

A scientific discovery on the trail of Homer

Experts using seismic tools and the poet's words say they've found the island of Ithaca.

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GRAPHIC

The real Ithaca?

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Using boreholes and seismic imaging to analyze subsurface geological features, British researchers have provided a key confirmation of their claim that Ithaca, the home of the legendary Greek warrior Odysseus, was located on a present-day peninsula of the island of Cephalonia.

The jutting piece of land, the scientists say, was a small island separate from Cephalonia until rubble from landslides and earthquakes over the centuries filled the channel between them.

The researchers think the peninsula, called Paliki, was the residence of the hero of the epic poem "The Odyssey," which along with "The Iliad," in which Odysseus also appears, is said to have been written by Homer in the 8th or 7th century BC.

The findings support earlier studies by the trio of researchers that linked specific sites on the peninsula to locations mentioned in Homer's verses.

A borehole drilled through the suspected site of the channel and underwater imaging of nearby bays have revealed rubble and marine fossils consistent with the researchers' theory, said John Underhill, a geologist at the University of Edinburgh.

"This is a prima facie indication that we were right that there was a channel there, subsequently filled by infill and seismic disturbances," he said.

The results do not yet prove that Paliki was the home of Odysseus, said team leader Robert Bittlestone, chairman of the management consulting firm Metapraxia and a classics scholar and amateur archeologist. "But that is the simplest solution that meets the observable facts."

Classics scholar James Holoka of Eastern Michigan University, who was not connected with the research, said he found the argument "very compelling."

"What's amazing to me is how fast this is all happening," he said. Bittlestone "went on a vacation [to Paliki] in 2003, published a book in 2005 and now has mobilized all these scientists and technological advances and is placing the results on the Internet. This is digital age archeology."

Many classicists argue that Ithaca, where Odysseus returned after the Trojan War ended about the 12th century BC, was an imaginary place. But scholars also said that about Troy before the city's remains were found on the northwestern coast of Turkey in 1870.

Other scholars place Ithaca on the modern island of Ithaki, and expeditions have searched that island fruitlessly for archeological confirmation. But Ithaki lies east of the 288-square-mile Cephalonia, whereas Homer stated precisely that Ithaca was the westernmost island in the group.

Using Homer as a guide, Bittlestone and colleagues Underhill and classicist James Diggle of the University of Cambridge concluded in their 2005 book "Odysseus Unbound" that the Paliki peninsula could have been Ithaca if it once was an island.

Their entire argument depended on the onetime existence of a channel separating Paliki from mainland Cephalonia.

Last year, Underhill and a team from the Greek Institute of Geology and Mineral Exploration in Athens did a seismic survey that showed deep sub-surface features leading up to the presumed channel, indicating that water once flowed through what is now an isthmus.

In October, the team drilled a 400-foot borehole near the southern end of the postulated channel. The drill encountered only loose rubble until it struck solid limestone about 45 feet below the current sea level. Because earthquakes have raised the entire island, that limestone floor would have been about 60 feet below sea level in Odysseus' time, the researchers said.

The final proof of the theory, Holoka said, "would be to come upon certifiably Bronze Age or Mycenaean Age remains on Paliki. That would be the clincher."

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