

Tom Palaima follows a trail of archaeological clues

Enigma spat out

Robert Bittlestone's *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca* is a good read. But is it a good book? That depends on what kind of book you think it is. Cambridge University Press touts it as a "highly illustrated book [that] 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." This is what is known in slang terms as "selling a bill of goods".

On the dust jacket, Tjeerd van Andel, honorary professor in earth history, Quaternary science and geo-archaeology at Cambridge University, calls *Odysseus Unbound* "a masterpiece of writing for the general public". But the best he can say about its geological arguments is that he is "in no doubt about the possibility of the theory being proposed".

That hardly sounds like belief in an exciting new discovery. Bittlestone's collaborator John Underhill, professor of stratigraphy at Edinburgh University, collects, examines and clearly explains the rich geological evidence in the book. Concerning the most critical link in the logical chain of Bittlestone's theory, he concludes that "the geological and geomorphological data do not refute [its] possibility". There is no hint of belief in proof here either.

The other dust jacket blurb, by Gregory Nagy, professor of classical Greek literature at Harvard University, assures us that Bittlestone's "reconstruction of prehistoric Ithaca has a convincingly Homeric 'look and feel' to it". His statement says nothing about Bittlestone's arguments and main thesis. But Nagy's name and authority enhance the sales pitch.

Enough about the marketing of a potentially money-making popular book by a university press. *Odysseus Unbound* is indeed a good read, if we do not try to make it something it is not. That something is the good book it could have been 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. It does not rise to the level of popular scholarly good sense attained by Michael Wood's *In Search of the Trojan War*. Paradoxically, *Odysseus Unbound* contains more sections of first-rate scholarly analysis than Wood's book.

Bittlestone himself, an enthusiastic scholarly amateur without any developed competence in Homeric studies, Aegean archaeology or geological sciences, wisely chose sound collaborators.

Besides Underhill, James Diggle, professor of Greek and Latin at Cambridge, ingeniously and without too much special pleading, interprets relevant ancient Greek texts to conform, as well as they can, to Bittlestone's ideas. No collaborator handles Aegean prehistory. A helpful Aegeanist is cited in the preface, but we should hold him nameless and blameless for what Bittlestone does with Linear B texts and Bronze Age archaeology.

Bittlestone locates Homer's Ithaca on the island of Cephalonia. He pinpoints the place names and topographical features associated with Ithaca and its surroundings in Homer's *Odyssey* and the Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad*. And his writing really is what van Andel calls it: "a masterpiece". He knows how to build drama and to grab his readers.

For example, *Odysseus Unbound* begins with, and in chapter 29 returns to, first-hand

descriptions of what it was like to live through the devastating earthquake that hit the island of Cephalonia in August 1953: the thunderous roar, 114 episodes of seismic shocks, the earth rolling from side to side, sudden jolts, rocks splitting as if hit by a giant saw blade whirring at high speed, roofs flying off, suffocating dust, the uninterrupted cacophony of animals in distress, human clamours of despair, the crash of falling 10-ton rocks, promontories slipping down vertically into the sea, a whole city cut down like a house of cards by a force equivalent to 60 million tons of TNT (or 4 H-bombs) being detonated under a smallish island. Survivor Andreas Delaportas reminisces 50 years later: "Look — we had the Second World War. Then we had the Civil War. Then we had the earthquake. Put those three things together: how are you going to survive?" Bittlestone aptly quotes George Seferis's poem *Helen* (1953): "Great suffering had desolated Greece/ So many bodies thrown/ into the jaws of the sea, the jaws of the earth."

I have never read anything anywhere that made me so well understand the awful power of Poseidon. As John Gould has argued, Greek gods are capriciously and powerfully cruel, and Greek religion contains a large factor of uncontrollable chaos in order to fit the precarious lives that ancient Greeks lived and the merciless natural forces that could strike them down suddenly.

None of this is really pertinent to the scientific search for Ithaca. Earthquakes enter in only because Bittlestone needs to study the geological history of Cephalonia to see when he can place a series of four seismic events — 1953 being the fourth and last — that over three to five millennia lifted the island of Cephalonia 6m in total. These four events changed the appearance of the coastline and perhaps turned into dry land a sea channel that used to separate the larger east-

through hypotheses, hunches and leaps of faith to a seismic discovery

from the jaws of sea



Tantalising location: Ithaca, revealed by goddess Athena to Ulysses/Odysseus, in an 18th-century Italian painting

ern part of Cephalonia from its smaller western region called Paliki.

At some point before the earliest of these events, Paliki was an island. Its northern projecting headlands might conform to those observed by the Phaeacians in Homer's

Odyssey when they deliver Odysseus back to Ithaca. This "new" island is identified as Homer's Ithaca.

Odysseus Unbound is full of hypotheses and hunches, assumptions and leaps of faith. According to the results of Underhill's

fieldwork, the first seismic event occurred anywhere between 2550BC and 750BC. If it were any time before, say, 1300BC, Bittlestone's game would be over. No problem. Bittlestone declares: "These ratio-derived dates are hardly precise: they

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are simply order-of-magnitude estimates." Thus he gives himself licence to proceed and he goes on to entertain hypotheses unsystematically plucked out of scholarly literature. The first event may have been part of an "earthquake storm" in 1225BC-1175BC that destroyed the Bronze Age Mycenaean palatial culture. Maybe. Or it could have spurred the Ionian migration, if that migration really happened in the post-Mycenaean Greek Dark Ages. Maybe. Or it could have occurred after the migration and explain why Ithaca loses its prominence in historical times. Just maybe.

Things get no better when Bittlestone speculates about evidence from the Mycenaean Greek Linear B tablets. He proposes impossible interpretations and admits that he did not even bother to consult the second greatly expanded and improved edition of the main Linear B handbook, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (1973). He gets by with the 1956 edition.

Bittlestone identifies a hilltop called Kastelli as the location of Odysseus's palace. There is no surface pottery material in the environs to support this. So he shows and talks about natural deformations in rock outcroppings that have, in his mind, intriguing cartoon-like shapes. If he really means to suggest that Odysseus's clan went in for rupestral pictorial graffiti, he would be obliged to cite parallels for such rock art or otherwise date these non-existent cartoons securely to the Mycenaean palatial period. Likewise, he proposes that a few loose stones with natural erosion holes were used for milling work attested in Homer's *Odyssey*.

When Bittlestone pinpoints the location of Eumaeus's pig farm, his new Ithaca really takes on a Homeric "look and feel".

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