

The Ithaca Enigma

1 Odysseus Unbound

This article discusses a modern mystery relating to an ancient place: the island of Ithaca off the west coast of Greece. I believe the answer to the mystery is plain enough, to anyone willing to consider the facts. I hope those who read my article to the end will agree.

Ithaca is a paradoxical place. It's a small island, remote even by Greek-island standards – it has no airport, nor does it have enough flat land for one to be built. Life there was deeply rural until quite recently. Yet the “Thiaki”, as the inhabitants call themselves, are acutely aware that their island has a unique role in the history of Western civilization. You might even say that European culture began here. Certainly the oldest European works of literature were Homer's wonderful epic poems, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The *Iliad* was about a war which took place in Asia, at Troy near the Dardanelles in modern Turkey. But the *Odyssey* was about the adventures of a hero of that war, Odysseus, as he won his way back to his home in Europe – and his home was this island of Ithaca.

Or was it? One of the biggest things to happen to Ithaca in recent decades is that the outside world has tried to rob the island of this distinction. A group of Englishmen made a splash with a claim that Ithaca should be demoted to insignificance. The idea that Odysseus was King of Ithaca, they said, was a millennia-old mistake. The claim has been publicized widely, and many are convinced. There have been times when the main thing the average non-Greek seemed to know about Ithaca was that Odysseus didn't come from there.

For the Thiaki this is a disaster. Imagine the English being told that “Runnymede” was a mistranslation, and the Magna Carta episode actually took place among foreigners, somewhere overseas.

My sympathies are with the Ithacans. But it is not just that I feel sorry for them: the new idea about Odysseus, despite all the razzmatazz and enthusiasm surrounding it, makes no sense to me. I am sure it is wrong, and Odysseus's home really was where people had always believed it was. This article is my take on the “Odysseus Unbound” controversy, as it has become known. Ithaca is a very special place, which has received a raw deal from the outside world in recent years (in addition to the raw economic deal which Greece as a whole has been getting). The Ithacans – Thiaki – deserve to have the record set straight.

My opening remark, that European culture began at Ithaca, was no hyperbole. It is

not just that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the earliest European literature. Homer has been assigned a significance going well beyond mere dates. Famously, Alfred North Whitehead said that the grand sweep of the European philosophical tradition boils down to “a series of footnotes to Plato”, and it might not be too much of a stretch to call European creative literature a series of sequels to Homer. Let me quote the historian Moses Finley:

No other poet, no other literary figure in all history for that matter, occupied a place in the life of his people such as Homer's. He was their pre-eminent symbol of nationhood, the unimpeachable authority on their earliest history, and a decisive figure in the creation of their pantheon, as well as their most beloved and most widely quoted poet. Plato ... tells us that there were Greeks who firmly believed that Homer “educated Hellas and that he deserves to be taken up as an instructor in the management and culture of human affairs, and that a man ought to regulate the whole of his life by following this poet”.

So quite naturally the Thiaki dislike suggestions that Homer's “Ithaca” was not Ithaca. But why should there be such suggestions? Is it not safe to assume that if Homer mentioned a place, it was the same place that we know today? Well, yes and no ...

When Odysseus finally won back to his home island, his difficulties were not over. During his long absence, men of the area had moved in on his wife Penelope, vying with one another to marry her and inherit Odysseus's kingship, and meanwhile eating up the family substance in riotous living. As Odysseus's young son Telemachus complains in the opening pages of the *Odyssey* (I quote the translation by T.E. Lawrence – “Lawrence of Arabia”):

Every man of authority in the islands, from Dulichium, and Same, and Zacynthus of the woods, as well as every figure of this rugged Ithaca – all, all are come wooing my mother.

Here we are given a list of four islands, two of which – Ithaca and Zacynthus – we know today; but where are Same and Dulichium? Nowhere is called Dulichium now. Nor is any island called Same; but if you take the ferry from Ithaca to the next-door and much larger island of Cephallonia, that is the name of the port where you land (“Sami” in modern Greek pronunciation), so perhaps the whole of Cephallonia was called Same once. People would have said they were taking the ferry for Same, at first meaning the whole island, but the word was gradually reinterpreted as meaning just the place where the ferry went. Otherwise it would be very strange that Cephallonia is missing from Telemachus's list: it's the largest of all the Ionian islands, and right next-door to Ithaca. Homer does sometimes mention the name Cephallonia, but in contexts that seem to refer to a kingdom covering several islands. Odysseus's royal seat may have been on Ithaca while his rule extended over Cephallonia and beyond.

So it is clear that names have come and gone down the millennia, and perhaps even swapped round. It is not out of the question that Homer's Ithaca could have been



somewhere other than our Ithaca. But I don't believe it was.

(The adjacent map shows northwest Greece as the Romans knew it, a few centuries after Homer's time, with the northern Ionian Islands, including Ithaca and Cephallonia, strung out down the west coast of the mainland. "Corcyra" is the island we call Corfu.)

Having mentioned Cephallonia, before going further I need to get out of the way an awkward little problem that cannot be dodged: how to spell Greek names. Because the Greeks use their own alphabet, the same name can appear in alternative guises when written in our alphabet. In the 21st century, probably the commonest spelling for the island I called Cephallonia is "Kefalonia". Indeed that name is particularly chameleon-like. You can find it spelled with single or double L, or as Cephallenia (as in this map), and in other ways too.

For the names of Ancient Greece, there is a well-established convention. Because the first people to write them in our Roman alphabet were the Romans themselves, we spell the names as the Romans did, with the word-endings adapted to the structure of Latin. With modern Greek names it is more difficult. Greek pronunciation has changed over the millennia, and Modern Greek spelling is not very phonetic. So there is a choice between spelling modern names by reflecting their sounds, or alternatively by replacing Greek letters with corresponding Roman letters. People do either, or even mix different approaches within one name. (Indeed, I have cheated in quoting Lawrence's translation: he actually switched randomly between "ancient" and "modern" spellings of the same names in different passages, but when I quote from Lawrence's Homer I shall make his spellings consistent.)

There is no ideal solution to this. I shall try to spell modern Greek names as they are commonly spelled, but my main aim is to keep things simple.

The reader might think that, on the contrary, I am making things unnecessarily

complicated. Who cares how speakers of Latin spelled Ancient Greek? Surely it would be easier just to use our alphabet to reflect the pronunciation of any name, old or new, as it is said by a present-day Greek? Well, that would mean that we would have to call the hero of the *Odyssey* something like “Odisefs” or “Othisevs” – that is his modern Greek pronunciation. His wife Penelope would become “Pinelopi”. These and other Ancient Greek names are familiar to British readers in one guise, and it would be offputting to force them into another.

But also, in the present context there are advantages in using different systems for ancient and modern names. My article is about which places in modern Greece correspond to places mentioned in the *Odyssey*, and in particular, whether the island we know as Ithaca is the island which Homer called Ithaca. To ask whether Ithaca was Ithaca sounds like an Alice-in-Wonderland sort of question. But the modern pronunciation of that name is “Ithaki”, so from now on that is how I shall refer to the present-day island. (Likewise, present-day Cephallonia will be spelled Kefalonia.) There is nothing illogical-sounding about asking whether ancient Ithaca is modern Ithaki.

To avoid misunderstanding, Ithaca and Ithaki are not two different names. They are different pronunciations of one Greek name: Ἰθάκη. The question is whether that name has always been attached to the same place. I have little doubt that it was. But, recently, this has become something like a minority opinion.

This is my attempt to get at the truth, and return its rightful distinction to the lovely island of Ithaca.

2 Who Was Homer?

Everyone has heard of Homer. Who was he?

No-one knows. Even in the Classical Greek age – the time of famous names like Pericles and Aristotle, around the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ – Greeks had lost any firm knowledge about this foundation figure of their national culture.

There were rumours. The traditional story was that Homer was a blind bard who lived somewhere on the Eastern edge of the Greek world – on the island of Chios, or in the city of Smyrna in Asia Minor (now the Turkish town of Izmir). It is not thought that Homer produced the epics completely from scratch; his contribution must have been to “edit” into the form we know today (and presumably, if he was blind, dictate to a scribe) material that had been handed down by word of mouth for generations. We know from more recent cases that pre-literate societies will often maintain bodies of oral poetry which are so extensive that we find it hard to imagine how they survived without the aid of the written word.

So little is known about Homer, though, that we cannot now even be sure that the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* were the work of one individual. It is often suggested that the two epics were composed by two different men, and it could even be that they were assembled by editorial collectives. But the traditional idea that one man was responsible for both is quite likely to be true, and it certainly simplifies discussion to

write as if it is true. So that's what I shall do.

Whether he was really one man or several, Homer probably lived not long after the introduction of the Greek alphabet, say about 750 B.C. But the Trojan War he described, if it was a real event, certainly happened much earlier. It is clear that Homer was trying to describe a society which he did not fully understand, because by his time many things had changed. One example often quoted is about chariot warfare. Homer's sources evidently told him that heroes had fought using chariots, but by his own day Greeks no longer did that, so Homer did not understand how chariot warfare worked. The *Iliad* has warriors using chariots as a kind of taxi service, taking them perhaps half a mile from camp to battleground and then dismounting to fight on foot.

One longstanding view of the likely date for the Trojan War put it at about 1200 B.C. This implies an implausibly huge gulf of time between the events and Homer's account of them, but it is problematic anyway because it would place the war in the Mycenaean Age (named after the archaeological site of Mycenae in the Peloponnese). Mycenaean Greece was an advanced, organized civilization. Bureaucrats were assessing and collecting taxes; records were kept in writing – not the alphabetic writing which the Greeks adopted from the Middle East centuries later, but the syllabic “Linear B” script, first deciphered by the English architect Michael Ventris in the 1950s. The society whose features can dimly be discerned in the Homeric epics was a cruder, more personal affair than that, resembling tribal societies which have survived into our own time in distant parts of the world. Exchanges between rulers and ruled were thought of as freewill gifts in either direction. There was no bureaucracy, and no writing.

Paradoxically, this probably means that the time of Odysseus and Achilles was not earlier than the Mycenaean period, but later. Between Mycenaean Greece and the alphabetically-literate Greece of the eighth century B.C. there intervened a Dark Age, when the arts of civilization were largely lost. (When the Greeks eventually got hold of the alphabet they had no idea that their ancestors had once had another script.) Our best surmise about the time described in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* puts it somewhere in that Dark Age – maybe about 900 B.C. (But this is something close to guesswork. One group of archaeologists nowadays argue that the Dark Age was much shorter than commonly believed. If they are right, the gap in time between Trojan War and Homer would itself be shorter.)

3 Geographical oddities

The Ithacans are intensely proud of their special link with the beginning of European civilization – and rightly so. But many of them have been at least vaguely aware that certain foreigners have tried to rob them of this distinction.

The fundamental reason is that the *Odyssey* says things about the island of Ithaca which don't fit modern Ithaki. In particular, people have pointed to lines in Book 9 of the epic. Odysseus has been shipwrecked on the island of King Alcinous; the king

takes Odysseus in, organizes a hot bath, dry clothes, and dinner, and then asks him who he is. Odysseus replies:

I am Odysseus, son of Laertes ... and my fame reaches heaven. I live in pellucid Ithaca, the island of Mount Neriton, whose upstanding slopes are all a-quiver with the wind-blown leaves. About it lie many other islands very near to one another, Dulichium and Same and wooded Zacynthus. My island stands deep in the sea and nearer the west than its neighbours which rather face the dawning and the sun.

Again we have the list of islands, but this time we are told where Ithaca lies in relation to the others. However, you only need to glance at a map to see that Ithaki is definitely not west of its neighbours. Quite the opposite: Ithaki could well be said to “face the dawning”. And the other Ionian islands are not closely grouped together, with Ithaki further out to sea – again it’s the reverse, Ithaki is very close to Kefalonia but Kefalonia and the neighbouring islands of Zacynthus and Lefkas are further apart. (Zacynthus lies off the map above, about ten miles south of Kefalonia.)

Furthermore, T.E. Lawrence’s translation “stands deep in the sea” folds together two Greek words which are normally taken to mean separate things. Ithaca is described not just as far out from the mainland, but low in elevation. Yet Ithaki is a particularly steep island. When my wife Jackie and I holidayed there, she had to drive our hire car because the precipitous roads gave me vertigo.

It is easy to check these things on a map: or it is for us, because in the 21st century maps are widely available. Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, they were not. Homer was thought to have lived in a very distant part of the Greek world, and many people have assumed that he was just hazy about the facts – they don’t affect the story. It seems a reasonable explanation.

But I suppose one might wonder why, if Homer were ignorant about Ionian geography, he needed to put those words in Odysseus’s mouth. The epic could have worked equally well if Odysseus had just told Alcinous what a splendid island he came from, without getting into which island was west of which. Perhaps on that logic, a whole series of people have felt that Odysseus’s words to Alcinous must be taken seriously – and hence that his Ithaca was not modern Ithaki.

For decades, the best known of these was the German archaeologist Wilhelm Dörpfeld.

4 An Eccentric German

The first thing to say about Dörpfeld is that he was a valuable archaeologist. When Heinrich Schliemann began excavating the site of ancient Troy in the 1870s, he made an amateurish mess of it, and only when the younger man Dörpfeld joined him after ten years did the latter put the project on its feet properly. That said, though, it is hard to take seriously Dörpfeld’s idea about the location of Ithaca.

At the end of the nineteenth century Dörpfeld turned his attention from Troy to locating Odysseus's home, and after a preliminary recce in 1897, he began digging in northern Ithaki in 1900 – financed by a wealthy Dutch friend, Adriaan Goekoop, who joined him on site. But when Dörpfeld did not immediately turn up any likely remains, he grew despondent.

Looking north from Ithaca you see at no great distance the cliffs of another Ionian island, Lefkas (in Classical Greek, Leucas, the “white island” – perhaps, earlier still, it was the island called Dulichium?) The cliffs are famous as the place where the poetess Sappho leapt to her death out of unrequited love for a ferryman. (Sappho was a real person, but the suicide leap may be mythical. Some think that Greeks invented a male love-interest for Sappho because they didn't like the idea of their great poetess being a lesbian.) Very quickly after Dörpfeld began digging on Ithaki – within weeks – he became convinced that he was on the wrong island, and Odysseus's palace would really be found on Lefkas. At first, digging there proved equally unproductive, and the bewildered Goekoop suggested going back and making a proper job of the Ithaki dig. But Dörpfeld was now adamant that he would not consider anywhere but Lefkas. If Goekoop wanted to go back to Ithaki, he should go, and take his money with him.

What put this bee in Dörpfeld's bonnet is unclear, but he did eventually find some remains on Lefkas that could have been the right age to be linked to the *Odyssey* (though, obviously, they were not labelled “Odysseus lived here”). Dörpfeld never wavered thereafter in his belief that Ithaca was Lefkas. He published long screeds defending his theory against distinguished scholars who rubbished it. When Dörpfeld died in 1940, he was buried on Lefkas.

Dörpfeld's theory is known mainly through a book he published in 1927, *Alt-Ithaka* (“Ancient Ithaca”). Its dedication page lists the individuals who had supported his researches, beginning with “His Majesty the Emperor and King Wilhelm II” – better known to the English as Kaiser Bill. By 1927, of course, Wilhelm had long ceased to be a Majesty. When Germany lost the First World War he had to abdicate, and he was living as a private individual in exile in the Netherlands. But as Kaiser he had supported Dörpfeld lavishly with both funds and belief in his theories, so perhaps Dörpfeld thought it tactful to overlook the abdication.

Reading *Alt-Ithaka*, it is hard to see what made Dörpfeld so sure that Ithaca was really Lefkas. Dörpfeld lists features on Lefkas which he sees as matching things mentioned in the *Odyssey*, and he claims that one cannot find good equivalents on Ithaki – but the claims are underwhelming. He says for instance that “the city harbour of Homer's Ithaca, which reaches far into the land, must surely be recognized as corresponding to the deep harbour of Vlikho on the east coast of Lefkas”. What about the harbour at Vathy, capital of Ithaki, which is further than Vlikho from the open sea? (Vathy even means “deep”).

These are minor issues, though, beside the point which kicked off this Ithaca-hunt: Odysseus's statement that his island lies “deep in the sea and nearer the west than its neighbours”. This doesn't fit Ithaki, but it doesn't fit Lefkas any better. One island is no further west than the other, and Lefkas is particularly close to the mainland – the two are almost joined by a bar of shingle. One couldn't call mountainous Lefkas “low-

lying”, either.

Before I read Dörpfeld, I imagined that he simply did not treat this phrase as important. It is only a few words, after all (though, if the words were not there, I wonder whether anyone would ever have doubted that Ithaca is Ithaki). But in fact Dörpfeld sees this phrase as crucial to his argument that Ithaca was Lefkas. Homer’s Ithaca “must be the westernmost of all”, Dörpfeld says. Yet Lefkas isn’t. But, according to Dörpfeld, the Ionian islanders in antiquity (and consequently Homer too) were confused about directions. They thought their islands lay to the south (rather than west) of the mainland, strung out from west to east (rather than, in reality, north to south). Not till the advent of the compass did they discover the truth. So, when Homer called Ithaca “furthest west”, he meant what we would call “furthest north”: which fits Lefkas. Simple!

But, but ... had they not noticed where the sun rises and sets? Even in rainy England that is hard to overlook. In Greece, sunrises (if one is awake for them) and sunsets are unmissable. So what could it mean to say that the islanders got the cardinal directions ninety degrees out of whack? And what about “deep in the sea”? Even someone muddled enough to think the sun is rising in the north must recognize that the distance to the mainland is much less for some islands than others.

We can safely leave Dörpfeld’s theory buried alongside him on Lefkas, though it attracted attention and even some followers in its day. But Dörpfeld was not the only one to place Ithaca elsewhere than Ithaki. Poor Dr Goekoop, his funding scorned, ended up deciding that Ithaca, Same, and Dulichium were not separate islands but different parts of Kefalonia – he thought Ithaca was its south-east quarter, around the town of Poros. And as recently as 2010 Adriaan Goekoop’s grandson Cees brought out a book arguing that Ithaca was the Erissos peninsula in north-east Kefalonia. There were many other ideas too.

We cannot dismiss out of hand the idea that a name became detached from one island and reattached to a different one. Culturally the name “Ithaca” was so significant for the Greeks that, if it fell out of use, they would surely have wanted to revive it – perhaps at a time when they had grown vague about its original reference. That time would have had to be early: by about 200 B.C. coins inscribed with the Ithaca name were being minted on Ithaki, as Jackie and I saw when we visited the Archaeological Museum at Vathy. But 200 B.C. was already many centuries after Homer. Ithaca was never mentioned in the writings that have come down to us from the intervening Classical period. Perhaps the island was uninhabited for a while – that would be an easy way for memories of its name to fade. We know that there was a period only five hundred years ago when Ithaki had no inhabitants.

Still, we would need some very solid reason before doubting that ancient Ithaca is modern Ithaki. Dörpfeld’s and others’ arguments against this are only theories. If any of these theories ended up being accepted by the wider world outside the Ionian islands, that would obviously be hurtful to the Thiaki. But as the 21st century dawned, those who followed such matters could take comfort: so far as international scholarship was concerned, none of the theories ranked as more than an eccentric curiosity. None so far, at least ...

5 A Kefalonian Epiphany

By our time, Wilhelm Dörpfeld is forgotten by all but a few people interested in obscure byways of intellectual history. The man who has now convinced the world (or much of it) that Homer's Ithaca was not Ithaki was an English management consultant, Robert Bittlestone. He founded a firm, Metapraxis, which helps organizations improve their planning and data visualization. Bittlestone's degree was in economics, but the Greek name he chose for his company is a clue to one of his enthusiasms. He studied classics at school, and he enjoyed walking in Greece and reflecting on the ancient culture underlying the Greece we see today.

(I write in the past tense because, very sadly, Robert Bittlestone died in 2015, in his early sixties.)

Since the 1990s Bittlestone had been pondering the problem about Homer's geography. Some time in 2003, as he looked forward to a Greek holiday coming up shortly, he had an epiphany. No present-day Ionian island fits what Homer said about the location of Ithaca. There is a chunk of Kefalonia called Paliki, though, which is not a separate island now – but it is a pen-insula (“almost-island”), and if it was once separate from the rest of Kefalonia, then it would match Homer's words. On the map above, Paliki is the peninsula on the west side of Kefalonia, separated from the main part of the island by what is now called the Gulf of Argostoli.

(Argostoli is the modern name for the Kefalonian capital, which appears on the map under its Roman name “Crane”. Paliki is named after its own main town, “Pale” for the Romans but nowadays called Lixouri.)

Bittlestone set about exploring the idea that Paliki could have changed since Homeric times from island off the coast of Kefalonia into Kefalonian peninsula, and he believed the evidence was favourable. He got the Greek Ministry of Culture, and the Athens-based Institute of Geology and Mineral Exploration, interested in collaborating with his research. With the help of two academic contacts, James Diggle (a Cambridge classicist) and John Underhill (a geologist, then at the University of Edinburgh), in 2005 Bittlestone brought out a book on his theory. It was published by Cambridge University Press, under the title *Odysseus Unbound: the Search for Homer's Ithaca*, by Robert Bittlestone with John Diggle and John Underhill. (Publishers use “with” to indicate that the first-named author is the prime mover, responsible for the book as a whole, while those following “with” have contributed in specific, limited respects.)

Odysseus Unbound, by an amateur who claimed to have solved a puzzle that had baffled experts for centuries, made a large splash. After a press reception for the book's publication, Channel 4 broadcast a four-minute news item on it, and more than a hundred newspapers worldwide carried the story. Mary Beard of Cambridge, perhaps Britain's best-known television classics expert, wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* that, while Bittlestone was not the first to have argued against identifying Ithaca with Ithaki,

he is the first to argue it systematically and with a full account of how this might be geologically possible and archaeologically proven ... he makes an impressive and enthralling case ... There seems to be no doubt at all that Paliki was once a separate island ...

For another Cambridge don, Michael Bywater, writing in the *Telegraph*,

This is a glorious adventure in the great tradition of the amateur blessed (or cursed) with determination ... Bittlestone's argument romps home, despite the meticulous securing of his sources

Another distinguished classicist, Peter Green, a Brit who spent most of his career at the University of Texas, concluded in the *New York Review of Books* that Bittlestone was "almost certainly correct".

In the months and years following the book's publication, the pot was kept boiling with a series of articles and events describing the theory to new readers and audiences, and updating them on continuing research. Just in September 2006, for instance, Bittlestone lectured on his theory at Stockholm University, and Cantabs returning to their alma mater for the annual Alumni Weekend were offered a seminar on it, "illustrated throughout with slides, satellite photography and computer animations". Earlier that year the co-authors had presented the theory at the Reform Club to the Anglo-Hellenic League, in the presence of the Greek Ambassador to Britain and his Consul-General. In the USA, a programme "Digging for the Truth" covered *Odysseus Unbound* on the television History Channel. The theory was equipped with a beautiful, professionally-produced *Odysseus Unbound* website, on which announcements emerged at frequent intervals about new and positive discoveries in the effort to establish that Paliki was once an island.

For the average member of the public who found the topic interesting but had no time or inclination to delve deeply, it must have seemed that the debate was settled. Ithaca was Paliki. Asked in 2007 how Ithaki would feel about that, Bittlestone responded "It will take time for a 3,000-year legacy to be reappraised, and we appreciate that this will not be an easy period for its inhabitants." Tough luck, Thiaki. Game over.

6 College Neighbours

Seeing the names of Robert Bittlestone's co-authors, I realized that one of them was very familiar to me.

When I went up to Cambridge as a shy eighteen-year-old, my college gave me rooms at the top of a remote staircase. The rooms below belonged to a don, to whom I scarcely dared venture a "good morning" if we met on the stairs. The only other undergraduate, opposite me on the top floor, was James Diggle. We shared a "gyp

room” (Cambridge jargon for a kitchen).

I don't know how rooms were allocated, but James and I were probably deemed to be birds of a feather. We both came from grammar rather than public schools, and had both won scholarships to study classical languages – Latin and Greek in his case, Chinese in mine. A few other lads from my school were scattered round the Cambridge colleges, but they were not specially close friends – and anyway my chief concern, that first term, was whether I could make the grade in this overwhelmingly distinguished place which, quite marvellously, had somehow decided to let me in. How many hours a week was I expected to study? Nobody told you things like that. My only recourse was to model myself on James, as the one pattern immediately available to me of the species Cambridge Undergraduate.

The difficulty was, the man never stopped working. I soon decided that, if I knocked on James's door at 4 a.m., the odds must be that I would find him conning a text of Aeschylus or Euripides. There was no way I could match James's tireless zest for study. But clearly I needed to do what I could to emulate him, before the college realized they had taken on a slacker and sent me home or, at best, revoked my scholarship. I buckled down with all the diligence I could muster to my Han Fei-tzū and Ssū-ma Ch'ien.

It didn't last. Cambridge winters are always chilly, but that winter of 1962–3 was in a class of its own, nationwide. It was perhaps the coldest and snowiest of the twentieth century – certainly the coldest I have experienced. The River Cam which flowed beneath the college walls froze solid; some undergraduates drove a car along it for a jape. Many college buildings were more than four hundred years old, and only limited compromises had been made with modern standards. Such heating as existed was by small, inadequate gas fires rather than radiators. Students would wake to find the insides of their windows thick with frost, and no cold running water, let alone hot. But my rooms were different. As luck would have it, my wall backed onto the flue of a powerful boiler. I believe its function may have been to heat the nearby college Chapel, but the side-effect was that neither of my washbasin taps ever failed, and my rooms were always warm. Suddenly I had a lot of friends.

This new social circle soon taught me that students have duties beyond their books. There was also drinking to be done, for instance, sometimes to excess, and attempts to be made (tentative and unsuccessful attempts in my case) to cultivate female company. After the thaw came, I had a thoroughly enjoyable and relaxed couple of terms and yet, thanks to the solid foundation laid down while I took James Diggle's workrate to be representative, I still achieved a decent result in the end-of-year exams. Truly, I owed a lot to James.

After three years the two of us took our BA degrees, and our careers diverged. I went to an American university as a graduate student, then returned to Britain and worked as lecturer and then reader in various academic institutions. Eventually, while the *Odysseus Unbound* controversy was at its height, I retired as a professor of computer science from a university much younger than me. Except for occasional reunion dinners I never went back to Cambridge. James stayed on there. For many years, apart from his teaching and research he served as University Orator, which

meant that whenever Cambridge bestowed an honorary degree on some distinguished personage, it was James's duty to summarize the personage's career in a witty, polished speech in Latin, ornamented (as the speeches of an educated Roman would have been ornamented) by odd words of Greek. David Attenborough's "Life on Earth" was rendered by James with a phrase lifted from the *Iliad*. The mathematician Paul Erdős's "random graphs" came out as *formularum graphicarum εἰκαιότης*. By the time Bittlestone's book appeared, James had attained the pinnacle of Cambridge professor of Latin and Greek. He is a member of the team currently working on a successor to "Liddell and Scott", the Ancient Greek dictionary which has provided the gold standard since the 1840s, and whose lead compiler was the father of Lewis Carroll's young friend Alice.

James and I had not kept in touch. But when I saw the name James Diggle listed as a co-author of *Odysseus Unbound*, I felt confident that not many people in this world knew more about Ancient Greece than he. I ordered a copy.

7 A Beautiful Volume

When my copy of *Odysseus Unbound* arrived, it was impossible not to be impressed. I own several thousand books, but I don't believe I have another volume as beautiful as this one. It is a hefty production – six hundred large pages on high-quality paper, with text printed in two colours. (Instead of italics for items of special significance, Bittlestone picks them out in blue ink.) The dust jacket features an enticing picture of white, stony Greek seashore and blue sea below a bluer sky – if any part of the world is more photogenic than the Greek islands, I haven't been there yet. And the body of the book is chock full of colourful photographs, maps, and diagrams.

No expense was spared in book production. And the publisher, Cambridge University Press, is the oldest in the world, attached to one of the world's greatest universities. (Many would forget the "one of" and simply call Cambridge the greatest of all; as a Cantab myself I leave that question for others to resolve.) The back of the dustjacket bears an endorsement by a classics prof at Harvard, another world-class institution: "This book is a gem". When a book appears with such *éclat* and carrying such credentials, it is surely presumptuous folly for the likes of you or me to query its contents?

When I first opened the book, I had no reason to feel sceptical. As a schoolboy I had been introduced to the *Odyssey* in English, and I remembered it as an exciting tale, but I had never looked into the controversies about Homeric geography. Jackie and I had often holidayed in Greece, but we had no particular loyalty to one island over another. The idea that a fellow-countryman in our own day had discovered something fundamentally new about this ancient story was appealing, and as I began reading Bittlestone's chatty account of how he explored the beaches and hills of Kefalonia with family and friends, I wanted his idea to be right. It was *fun*.

But ideas can be fun, and impressively presented, and yet quite wrong. As I read on, doubts arose. They crowded forward thicker and faster as chapter followed chapter.

The essence of Bittlestone's approach, like Dörpfeld's, is to assume that Homer was accurate about the geography of Odysseus's home island. If that were so, then the passage which describes the island as west of its neighbours would mean that Homer's Ithaca could not be the modern Ithaki. But Bittlestone goes far deeper into detail than that. For him, every brief phrase from which some geographical implication can be squeezed is a clue that must be satisfied by some aspect of the lie of the land visible today.

In Book 1 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus's son Telemachus, at Odysseus's palace, is talking to the goddess Athena, who has appeared in the guise of a mortal. He asks her what ship she came on, and she says it is moored some way from the town. (Being a goddess, Athena did not really come by ship, she just materialized where she wished to be – but she wants Telemachus to see her as a mortal, who would have needed a ship.) The implication, Bittlestone says, is that there must be a place where a ship could be moored without being visible from the palace (if it were visible, Telemachus would not have needed to ask the question). But the site which, for other reasons, Bittlestone has assigned to Odysseus's palace has fine views of the coast, so it would not work unless some feature of the terrain hides a potential mooring-place. And luckily, in the distance there is a spit of land high enough to do the job: so Bittlestone's palace site passes that test.

Bittlestone picks out dozens of passages which most of us would not see as carrying geographical implications, and using a logic reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes he argues that these are crucial clues to the locations where the story unrolled.

The fundamental problem, of course, is that even if Ithaca is not Ithaki, Homer does say that Ithaca is an island. Yet neither Ithaki, nor any other Ionian island can really be said to fit the basic Homeric requirements of being furthest out to sea westwards, and relatively low-lying. But the Paliki peninsula *could* fit the bill, if thousands of years ago it was a separate island. Then it would be west of all the neighbouring islands, and lower-lying than them.

Around the time of Christ there was a Greek called Strabo who wrote the earliest detailed account of European geography. Describing Cephallonia, he said among other things "where the island is narrowest it forms an isthmus so low-lying that it is often submerged from sea to sea". As a statement about modern Kefalonia this would be puzzling: there is no isthmus like that today. But the phrase "where Cephallonia is narrowest" would fit the area that links Paliki to the rest of Kefalonia (an area today called Thinia). Perhaps, Bittlestone urges, there was once a sea-channel where the isthmus of Thinia lies today. It might have gradually been filled in: by Strabo's time it was barely a channel any longer, and two thousand years later all traces have disappeared – Thinia is now quite hilly. But at the time of the Trojan War, Paliki could still have been an island. It might have been – nay, it was – the island of Ithaca. Bittlestone places Odysseus's palace on a hilltop in Paliki.

What makes this not wholly unreasonable is that the Ionian islands are an area of frequent earthquakes. When I was a boy, we had no television set in our house, but I sometimes went to hang out with the son of our newsagent, and they had one. One of the first pieces of television I ever remember seeing was news footage about the

catastrophic quake which hit Kefalonia in August 1953. (This was not the very first television programme I ever saw; like most of the rest of the country, two months earlier our family had trooped off to another television-owning friend's house to watch Queen Elizabeth II being crowned. But it was probably the second.) Other than in one small corner of Kefalonia which is geologically separate from the rest, almost all buildings were destroyed. The Royal Navy sent ships to help in the rescue efforts, which may have been one reason why BBC Television had such detailed coverage. Walking on Kefalonia today, you encounter ghost villages with a few empty houses still standing, but where so much was destroyed that the village has been rebuilt on another site. And of course earthquakes trigger landslips. Right next to the Thinia isthmus is Mount Imerovigli, over three thousand feet high. Perhaps successive earthquakes down the millennia have sent so much rock and earth tumbling down the mountainside that a sea channel was eventually transformed into the moderately hilly stretch of land which is Thinia today.

That was Bittlestone's idea. His geologist co-author John Underhill agreed that it was possible. And once the possibility was conceded, Bittlestone convinced himself that everything else in the geography of the *Odyssey* fell beautifully into place. Homer's Ithaca just had to be Paliki.

Or did it ...?

8 Lost in Translation

My first reaction when I read Bittlestone's idea about a sea-channel buried below the isthmus of Thinia was that even if I could swallow that, to see Homer's Ithaca as a description of Paliki required a very selective reading of the *Odyssey*. Yes, Paliki as an island would be west of its neighbours. But take another passage, in Book 4, where Telemachus is visiting Menelaus in Sparta. Menelaus offers him gifts of horses and a chariot which Telemachus declines, explaining that he could not use them in Ithaca:

In Ithaca we have no broad riding-grounds, no meadow land at all: of these our islands which rise rock-like from the sea, not one is fit for mounted work, or grass-rich: least of all my Ithaca.

Probably none of the Ionian islands were ideal places for horses, but it would be odd to say that Paliki was least so of all: some land there is relatively flat. Steep, rocky hillsides plunging sheer into the sea are the hallmark of Ithaki. Repeatedly, Homer describes Ithaca as "rugged" compared to its island neighbours: that fits Ithaki, but not Paliki. The novelist Lawrence Durrell, who lived in the Ionian islands as a young man (as depicted in the recent television series *The Durrells*), took these passages as confirming that Ithaca was indeed modern Ithaki:

Ithaca, which reverberates with Homeric legend, is a delightfully bare and bony little place, with knobbly hills, covered in holm oak, which come

smoothly down into the sea ... Nothing could convince you more that this was the island of Odysseus than recalling it while actually on the spot: “It is a steep little island impracticable for horses ...”

Jackie is a horsewoman, and when we were walking on Paliki I asked her whether she didn't feel it was a more “rideable” sort of place than Ithaki; she emphatically agreed.

There are other anomalies too. It would be tedious to list all the ways in which Paliki would *fail* to fit Homer's description of Ithaca. But once Bittlestone decides there must have been a channel making Paliki an island (he calls this hypothetical feature “Strabo's Channel”), he loses interest in noticing counter-evidence. Instead, he seizes on any and every hint which seems to him to support his theory.

One of his techniques is to spot chance resemblances between place-names mentioned in the *Odyssey* and names on modern Kefalonia, in order to announce that the places are clearly the same.

In the epic, when Odysseus finally reaches his home island, Athena advises him not to confront his enemies, Penelope's suitors, directly but first to seek out his swineherd, Eumaeus, who has remained loyal during Odysseus's twenty-year absence. The place to find him, Athena says, is the spring called “Arethusa”, where he is watering his pigs. In the north of Paliki Bittlestone notices a village called Atheras, above a deep bay of the same name. It isn't clear whether the bay is named after the village or *vice versa*, but anyway to Bittlestone it looks obvious that Atheras and Arethusa are one name. The R and TH have swapped round, but Bittlestone tells us that linguists are familiar with a process called “metathesis” by which consonants can swap places. Atheras, Arethusa, same difference. So from then on in Bittlestone's book, Atheras is the site of Eumaeus's pig-farm.

Well, metathesis does happen – think of West Indians who turn the word “ask” into “aks”; though usually the sounds are adjacent, not at either end of a syllable. But Bittlestone doesn't seem to understand that the names he discusses are more than just noises. They are meaningful words. Arethusa is a form of the verb *ardō*, to water animals; the -usa ending makes it what grammarians call a participle, “watering(-place)”, so Arethusa is a natural name for any spring in a suitable location for bringing flocks to drink – many springs throughout Greece are called Arethusa. Atheras, on the other hand, is an inflected form of *athēr*, a spike. (The word covers things like an ear of corn, or the point of a spear.) I don't know what particular spiky thing in this corner of Kefalonia led village and bay to be called Atheras. Perhaps it was the headland enclosing the western side of the bay, which might indeed be seen as a spike (Bittlestone himself calls it “razor-sharp”). But whatever the origin of the name Atheras may have been, it wasn't a mangling of the name Arethusa.

What Bittlestone has done here is akin to searching maps of England for a name “Deeracre” found in some old document, spotting a hamlet in some marshy area called “Reedy”, and saying “Ha! They must be the same – it's just that the D and the R have metathesized (and the -acre part got lost)”. Bittlestone does things like this again and again. Only a few pages earlier, he confidently equated another pair of ancient and modern place-names before admitting that James Diggle told him that

pair could not be related. Perhaps James got tired of puncturing Bittlestone's naive assumptions, or perhaps he was back with his Cambridge students by the time Bittlestone dreamed some of these equations up.

Not only does Bittlestone read the *Odyssey* as providing geographical clues in numbers, and at a level of detail, going far beyond anything suggested by earlier Ithaca-hunters. Also, whenever he matches up some place on Paliki with an *Odyssey* passage in this way, for the rest of his six hundred pages he treats the identification as an established fact, and points to commonplace items he stumbles across as relating to whatever events happened at that place three millennia ago, according to the poem.

The Ionian islands are made of limestone, which dissolves in water. That is why limestone country is riddled with caves. And (as anyone knows who has walked in the Yorkshire Dales) limestone which is exposed to weathering on the surface presents all kinds of weird shapes. At the beginning of Book 2, Telemachus, having given up hope of his father Odysseus remaining alive, summons an assembly of the men of Ithaca to decide how to move forwards without their ruler. When Telemachus comes to the outdoor assembly ground, "The elders yielded him way and in his father's great chair he sat him down." On the hilltop near where Bittlestone sites Odysseus's palace, there are the remains of stone terraces descending the hillside. There often are such terraces in Greece, where commonly there is not enough level ground to ignore the potential of hillsides for growing crops, but Bittlestone decides that these particular terraces could have been built to accommodate members of the assembly. And then he spies a rock with a roundish indentation – he shows us a photograph. Walking in the Dales, I am not sure I would have given it a second glance, but Bittlestone sees the indentation as "just about the right size for a Bronze Age bottom". It was Telemachus's father's great chair!

Sometimes Bittlestone's expert friends manage to keep his enthusiasms within bounds. He hopes that a paved track was the road between Odysseus's palace and harbour, but a Cambridge don tells him it was only a Turkish mule-path. For Bittlestone "That was a disappointment, but perhaps there are the foundations of a much older road underneath." Perhaps so – or, equally, perhaps not. Another Cambridge classicist points out that a millstone and remains of stone walls which Bittlestone excitedly identified as evidence of *Odyssey*-period settlement were likely to date back no earlier than the Middle Ages. But it looks as though Bittlestone was throwing out these assumptions so thick and fast that his friends could not keep up, in order to administer the appropriate shower of cold water to each one as it arose.

Bittlestone was clearly enjoying himself immensely. And it is tempting to think that, well, it is all very airy-fairy and naive, but after all, there is no harm done.

However, we shall see that the consequences of *Odysseus Unbound* were not so completely innocent as one might suppose.

9 Politics Intrudes

People on Ithaki's "big brother" island of Kefalonia were delighted to learn that Odysseus belonged to them rather than to their little neighbour. The Director of a Kefalonian library went into overdrive to translate *Odysseus Unbound* into Greek, getting his version out as early as 2007. And local politicians were in a position to take advantage.

After Greece gained independence from the Turks in the nineteenth century, local government was organized into units with names drawn from classical antiquity. The smallest units were called "demes", and groups of demes were linked into "nomes", under the leadership of men called "demarch" and "nomarch" respectively. (We might think of deme and nome as district and county, though the Greek units are on a smaller scale, in a country whose entire population is only one-sixth that of Britain.) Ithaki is a deme of its own, but it is dominated by the nome based on Kefalonia. (At least, that was so until very recently. The nome layer of administration has just been abolished in favour of larger regional units, but the Nome of Kefalonia was very much alive when Bittlestone's book appeared.)

One blogger, Demosthenes Syrmis, a historian and enthusiastic Ithacan local patriot, has published a dark account of political skulduggery that allegedly ensued after the appearance of *Odysseus Unbound*.

Since the 1990s, archaeologists from the university at Ioannina on the mainland had been excavating on Ithaki, with support from the Greek Ministry of Culture, and had been finding remains of the right sort of age to be possibly linked with the Odyssey legend. After investigating several sites they were focusing on one known traditionally as "Homer's School", above Afales Bay in the north of the island. "Homer's School" is just a name, no-one in modern times seriously thought Homer had been a schoolboy there. (Two hundred years ago the local Orthodox priest invented the name to spoof a visiting English antiquary, and after the antiquary took it seriously the name stuck.) What the archaeologists thought they were uncovering was more exciting than a school: it was more like a citadel. And then, just around the time that *Odysseus Unbound* came out, they turned up a clay tablet with a picture which looked like a Homeric scene – the episode where Odysseus had himself tied to his ship's mast, so as to hear the song of the Sirens without falling victim to their fatal attractive power.

The inference was too good to resist, and in August 2010 the lead archaeologists announced that they had found Odysseus's palace.

Shortly afterwards (if we believe Syrmis's blog post), authorities connected with Kefalonia took steps to close down the Homer's School excavations and to promote a site on Kefalonia (though not on Paliki – the official concerned allegedly had a financial interest in a site near Poros) as the true home of Odysseus. Next year, things apparently took a dramatic turn. Permission given by an Ithaki official for new archaeological activity was revoked (so Syrmis tells us) within 24 hours under pressure from Kefalonia, and when the archaeologists on Ithaki wanted to show their site to members of a society of Homerophiles, they were threatened with police action

if the visit went ahead. Whether because of these political shenanigans or because of the miserable economic circumstances into which Greece had meanwhile fallen (or perhaps because of both), the Ministry withdrew its support for continued excavation.

Syrmis even blames the struggle to cope with the resulting bureaucratic nightmare for the stroke which killed one of the lead archaeologists in 2015.

I cannot vouch for the accuracy of any of this – I have no personal experience of the facts. What I can say is that when Jackie and I visited “Homer’s School”, shortly after these dramatic events are claimed to have occurred (though at the time we knew nothing about them), it presented a sad picture. One could see that digging had taken place, and simple covers had been installed to provide basic protection from the weather. But nothing was happening, no notices informed visitors about what the site might be or what had already been found there – it looked as though it had been given up as a bad job. No-one could have guessed that this place has a serious claim to be intimately associated with the very taproot of European civilization.

10 Omicron and Omega

Robert Bittlestone’s ideas that a weathered rock he stumbled across on a Paliki hillside was Odysseus’s very throne, and so forth, were more amusing than serious. But below the surface naivety lay a real puzzle. *Why* was Bittlestone so convinced that the work of poetic literature we know as the *Odyssey* was an accurate guide, more detailed than a modern guidebook, to the minor hillocks and footpaths of Odysseus’s home?

It was not as if Bittlestone saw the *Odyssey* as a whole as geographically precise. Thanks to the hostility of the sea-god Poseidon, Odysseus’s voyage home from Troy took ten years, filled with fantastic adventures. Winds drove him to the land of the Lotus-eaters, whose food robbed men of memory and the desire for home, so that he had to force his crew back on board. On the island of the enchantress Circe, she turned his sailors into pigs. And so on. There have been people who set out to plot all this on maps of the Mediterranean, and not all of them were obscure oddballs. No less a figure than William Gladstone in the nineteenth century published a book which used estimates of sailing speeds and other clues to construct a chart showing just where each of these places was. One of Odysseus’s stops was Aeolia, a floating island of no fixed abode, but Gladstone even worked out where Aeolia was when Odysseus landed. (Rum people, politicians.) But Bittlestone makes it explicit that he is not pretending to reconstruct those parts of Odysseus’s story. It is just Ithaca which Homer rendered with pin-sharp accuracy, according to Bittlestone.

Why should that be? Homer presumably had to identify Ithaca as Odysseus’s home, because that was where the folk-tales he drew on placed Odysseus. Homer himself, though, lived about as far from Ithaca as it was possible to get in the world of Greek antiquity. Even if it was important for his poetic enterprise to reflect the precise terrain of Odysseus’s island (which it surely wasn’t), how would Homer have been capable of doing it?

At this point a horrid possibility occurred to me. Surely Bittlestone hadn’t confused

omicron with omega, had he? Someone, please tell me he hadn't made that muddle! But he had.

Here I need to explain something about the Greek language. But I shall keep it simple.

We know that Ithaki, Kefalonia, and the other islands west of the Greek mainland are known collectively as the Ionian islands; the sea surrounding them is the Ionian Sea. On the other hand, before the coming of the Turks, when the coast of Asia Minor was still Greek, that coast (or part of it) together with its adjacent islands was called Ionia. In English it seems self-evident that these names, "Ionia", "Ionian" must be forms of the same root.

But that is only because in our alphabet we have just one letter O to represent two different Greek vowels, called omicron and omega. Omicron is written as a circle, like our O. Omega is written with splayed-out feet: Ω. In Modern Greek these two letters are pronounced alike, but in Ancient Greek they sounded different. Omicron was a short vowel and omega long (o-mega and o-micron mean "big O", "little O"), and they differed in quality too: omicron was something like the o of English *note*, omega was a more open sound like the aw of *dawn*. In scholarly writing, where it is important to show the difference, omega is written with a long mark: ὦ.

Ionia, at the eastern end of the Greek world, was Ἰῶνια, with omega. The Ionian sea and islands, on the other hand, have a short omicron. Both regions are named after mythical figures, but different figures, of different sexes: Ionia after an illegitimate son of Apollo called Ion, the Ionian Sea after one of Zeus's mortal lovers called Io. These names were no more confusable, for a Greek, than Lancashire to an Englishman is confusable with Lincolnshire.

And it is Ἰῶνια that Homer came from, not the Ionian islands. The map below shows



Greece as it has been since the Turks occupied Asia Minor; it covers almost the whole world known to Homer. Cephallonia and Ithaca are near the western margin. Ionia was the area north and south of Smyrna, in “Turkey in Asia” to the east.

It is not just that tradition placed Homer in Smyrna or Chios (spelled “Khios” on this map). The language of the poems themselves reveals it. In the 21st century we take for granted that English is written in a standardized form which is independent of local peculiarities, except for a few spelling differences between Britain and the USA. But Ancient Greek had large differences between regional dialects, and people wrote as they spoke. It was a little as if, rather than writing “Heaven lies about us in our infancy”, Wordsworth as a Cumberland man had written something like “Eaven ligs aboot us in wer bairn-time”. If Wordsworth in the nineteenth century had written like that, he would have labelled himself a yokel not to be taken seriously. But in Homer’s day there was no recognized standard Greek yet. (Eventually, the Greek world did converge on Attic, the speech of the Athens region, just as England standardized on the English of the London region. But that standardization among the Greeks happened after Homer’s time.)

And Homer’s language is Ionic, the language of Iōnia. Ionic Greek was spoken more widely in eastern parts of the Greek world than just the territory called Ionia, but it certainly was not spoken in the Ionian islands – the Greek spoken there was a variety of the Doric dialect. I am no expert on this stuff (I am an Orientalist rather than a Classicist in the usual, European sense), but I believe one example of the difference would relate to Homer’s word *trēchys* for “rugged”, which is relevant to *Odysseus Unbound* because the *Odyssey* describes Ithaca as distinctively *trēchys*. As I understand it, for a Doric speaker this word would have been *trachys*, spelled with alpha rather than eta.

If Bittlestone did not appreciate the difference between “Iōnia” and “Ionian”, that might explain his hard-to-understand assumption that Homer was familiar with the detailed geography of *Odysseus*’s home island. And he didn’t. Towards the end of his book, Bittlestone makes it obvious that he takes the names to be essentially identical: Homer knew the Ionian, because he had moved from there to the Chios/Smyrna area.

Oh dear ... Perhaps the confusion is forgivable on the part of someone who, after all, was a management consultant rather than a professional philologist. And there is no reason why a professor of geology should be any clearer about it. On the other hand James Diggle would certainly have understood the point, far better than me. How come he didn’t raise the issue long before *Odysseus Unbound* got as far as publication?

At first this puzzled me. But as I re-read the book, it struck me that James’s contributions were quite limited. The sections he was clearly responsible for were those where he used his deep knowledge of Ancient Greek in order to explain just what various crucial lines of the *Odyssey* could and could not have meant, so that Bittlestone could compare those glosses with the facts on the ground. Maybe, once Bittlestone had picked James Diggle’s brains that way, he then ran with the material in whatever direction occurred to him, and never thought to check back later to be sure that he had not committed linguistic howlers along the way.

At any rate, that seemed the most plausible explanation. But whoever’s fault it was,

to assume that a speaker of “Ionic” Greek must be familiar with the “Ionian” area was a really breathtaking misconception.

11 An Implausible Channel

In all the reviews and discussions sparked off by Bittlestone’s book, nobody seemed to be questioning the weakest point of all. It surprises me a little that three thousand years of landslips might be enough to change a sea-channel into a range of hills rising six hundred feet and more above sea level, but this is not my expertise. However, “Strabo’s Channel” poses a quite different puzzle which is barely even mentioned in *Odysseus Unbound*. As the authors describe it, it was an extraordinary landform, so that I wondered how it could ever have come into being.

The book plots the course of the hypothetical channel in a quite detailed way. Infra-red satellite photography distinguishes between vegetation overlying bedrock and vegetation growing on areas of rubble, such as might derive from landslips. The book uses this to identify the contours of the channel rather precisely. Relative to its length, about four and a half miles, it was quite narrow. The Greek edition of the book (published after two further years of research, so presumably more accurate) shows an even more extreme profile. The hypothetical channel was just a hundred to 150 yards wide for most of its length, broadening only occasionally to a maximum of some 350 yards.

If we encountered a channel this long and narrow today, our first thought would surely be that it must be a man-made canal. Could such a phenomenon really arise naturally?

Odysseus Unbound devotes a lot of space to discussing how the channel could have been obliterated by successive landslips, but in its 600 pages I found just one sentence about this other question. John Underhill says in his appendix that Strabo’s Channel was probably created during the last Ice Age by runoff from the nearby high ground.

For a layman like me, mention of the Ice Age is potentially confusing. The movement of ice can create very long and narrow channels. A few of the Norwegian fjords have dimensions comparable to the hypothetical Strabo’s Channel (and it is only because Norway was blanketed by ice that the fjords came into existence). But that is not what Underhill meant. In the Ice Age, the Earth’s northern icecap did not stretch much beyond the south coast of England – it certainly did not extend to Greece. The relevance of the Ice Age is that, by locking much of the Earth’s water up in icecaps, it made sea levels elsewhere low. Underhill’s idea was that Strabo’s Channel was created by rainwater eroding the land surface at a time when the sea level was at least three hundred feet lower than today.

But water flows downhill, not horizontally for miles. If runoff from Mount Imerovigli to the east and the lesser hills to the west had begun to erode lower ground between them, the eventual outcome should be a valley higher in the area immediately between the two ranges, and lower further north and further south, as the streams descended towards the bottoms of the bays which now adjoin the two

ends of the hypothetical channel.

But in that case, either the rise in sea level when the ice melted would not be enough to form a continuous sea connexion from bay to bay, or, if it was, then the ends of the channel where they meet the bays would be far deeper (and, since the valley sides can hardly have been perfectly vertical, far broader) than Bittlestone's book suggests. The authors postulate a channel that was not deep anywhere. A diagram shows a hypothetical cross-section of the strata at its southern end, with the bedrock sloping down to just below current sea level (under hundreds of feet of hypothetical earthquake-generated debris).

Valleys eroded by water rather than ice are V-shaped in cross-section. The diagram makes it clear that "Strabo's Channel" was not just V-shaped but extremely steep-sided. Traversing it by boat would have been a dramatic experience. Bittlestone invites us to imagine ourselves doing so: "because it is so narrow we will certainly have to row all the way ... The feeling is decidedly claustrophobic: we are rowing through a narrow channel with cliffs on each side ... at the mercy of whoever might be standing up there armed with rocks or bows and arrows."

Is there, anywhere in the world we know today, a sea channel (not created artificially, and not gouged out by ice) which comes even close to being fifty or sixty times as long as its typical width? Elsewhere in the Greek world, the Dardanelles and Bosphorus are remarkable landforms, but they do not approach this proportion. And in any case they are thought to have been created by downhill seawater flow, when the Mediterranean broke through and over a long period filled a basin which became the Black Sea. Nothing like that could have happened at Kefalonia: the hypothetical channel linked two arms of the same sea. While the sea level may have fluctuated over the geological aeons, it must always have been the same at the two ends of the channel.

If there is nothing at all like "Strabo's Channel" anywhere today, how realistic can it be to postulate such a thing in order to interpret a piece of literature from the dawn of civilization? Yet the book reviewers never seemed to notice this problem – obvious though it seemed to me.

If you don't understand something, ask. I posted a query on the "forum" section of the *Odysseus Unbound* website, expecting to hear that the Bittlestone group had merely omitted their answer to this puzzle as too technical to include in the book. A response came promptly, from a member of the website team called Demodocos. But it wasn't what I expected. Demodocos's crucial sentence ran:

This is a very interesting geological issue and one which was by no means clearly understood by the project team when the book was published in October 2005.

Demodocos pointed out that "industry-scale resources" were now being used to look below the present-day surface of the Thinia isthmus, "and this has broadened the team's understanding of the issue". This referred to the fact that in 2007 the authors had entered into a research partnership with an international geoscience company,

Fugro, based in the Netherlands. Demodocos recommended a lecture to be given by John Underhill at the Geological Society of London in the near future, namely October 2008.

This was a surprising answer. It amounted to saying “The Ithaca = Paliki case which we made at great length in 2005, which has attracted worldwide attention and convinced numerous reviewers, contained a gaping hole and ought not to have convinced anyone; but we have extra evidence now, and if you can hang on till Underhill’s lecture, you may find the theory works after all.” If the team convinced themselves sufficiently to publish their 2005 book on the basis of an argument which, to a friendly but objective outsider, seemed clearly flawed, then I wondered how sure I could be that evidence brought forward three years later would change the picture.

The only thing to do was to wait for Underhill’s lecture.

12 Channel or Canal?

I looked forward to all becoming clear at John Underhill’s Geological Society lecture.

When it arrived, this was quite an occasion. In my own academic career I have been a member of more than one national society devoted to the disciplines I have researched and taught at different times, but the societies I belong to have no premises of their own. Typically they hold meetings perhaps twice a year, hiring for the purpose anonymous-looking lecture rooms in different British universities, and in between times their only continuing physical embodiment is a set of files in the society secretary’s office. The Geological Society of London is a different matter. Geology is one of those disciplines which became a national passion during the expansive Victorian age. Like some other disciplines of that vintage, it has its own permanent headquarters, and an imposing one. The Geological Society occupies part of Burlington House, the extensive Palladian mansion on Piccadilly which was once the home of the Duke of Portland, and which is best known today for the Royal Academy that occupies another part of the buildings.

The Geological Society section of the mansion contains fine rooms used as lecture halls, libraries, and so forth. There are columns, coffered ceilings, gilt-framed oil paintings of past geological worthies. The visitor feels that he really should be wearing a frock-coat and sporting a bushy beard – though needless to say we in John Underhill’s 21st-century audience presented a less picturesque appearance.

Probably most lectures which the Society lays on for the general public are more worthy than exciting. Recent offerings have included “Understanding pyroclastic density currents”, and “Groundwater in fractured bedrock environments”. John Underhill’s lecture on “The search for Ithaca” was in a different class, and I imagine that the audience it drew was larger than average. Having read the *Odysseus Unbound* book I knew roughly what Underhill would be telling us, and there were no surprises in the body of his talk, but he certainly succeeded in presenting the Bittlestone theory in a beguiling fashion.

After the lecture, I knew there would be a chance for audience members to put

questions to the speaker. When my turn came, I raised the objection I have discussed. Even accepting that the hypothetical channel might have been wiped out by earthquakes and landslips, how could a channel of this remarkable form ever have arisen?

John Underhill's response amazed me. He seemed to agree that the channel was implausible as a natural phenomenon. But perhaps, he said, it was not natural. If the isthmus had been less hilly in ancient times than it is today, then it might have been worthwhile for the Cephallonians to dig a canal through it.

This was shooting from the hip with a vengeance. There was no hint in the *Odysseus Unbound* book that "Strabo's channel" could have been a man-made canal. And the idea sounded incredible.

In the first place, I wondered whether the inhabitants of a remote Greek island at the dawn of history could have been capable of digging a canal four or five miles long. Wouldn't the labour required have been beyond the resources of a small early society? But, much more important: even if in theory they *could* have done this, why would they have wanted to? Canals are worth building if they shorten journeys. The Suez Canal allowed ships to sail to India from Britain and Europe without going all round Africa. The Panama Canal cut out the long and perilous detour round Cape Horn. What journeys would be shortened by a "Thinia Canal"? Only journeys between places within the Gulf of Argostoli which separates Paliki from the main part of Kefalonia, and places to the north of Kefalonia – perhaps Lefkas, or the larger island of Corfu. (Though, as a proportion of the whole passage from Argostoli to Corfu, the distance saved by a Thinia Canal seems almost trivial.)

Could there ever have been enough traffic on these routes to make the effort of canal-building worthwhile? It seemed unlikely. Corfu itself did not even have Greek inhabitants much before Homer's time. Back in Odysseus's day there seemed no reason why more than a very occasional adventurous Greek would travel that way at all.

As I walked out of Burlington House into the October evening, heading for Charing Cross and home, I was glad to have attended an enjoyable occasion, but I felt even more puzzled than before about *Odysseus Unbound*. I had gone to Piccadilly expecting to hear answers to my sceptical questions. Instead, my scepticism was reinforced.

13 Commercial Considerations

For the geoscience company Fugro, turning from surveying pipeline routes or sites for offshore wind farms to investigating the beginnings of European culture created attractive public-relations opportunities. Klaas Wester, its Chief Executive, commented "This is an opportunity for Fugro to showcase many of the specialized ... services that we offer". For a British academic such as John Underhill, roping an industrial company into his research would have been the holy grail.

By the beginning of the 21st century, power in British universities had been shifted

away from academics to managerial types who cared not at all about academic values, but only about money. All of us were hounded to raise our institution's position in the league tables, and hence its financial viability, by finding outside organizations willing to sponsor our research. We were all forced to play this game. (My own research was funded largely by the Ministry of Defence.)

One unhealthy consequence was that people began to see the flow of funds into research as a kind of warranty of the value of the work. Demodocos's remark about "industry-scale resources" was a symptom of this. The suggestion was that because serious outside resources were being put into the theory, it had to be taken seriously. And as the Fugro investigations got under way, similar suggestions were echoed by others.

This is silly, of course. How far a set of data supports a given idea depends purely on the logical relationship between data and theory – the expense of generating the data is not relevant. Where that expense is relevant, particularly when the research sponsor is a private-sector company, is that shareholders want to see value for money. The company will have a strong motive to talk up the success of research they are paying for. The *Odysseus Unbound* website, part of what Fugro provided, was full of triumphalist wording going far beyond anything justified by the findings to date. It described the Paliki idea not as a theory but a "discovery". It used phrases like "we now know", "the answer is a resounding 'yes'".

For that matter, the book itself considerably exaggerated the extent to which the Paliki idea was confirmed when it was published. If Cambridge University Press invested in a volume as sumptuous as *Odysseus Unbound*, perhaps they did not want to risk the idea being seen as the daring hypothesis which it was.

There is no suggestion here of bad faith on the co-authors' part. James Diggle, interviewed about the Paliki theory in the respected American magazine *Smithsonian*, said "I haven't the slightest doubt" – but he elaborated by saying it was "supported by geology". James himself had no special interest, so far as I know, in the geological aspects of the theory. My diagnosis is that he, too, was over-impressed by the fact that an industrial concern was investing serious resources in it. Classics as an academic subject has come sadly down in the world since James's and my undergraduate days, when no-one hoping to read any arts subject was considered for entry to Cambridge without knowledge of Latin. For a classics professor in the 21st century, it might be a heady experience to find people from the great world of commerce and industry eager to pick his brains.

It seemed that everything depended on whether Fugro was actually going to come up with the goods, in the shape of positive evidence for a sea-channel buried under the Thinia isthmus. If bedrock stretched up above sea level, then Paliki could never have been an island. But if the course of the channel was full of rubble stretching down below sea level everywhere, then *Odysseus Unbound* might well be a winner.

Various "interim reports" emerged, all worded in upbeat tones, but not seeming to take the substance of the issue a great deal further. Good science can be a slow business. I waited patiently for more definite news.

14 The Goalposts Move Again

I waited for solid results from the Fugro research: but none came. By 2011, the geological investigations seemed to be getting nowhere. The most recent hard news I found on the *Odysseus Unbound* website was a report describing a finding of quarried limestone strata in the middle of the hypothetical course of Strabo's Channel – a finding which it described as “enigmatic”. If the *Odysseus Unbound* theory were right, there surely should never have been a limestone quarry there. I mentally translated “enigmatic” as “adverse to our theory, but we prefer not to say so”.

So far as hard evidence went, the Paliki theory had run out of steam. It had been a fun idea, but when examined objectively the bubble had burst. However, the public did not realize that. The lovely book and the glossy website were still there, accumulating a fan base of enthusiasts whose will to believe seemed far to outrun their ability to assess evidence. And there was a much wider circle of people who had no specialist interest, but who had noticed the theory being publicized in 2005 as established truth, and had no way of knowing that it was much less than that. Surely the record needed setting straight?

It was the fact of the geological investigations that were keeping the theory alive in public perception, so I got into e-mail dialogue with the geologist co-author, John Underhill.

Underhill began by commiserating with me on how difficult geology is for a layman like myself to understand. This did not impress me. I'm sure there are aspects of the subject which would baffle anyone who has not undergone lengthy study, but much of geology seems relatively straightforward as academic subjects go. It is about processes which are familiar enough on a human scale – water erodes ground it flows over, flat sheets buckle when slid firmly against an obstruction – but scaled up unimaginably in terms of time and masses of material affected. When I have known geologists personally, they have seemed given to heavy use of arcane technical terminology, never saying “mountain-formation” if they can say “orogenesis”. In my cynical way I take this for a defence mechanism making their specialist knowledge sound more mysterious than it really is.

But since this was the tack Underhill was taking, I tried to cut through the complexities by putting a direct question to him. Since presumably the readers of *Odysseus Unbound* were not being asked to believe that Strabo's Channel had been a unique physical phenomenon, could he tell me where in today's world there is a channel fifty or sixty times as long as its typical width, not created by glacial action, and not man-made? (Underhill seemed to have abandoned the canal idea – he never made any further reference to it.)

John Underhill's answer was the Menai Strait, which separates Anglesey from the mainland of North Wales. But the Menai Strait was created by glacial action. It took me seconds to check that via Google. I would have thought a professor of geology might have done the same.

Underhill also told me that the Fugro investigations were showing that “the

tectonic dislocation in [the Thinia] area is far more extreme than originally imagined” and “Consequently, the long yet extremely narrow channel path may not be relevant”. The implication seemed to be – though this was not spelled out – that the new investigations might provide evidence for a wider and hence more normal sea channel.

But this was moving the goalposts yet again. If the investigations did produce such evidence – if – that would be very different from the hypothesis discussed at length and in detail in the book.

It was time to see if I could persuade the academic world at large that it had made a mistake in 2005 in giving *Odysseus Unbound* such credence. Then, many people had written favouring the theory. Now, they were not discussing it at all, so it was turning into received wisdom by default. I tried to stimulate a reconsideration, by e-mailing a dozen or so scholars who had commented on *Odysseus Unbound* or who might be expected to be interested, putting the other side of the case. I pointed out that, to an outsider, it seemed quite unpersuasive to be told in a glossy, highly-publicized book that Paliki could have been an island fitting Homer’s description, to find that this hypothesis was based on an unacknowledged geological contradiction, and then to be told five years later that it might be possible to change the hypothesis in a way that made it tenable after all – though the new hypothesis had not yet been publicly stated, let alone corroborated by published evidence. I protested that in this situation it was misleading for the *Odysseus Unbound* website to be announcing the Paliki theory as an established “discovery”.

Underhill’s reaction made the situation very clear.

15 Farewell the Trumpets

John Underhill responded to my e-mail, copying his response to everyone I had sent my message to, complaining that I had libelled him.

In England the law of libel is draconian, so a remark like that is no trivial matter. Academics who believe their writing really might be found libellous by a court have good reason to be frightened. But I wasn’t worried about that. I knew enough about the law to be aware that you can’t be sued for saying that someone else’s idea is wrong. (If you could, we would need to close all our universities down forthwith.)

What was significant about the remark was what it implied about the state of play in the *Odysseus Unbound* controversy.

Science is a sport with rules. For human knowledge to progress, we have to consider a stream of novel ideas whose correctness or otherwise is not given in advance. People have to be able to put forward new hypotheses, and others have to be free to see whether they can knock them down. All of us naturally hope that our pet theories will survive the onslaught, but science gives us only a few weapons to defend them. The allowable weapons are observational evidence, logic, and persuasive argument – no others. You may be a Fellow of the Royal Society, and the person challenging your idea may be a lowly graduate student, but if you try to squash

his challenge by pulling rank, you just reveal yourself a pompous ass.

As for resorting to the law: that is totally excluded.

I have put forward novel and controversial intellectual positions in my time, some of which have been vigorously opposed by fellow academics. If I had hinted at the possibility of using the law to suppress opposition and win the argument, the academic world would still be laughing at me today. Happily, I have managed well enough to seek out telling evidence, and to construct arguments bolstering my ideas, that I was never tempted to go down any other route. Someone who succumbs to the temptation has as good as thrown in the towel and accepted intellectual defeat.

So, by 2011, it was clear to me that (whether or not the public realized it yet) the *Odysseus Unbound* theory was a dead duck.

And indeed, looking at the *Odysseus Unbound* website, it seems that, about that time, the people responsible for the theory had quietly given up. In 2016 the latest news I could find on that site related to analysis of investigations by Fugro which ended five years earlier. One cannot expect a commercial organization to come out and say explicitly “Our idea turned out to be mistaken”. That is not the way the world works. A firm will just quietly regroup and focus on newer and more hopeful prospects. And that is what Fugro’s own website (the one about the company, rather than the one they provided for *Odysseus Unbound*) seems to have done. It no longer contains material bringing *Odysseus Unbound* research to the attention of casual visitors. Using their search engine to check what might still be tucked away in remote corners of the site, all I could find were a couple of reports dating all the way back to 2008.

So, if it is continuing geological research which has been maintaining the world’s enthusiasm for *Odysseus Unbound*, the answer seems to be that it is not continuing.

And the scholarly reviews have not been as unanimously favourable as it seemed at one time. We saw that Peter Green believed in the *Odysseus Unbound* thesis, but his Texas colleague Tom Palaima’s verdict was that it could have been a good book “if more scholarly rigour had been demanded of it by outside readers and press editors, and if less had gone into trying to boost its sales through breathless sensationalism.” Palaima didn’t actually say whether he thinks the Paliki idea is right or wrong – but it isn’t hard to guess. Barbara Graziosi, a classics professor at Durham University, believed that there were “questions to be asked about Cambridge University Press’s decision to publish a book that is about 550 pages too long; [and] about the relationship between scholarship, the media, and privately funded research”. Somehow, among all the ballyhoo that followed publication of *Odysseus Unbound*, sceptical voices like these had become near-inaudible to most onlookers. Now the razzmatazz has faded, it is easier to give such comments their due weight. The book is still out there, and new readers will come across it and perhaps be persuaded. But for those who look into matters a bit deeper, the theory has little left to recommend it.

Bittlestone and his team are far from the first to seek to relocate Homer’s Ithaca, and doubtless they will not be the last. But Robin Lane Fox of New College, Oxford, writing in 2008, sees Homer as “defying the continuing modern attempts to locate the places which he names on an Ionian island other than modern Ithaki.”

Homer does not offer us an accurate Baedeker guide to the Ionian islands. To read the *Odyssey* that way is to miss the point by a mile. The poem is a supreme expression of what the Greeks call *nostos*, the longed-for return to one's home. It has appealed to readers for thousands of years because each of us has our Ithaca: it is what A.E. Housman called

... the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

We love to hear about Odysseus, because he achieved the impossible and won his way back to his own land of lost content. That is where the significance of the poem lies; not in details of geography.

Perhaps some readers find the thought of identifying a rain-washed chunk of limestone littering a Kefalonian hillside as Odysseus's royal throne just too intriguing to abandon. If so, who am I to spoil their dreams? But, now the storm has passed, the rest of us can recognize that Odysseus has safely returned to Ithaki, where he always belonged.