalonia has a western peninsula, Paliki. What if it were separated from Cephalonia 3,000 years ago? The geographer Strabo, writing 2,000 years ago, mentions that at certain times there was a water channel between Paliki and Cephalonia, but how accurate was his account (which was second or third hand)? Such a channel between them is quite impossible now (the area is currently 60-180 metres above sea level) and such a great change in only 3,000 years seems most unlikely. Only slightly deterred, Bittlestone takes us through his voyage of discovery. Some of Homer's geographic clues fit

the topography of Paliki very well, others less so. At this point, Bittlestone calls in the professionals, John Underhill (Professor of Stratigraphy at the University of Edinburgh and an expert on the geology of Cephalonia) and our own James Diggle (Professor of Greek and Latin at Cambridge).

The island of Cephalonia is on the fault line between Europe and Africa, so earthquakes are common. According to Underhill, these caused large landslips which have filled in the channel between Cephalonia and Paliki. When this occurred has yet to be determined though remnants of a Bronze Age wall of Mycenaean style from 1500-1000 BC have been found under the landslip material. If (and only if) the large landslip has occurred in the last 3,100 years, then the theory that Odysseus' palace was on the Paliki peninsula becomes viable. Indeed, by a close reading and retranslation of parts of the poem, James Diggle was able to show (and discover) that the geographical details of the Paliki peninsula fit Homer's description extremely closely, so closely in fact that the original author or authors must have lived there (which would be a new discovery). Moreover, John Underhill confirms that the topography of these areas (apart from the channel described by Strabo) was not significantly altered by subsequent earthquakes. Anthony Snodgrass (Emeritus Professor of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge) joined the party and has found abundant Bronze Age sherds in the anticipated area, so the theory is holding up well; but more archaeological research will be needed if the required dates of the landslip are substantiated.

In his book, Bittlestone provides an exciting series of 'what-ifs' including several blind alleys (most realised and acknowledged as such) that eventually led to his theory. He gives a very clear account for the layman of the science used and provides copious computer-generated images of the various areas of Cephalonia. This makes for an exciting read, though I would have preferred a more streamlined account (a small complaint). There are very informative appendices by James Diggle and John Underhill which are of independent interest. Although 'proof' for me (a pure mathematician) has a totally different meaning, I find the argument quite persuasive if the geological dating of the landslip is as expected. I will certainly follow the developments on www.odysseus-unbound.org and remain cautiously optimistic that the geological and archaeological research will provide increasing support for the theory that Odysseus' Ithaca is the Paliki peninsula of Cephalonia. I enjoyed the book and thank the authors for their fascinating insights and discoveries.

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