

Name: _____ **Period:** _____

Purpose for Reading:

While reading the following article, highlight/underline and annotate information that supports the following question:

- **Was Homer's Ithaca a real place?**

Your position:

Why?

- What is the main idea the author is trying to make?

Text:

Explain:

- What detail possibly proves Ithaca is a real place?

Text:

Explain:

- What detail possibly goes against the idea of Ithaca really existing?

Text:

Explain:

Where was Homer's Ithaca?

Odysseus' home found at last?



European literature certainly, and perhaps European history also, begin with Homer's long epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The *Iliad* is about an episode during a war between the "Achaeans" – men from an area of what we now know as Greece – and Troy, a city-state near the mouth of the Dardanelles in north-west Asia Minor (nowadays in Turkey, but the Trojan War dates back long before the Turks arrived from Central Asia and invaded what had been Greek lands). One of the Achaean leaders was Odysseus – the Romans called him Ulysses. After a siege lasting many years, the Achaeans finally conquered Troy; the *Odyssey* is about Odysseus's journey

home after the war, during which he has many fantastic adventures but finally gets back to his home island of "Ithaca", where his wife Penelope is waiting and fending off the attentions of numerous men keen to move in on her.

There is an island called Ithaca (Ιθάκη, in modern Greek pronunciation Ithaki) today, one of the Ionian Islands off the west coast of mainland Greece, and the assumption has been that (if there really was a man called Odysseus) that must have been where he lived. But a fascinating new theory has been put forward which says that this is wrong. Odysseus really was a historical figure, but the place he called "Ithaca" was not modern Ithaki: it was what is now a peninsula (called Paliki, Παλική) attached to the western side of the large island whose modern name is Cephallonia (Kefalonia, Κεφαλληνία – because Greek uses a different alphabet, spellings of place names in our alphabet vary a bit). What is more, Paliki contains fragmentary remains which could plausibly be the ruins of Odysseus's palace. We might actually be able to touch today traces of walls and pavements which the Homeric hero walked among.

A remote and unknown place

But that is the point. All these inconsistencies, including the fundamental one about whether Ithaca was to the west or to the east of its island neighbours, are only troublesome on the assumption that Homer was familiar with the Ionian Islands. Bittlestone argues that Homer was actually an Ithacan himself, writing primarily for his fellow-islanders, who would have been delighted to hear allusions to the individual paths and smallholdings of their home. That is quite contrary to the traditional view, though, according to which Homer came from the eastern edge of the Greek world – either from the island of Chios, or from Smyrna (now Turkish Izmir); on the map below, those places are to the right of the words "Aegean Sea", while the Ionian Islands are around the words "Ionian Sea" near the left edge of the map. This tradition could of course be wrong; but experts tell us that various features of Homer's language suggest an eastern background, and would not fit a birthplace in the Ionian Islands. (I believe that one example would be the word τρηχύς for "rugged", quoted above; the vowel of the root would be alpha rather than eta, if Homer were a westerner.)

If Homer did come from Chios or Smyrna, then for him the Ionian Islands were about as remote as anywhere in the Greek world. If he wanted to take Odysseus's homecoming as his theme, he was forced to place it there, because the body of legends he was drawing on presumably said so. (Legends about the Trojan War, sections of which Homer used as the basis for the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were clearly well known in outline independently of Homer; for instance, although Homer alludes briefly to the Wooden Horse episode, for the details one has to go to other writers.) But if Homer was not personally familiar with the Ionian Islands then he would have had to describe the geography as best he could on the basis of hearsay, and it would have been natural enough for him to make mistakes. Perhaps he simply did not know, or forgot, which was further west of Ithaca and Cephallonia. He could not check it in an atlas, as a modern writer would.

Since from Homer's point of view Ithaca lay on the remotest edge of the Greek world, perhaps it made a more dramatic story to describe it as the most far-flung island of all, than to say it was second to Cephallonia. If Bittlestone thinks that the passage in Book IX which describes Ithaca as "furthest out to sea" is geographically precise, then how does he explain the other islands being described as "quite close to each other" (μάλα σχεδὸν ἀλλήλησι), and "apart" (ἄνευθε) from Ithaca? On Bittlestone's hypothesis, Ithaca = Paliki was far closer to Cephallonia than that and the other islands were to one another.

It is much easier to believe that the *Odyssey* was composed by a poet who was hazy about the geography of Ithaca, because he had never been there, than that the Paliki peninsula was once separated from Cephallonia by a channel unlike anything in the modern world.

Furthermore, the geographical mistakes have no importance. They do not go to the core of what the poem is about. The *Odyssey* has appealed to readers for thousands of years because each of us has his 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.

The Trojan War legends may have had a historical basis (though we do not know whether they did). Possibly there really was a man called Odysseus. But when Homer worked up legends about him into a long, detailed poem, I very much doubt that each footpath and headland mentioned in the poem was for Homer a particular, identifiable path or headland. They were generic landscape features, invented as the story called for them. To think otherwise seems as misguided as it would be to enquire about the precise latitude and longitude of Prospero's island in *The Tempest*.

We shall never know for sure whether a real man lay behind the myth of Odysseus. But if there really was an Odysseus, the best guess at the identity of his island of Ithaca remains: Ithaca.