Odysseus Unbound

Where is the Ithaca described in such detail in Homer's *Odyssey*? The mystery has baffled scholars for over two millennia, particularly because Homer's descriptions bear little resemblance to the modern island called Ithaki. This highly illustrated book tells the extraordinary story of the exciting recent discovery of the true location of Homer's Ithaca by following a detective trail of literary, geological and archaeological clues. We can now identify all the places on the island that are mentioned in the epic – even the site of Odysseus' Palace itself. The pages of the *Odyssey* come alive as we follow its events through a landscape that opens up before our eyes via glorious colour photographs and 3D satellite images. Over a century after Schliemann's discovery of Troy, this breakthrough will revolutionise our understanding of Homer's texts and of our cultural ancestors in Bronze Age Greece.

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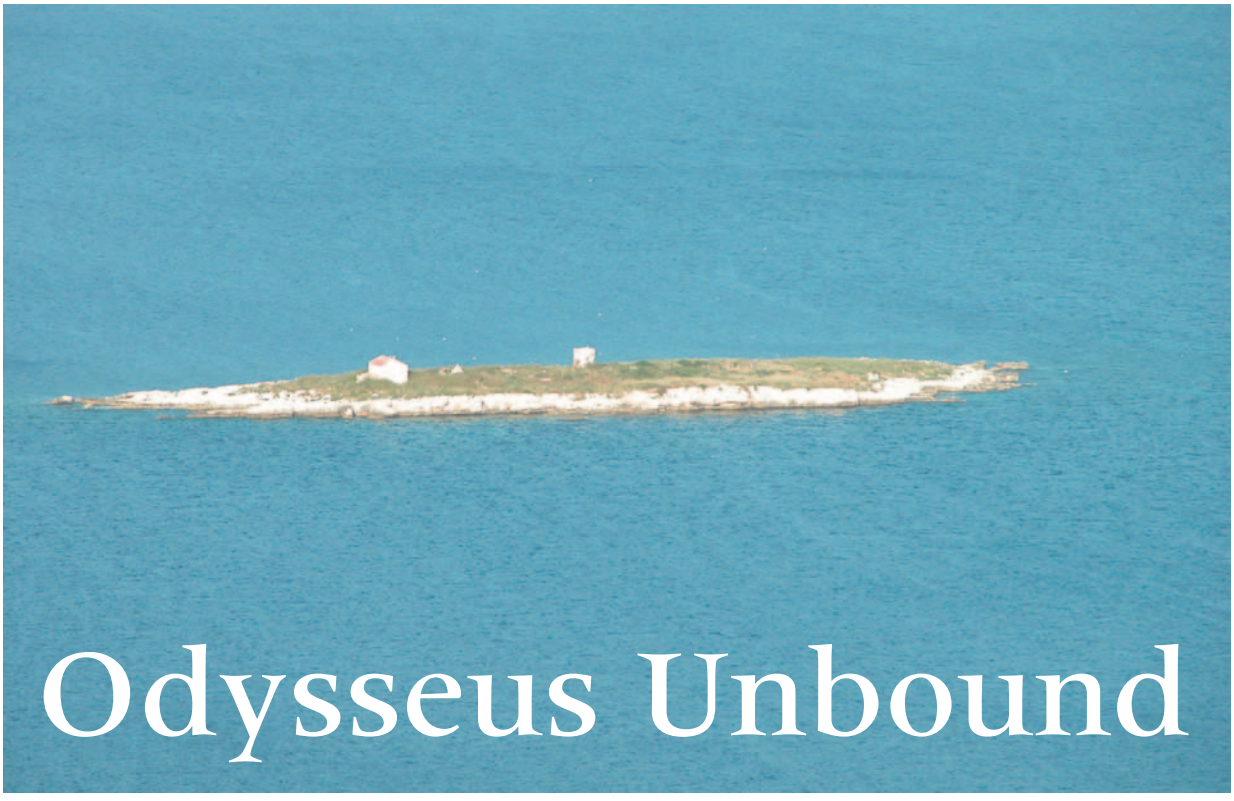
Head of Odysseus: Tiberius Grotto, Sperlonga
Excavated from the cave at the foot of Mount Ciannito between Rome and Naples, where Tiberius (Roman Emperor from AD 14 to 37) is thought to have entertained his dinner guests beside his fish farm.
[Image: photographed by the author with the kind permission of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici del Lazio, Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Roma.]



Odysseus Unbound

The Search for Homer's Ithaca

ROBERT BITTLESTONE

With James Diggle and John Underhill

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Extract of *Helen* taken from *George Seferis: Complete Poems* translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Published by Anvil Press Poetry in 1995. Reproduced by permission of Anvil Press Poetry and Princeton University Press.

For the people of Kefalonia
Great suffering had desolated Greece.
So many bodies thrown
into the jaws of the sea, the jaws of the earth,
so many souls
fed to the millstones like grain.
And the rivers swelling, blood in their silt,
all for a linen undulation, a filmy cloud,
a butterfly's flicker, a wisp of swan's down,
an empty tunic – all for a Helen.
George Seferis, *Helen* (1953)

And for Jean
From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:
They sparkle still the right Promethean fire;
They are the books, the arts, the academes,
That show, contain, and nourish all the world.
Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*
IV.iii.297 (1593)

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James Diggle is Professor of Greek and Latin in the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Queens' College. His involvement with this enterprise started with the provision of a crucial expert opinion concerning the Homeric description of Asteris and since then he has been a delightful and untiring source of inspiration, expertise and philological advice. His willingness to devote serious consideration to alternately ridiculous and radical proposals from an amateur whose Greek was half-forgotten has been remarkable. He has combined the eye of an eagle with the pen of a poet and I owe to him more than I can describe.

John Underhill is Professor of Stratigraphy at the University of Edinburgh and an international expert on Cephalonian geology. His enthusiasm to solve the riddle of Strabo's Channel has been boundless and he has visited and revisited the island in order to unravel the mystery of its transformation. He has devoted extraordinary energy to this quest while simultaneously acquitting himself as a Scottish Premier League referee.

Anthony Snodgrass is Laurence Professor Emeritus of Classical Archaeology at the University of Cambridge. He has acted as mentor to many of today's classical archaeologists and he and his wife Annemarie have provided encouragement and expert advice at crucial points in this venture. Their personal involvement in the summer of 2004 resulted in fundamental new interpretations and insights.

Tjeerd van Andel is Honorary Professor in Earth History, Quaternary Science and Geo-archaeology at the Godwin Institute of Quaternary Science within the Department of Earth Sciences at Cambridge University. Internationally recognised as the author of *New Views on an Old Planet* and the discoverer of geothermal vents, his work on *terra rossa* and the interaction between human beings and their physical environment has been of great importance to this project.

Michael D'Souza was a co-explorer on the second and third expeditions: *inter magna alia* he constructively challenged the Asteris hypothesis and thereby injected more rigour into this proposal. His interests range from Bronze Age marine warfare to the Dorian Invasion and beyond: he has been an invaluable and enjoyable companion and sage.

Chris Goodger filmed with great professionalism key moments of the first expedition as the discoveries were taking place and simultaneously refused to

be blinded by Homeric research, obliging me to check and recheck the interim findings for real-world credibility.

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Per Wikstroem of Radarteam in Sweden surrendered a holiday in order to deploy his advanced ground-penetrating radar antenna, which was instrumental in identifying former sea level contours and also in profiling a famous collapsed cave.

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Manolis Pantos of the Daresbury Laboratory Archaeometry Unit has been a source of rare reference materials and he has also cooperated with C. H. Goekoop in preparing an English translation of his book. The generosity of his spirit in encouraging me to pursue a competitive theory has been extraordinary.

Gilles le Noan is an indefatigable Homeric researcher whose publications on this subject are thought-provoking and controversial. He provided me with access to some recondite source material and his inquiry into the history of today's island of Ithaca has been of considerable value. Although our views differ on the central question of the geology of ancient Ithaca, we nevertheless find ourselves in agreement regarding several of the Odyssean locations.

In 1998 Babis Katsibas of Lefkas alerted me to the possibility of historical changes in the sea levels on mainland Greece as a basis for reassessing an archaeological site in Acarnania and this became a catalyst for the present project.

Peter Kuniholm of the Malcolm and Carolyn Wiener Laboratory for Aegean and Near Eastern Dendrochronology at Cornell University in Ithaca (NY) clarified the relationship between claims and reality in the matter of Greek olive tree aging.

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Tim Severin is an intrepid explorer whose *Ulysses Voyage* proposed that the *Odyssey* describes real sea journeys and places: his adventures sparked my interest in this endeavour and also helped me to focus on small-scale topography rather than long-distance voyages.

Professor Anastasia Kiratzi at the Department of Geophysics in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki identified key research papers that explained the history of local sea level changes. The earthquake catalogue of over 20,000 tremors dating back to 550 BC and related researches by her, together with Professor B. C. Papazachos and others at the University's Geophysical Laboratory, have provided essential information on historical continuity.

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salt water in the buried marine channel at a considerable distance from the sea.

Professor Ioannis Koumantakis of the Department of Mining Engineering and Metallurgy in the Section of Geological Sciences at the National Technical University of Athens and Professor T. Mimides of the Laboratory of Agricultural Hydraulics at the Department of Land Reclamation and Agricultural Engineering of the Agricultural University of Athens performed the original research on the composition of these underground inland sea water reservoirs and they also identified an important hydrological anomaly.

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John Walker, founder of Autodesk and co-author of AutoCAD, wrote the astronomical programs that enabled the exact positions of Mars and Venus at dawn on specified dates 3,200 years ago to be determined.

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Andrea Celentano and Ilaria Tramacere of Eurimage in Rome obtained high resolution Digital Globe Quickbird satellite images of the critical locations and their colleague Axel Oddone patiently manipulated the data involved to provide image resolution to an accuracy of 70 centimetres from an orbit 450 kilometres away.

Des Newman of D&L Software created the OziExplorer 2D and 3D programs which made possible the integration of satellite, survey, geological and digital elevation imagery with on-site GPS data values.

Alistair Dickie is the author of OziPhotoTool which synchronised the time-stamps from digital photography with those from GPS location information.

Dennis Johnson and Michael Jeffords of Geophysical Survey Systems provided the ground penetrating radar control equipment and the analytical software that enabled the radar scans to be interpreted.

Ray Gardener is the author of Leveller, a volume sculpting tool for three dimensional digital elevation models which helped in the recreation of the former channel contours.

Simon Bittlestone recalled C. H. Goekoop's reference to the potential ambiguity of the Greek word 'nesos' at a crucial moment and applied it to the identification of Asteris when exploration time was running out and no windy heights were to be found. He also acted as the project's on-site coordinator in the summer of 2004.

Nicola Bittlestone's penetrating question about the proximity of the sea at Palairos in 1998 launched a chain of thought which led to the Schizocephalonia hypothesis.

Matthew Bittlestone realised that there would be no point in developing a theatre for the inhabitants of a deserted city and he also alerted me to the implications of the fact that Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachos and Laertes are the only witnesses to much of the action described in the *Odyssey*.

Mark Bittlestone discovered the second well of Arethousa Spring and worked out why Telemachos would have chosen to land at a bay as small and unknown as Agni Cove.

In London my solicitor Lawrence Cartier provided support and advice well beyond the call of purely legal duty. He also suggested an additional reason for the relatively high population of Doulichion, in view of its proximity to the Greek mainland as a first port of call for visitors.

In Argostoli my solicitor Nellie Constandaki-Hioni provided invaluable assistance and guidance in connection with the people and the places of this beautiful island.

The library of the Athenaeum in Pall Mall has been an outstanding source of rare volumes and I am most appreciative of both the quality and the quantity of the books that I have been permitted to borrow, particularly in the case of those that were donated by their authors.

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Michael Sharp and his team at Cambridge University Press adopted and adapted my typescript with great professionalism and they also had the courage and the confidence to commit to a full colour publication from an author unknown in this field.

Finally, writers need families and I am no exception. Simon, Nicola, Matthew and Mark have humoured and encouraged me throughout this undertaking and as for Jean, who married me in 1979 in the teeth of much prevailing advice: well my dear, you will note that I have dedicated half of this book to you. I realise that this will represent little compensation for all those solitary evenings but at least your half is still heavy enough to satisfy your urge to throw it at me from time to time.

Prologue

The *Odyssey* is Homer's story of the return of Odysseus from the Trojan War to his palace on the island of Ithaca and his battle to regain the kingship there after a long absence. The *Iliad* describes certain events towards the end of this war which is believed to have taken place in the twelfth century BC. Although these poems are thought to have been set down in writing several centuries later, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* nevertheless represent two of the world's oldest surviving texts.

These are long epic poems of magnificent style and breathtaking sophistication. They were pivotal in defining the language and culture of classical Greece and these in turn have fundamentally influenced the development of Western Europe. Many aspects of our own spoken and written word, democracy, philosophy, politics, mathematics, architecture, painting, sculpture, drama and other facets of Western culture derive from the Greek civilisations of the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

The Greeks regarded Homer as their teacher and the Homeric poems made an immense impact upon the whole of ancient literature. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle studied the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as a precursor to the development of their own ideas and for the last 2,500 years the Homeric poems have been required reading for every serious writer and philosopher. That legacy remains with us: in fact it is difficult to compose a significant paragraph in Italian, French, Spanish or English without using at least one word that was first articulated by Homer.

Ever since classical antiquity there has been considerable speculation about who Homer was, when and where these poems were written, whether there was a single author and whether the people, events and places that are described are real or imaginary. Although some of the place names that are mentioned in the *Odyssey* continue to exist today, including an island called Ithaca in the Ionian Sea to the west of Greece, attempts to relate this location to Homer's descriptions have proved unsuccessful. Despite continuing claims, excavations on modern Ithaca have failed to reveal the ancient city or Odysseus' Palace and its geography cannot be reconciled with descriptions in the *Odyssey* itself. This represents a marked contrast with the *Iliad*'s description of Troy, which was located by Heinrich Schliemann on the north-western coast of Turkey and extensively excavated since the 1870s.

However, new geological research into the location of the ancient seaway which I describe as Strabo's Channel has now suggested an alternative location for Homeric Ithaca. At an early stage of its development this theory implied that researchers over the centuries have been looking for Ithaca in the wrong place because the channel no longer exists. The evidence in support of this former seaway has been evaluated by John Underhill and his summary of the scientific findings is contained within an appendix to this book.

This new location for Homeric Ithaca agrees very closely with descriptions of the island in the *Odyssey*. Specific sites for Phorcys Bay, Asteris, Ithaca city, Odysseus' Palace, Hermes' Hill, Raven's Rock, Laertes' farm and other Ithacan locations have been identified and visited and the results of this preliminary on-site exploration are very positive. This is particularly evident in the case of those well-known Homeric passages that have previously appeared topographically inconsistent. In every case this new location supports the view that Homer's geographical descriptions of ancient Ithaca in the *Odyssey* were exact. James Diggle has reviewed and retranslated from the Greek all the crucial passages which provide us with these clues and his expert assessment of this material is referred to in the text and presented by him in a further appendix.

The essence of the theory presented in this book was compiled before my first visit to present-day Ithaca or Cephalonia, although I was familiar with other areas of Greece and its islands. The solution that emerged therefore represented the first phase of a 3,200 year old detective story: an *ab initio* attempt to identify the site of Homer's Ithaca based on an evaluation of off-site evidence. This consisted primarily of seismic research, geological considerations, textual analyses, Internet-based photographic repositories, satellite images, previous researchers' theories and responses to e-mail or telephone inquiries. The task was to try to fit together all these different clues so that the historical jigsaw made sense.

Once the first draft of the theory was complete, a series of visits was arranged to see if its predictions were supported by the reality. Although some important aspects of the theory were modified in the light of these visits, the central thrust has remained the same and I have tried to echo this in my title, which draws on Aeschylus' and later Shelley's reference to the plight of Prometheus tied to a rock. In this case Odysseus and his homeland have been tied to the rock of Same by earthquake-induced landslip: I hope that these present researches may represent an initial step towards their liberation.

As an amateur in their disciplines I am conscious of the blunders of interpretation that I have doubtless made in deploying material from the expert domains of seismologists, geologists, classicists and archaeologists. I ask them to forgive me for these mistakes and also for my use of everyday language in the presentation of these findings. However, even if I possessed the skills to convey this material in the language of experts, I am not sure that I would have used them, because this is a story that affects us all and it is perhaps therefore appropriate that all of us should have the chance to absorb it.

I hope that some of those who read this volume will agree that sufficient progress has now been made on preliminary research to justify the organisation and funding of professional investigation. This project will always belong to Greece but the sites involved are very extensive and it will take a major international effort for them to reveal their secrets. Consequently it is hoped

that some form of conduit for information and resources can be established to facilitate contact with those organisations and individuals who wish to support this endeavour and thereby become associated with the further discoveries that may emerge.

Finally, anyone involved in a venture such as this cannot fail to be aware of the extensive history of prior attempts to solve this ancient puzzle, of the debt that is owed to those great researchers and to the ever-present possibility of failure. It will take time for this proposition to be tested independently and inevitably some disappointments will ensue. I hope that these will be offset by the excitement of new discoveries but if that should not be the case then I can do no better than to refer to Shelley once more and quote from his own Preface:

Whatever talents a person may possess to amuse and instruct others, be they ever so inconsiderable, he is yet bound to exert them: if his attempt be ineffectual, let the punishment of an unaccomplished purpose have been sufficient; let none trouble themselves to heap the dust of oblivion upon his efforts; the pile they raise will betray his grave which might otherwise have been unknown.

Kingston-upon-Thames, October 2004

Text, translation and images

While writing this book I have been conscious of two distinct audiences: amateurs and experts. As an amateur I have tried to learn from experts in disciplines such as geology, archaeology and classical studies. When I introduce material from their domains I aim to explain the underlying concepts as I have tried to understand them myself. This approach may help other amateurs but it runs the risk of irritating experts, so that is one reason why James Diggle has composed Appendix 1 and John Underhill Appendix 2. I have been very fortunate to be advised by them and other authorities; the resulting text is intended to stand up to the scrutiny of their peers. Expert readers are encouraged to refer to their appendices at an early stage as an antidote to the layman's descriptions elsewhere.

Because this book is both an explanation and also a chronology of the search and the discovery, I have from time to time exposed the reader to some of the blind alleys that I unwittingly entered as this adventure unfolded. It might have been simpler to have omitted these false steps but the result would have been less true to life. If you are an expert reader you will probably be horrified by some of these naïve presumptions; fortunately they were in most cases detected and the resulting correction is then discussed in a later chapter.

Some of these false steps involved my misunderstanding of the text. My own ancient Greek is decidedly rusty, although when armed with a magnifying glass and Liddell and Scott's Greek dictionary I can attempt a word-by-word translation. I based my preliminary research into the *Odyssey* on the translation by Robert Fagles published in 1996. Fagles' intention was to turn the poem into an accessible vernacular and in this he succeeds remarkably well; but this success is of necessity sometimes achieved at the expense of textual fidelity. From time to time I have therefore reverted to a more traditional translation, mainly that of A. T. Murray published in the Loeb Classical Library (1919) and revised by George E. Dimock (1995).

After reading a first draft of the initial chapters of this book in which I had quoted Fagles' translation, James Diggle persuaded me that since I was building much of my case on the text of the *Odyssey*, I needed to use a translation which reflected as precisely as possible the nuances of the original Greek. At the same time he felt that a literal prose translation would fail to convey the poetic qualities of Homeric verse. He therefore volunteered to translate into verse all the passages upon which I relied. This rapidly became a major undertaking since those original 260 lines soon turned into over 700, but I believe that he has achieved what I thought to be impossible: a translation of great elegance which simultaneously retains an exceptional level of fidelity to the original Greek. I have used other translations of the *Odyssey* for the passages that I quote at the beginning and the end of this story, where the reverential awe of Murray's Victorian English seems appropriate.

I also owe to James translations from the *Iliad* and from other verse and prose authors; those translations for which he is not responsible are acknowledged in the text. He has added notes to his own translations where he felt that they required them, drawing attention to problems in the Greek text and in its interpretation. These notes are designed to be accessible to the reader who knows no Greek. The index at the end of the book includes line references to these and other Homeric translations; the line numbers throughout refer to the Greek version of the text.

In modern Greek I am about as speechless as the average tourist and therefore most grateful to Karen Rich, who managed not only the normal complexities of translation but also tackled some arcane phrases from geophysical electrochemistry. With the benefit of hindsight I suspect that my cheerful words of encouragement that most of these terms were derived from ancient Greek in the first place may not have been as helpful to her as I imagined at the time. The remaining translations from French, Italian and German are my own except where otherwise indicated; in some cases I have made use of computerised translations.

Concerning the English spelling of Greek proper names I have generally followed James Diggle's advice to remain faithful to the original except where established convention makes that awkward. Odysseus is the familiar English spelling of the name which in Greek is *Odusseus*. The Roman version of his name is *Ulixes* and from this comes the English spelling Ulysses. So I have kept to the familiar spelling for him and a few other well-known individuals but used the Greek form for the remainder.

There are many maps, diagrams and photographic images in this book. The use of satellite and other digital imagery has been fundamental to these researches and the appropriate credits have been provided throughout. Almost all of the photographs were taken by me on-site and so where an alternative source is not listed then I am responsible for the image.

Much of my professional life has been spent in emphasising the importance of visualisation within business circles and so I make no apology for bringing the same techniques to bear in this rather different inquiry. I hope that they will help the reader to visualise Homer's Ithaca, both as it was in the time of Odysseus and as it is today. They also serve to lighten the impact of what might otherwise have been a rather intimidating sequence of unbroken pages of text.

Finally I must point out that the island on which most of the following action takes place is variously spelt as Cephalonia, Cephellenia, Kefalonia, Kefallenia and Kefallinia. In general I have adopted the first of these except when referring to the 'great-hearted Cephallenians' who live there. That adjective is a Homeric epithet (*Iliad* 2.631) which I have found to be as true of the people who inhabit the island today as it was over 3,000 years ago.