

## HOMER'S INFLUENCE ON MYCENAEAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF LATE HELLADIC HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

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### **Abstract**

*The thematic thrusts of this paper are twofold. The first is a broad brush look at how Homer's epics have influenced Mycenaean archaeological discoveries. The second and more important thrust attempts to elucidate more completely a missing but vital part of a puzzle- the Homeric legacy in the Ionian Islands region of western Greece. In some cases, the legacy is unfolding by nature of the ongoing discovery of rich and truly significant finds. In others it has become a highly contested if not political process that has sidetracked progress on rounding out our understanding of Bronze Age Mycenaean civilizations. The ultimate goal of this paper is to provide a fresh perspective on understanding the people, places and culture of a less studied area of Greece that is far removed from the mainstream heartland of the Mycenaean world. Systematic excavations and other research at Troy, Mycenae and Tiryns have confirmed many of Homer's references. Again and again, the accuracy of Homer's geography has been shown. On the other hand, researchers and Homeric scholars have lacked consistency in following Homer's descriptions in their search for Odysseus' lost palace of Ithaca. Many theories have been put forward, beginning in ancient times. Progress had stalled until the 1991 discovery and excavation of a tholos tomb in Tzannata in the south east part of the island of Kefalonia. This tomb is among the largest found in Western Greece. Its significance is even more striking due to the discovery of a miniature double headed gold axe or labrys (λαβρίς) which is generally a sign of a royal tomb, and a seal which bears a striking resemblance to the one Homer ascribed to Odysseus. Subsequent discoveries and a careful reading of Homer's text support the hypothesis that south eastern Kefalonia was the centre of Homeric Ithaca. Additional excavations have uncovered a rich archaeological record that adds weight to this theory.*

**Keywords:** Homer's Influence, Mycenaean Archaeology, Late Helladic Historical Geography.

## 1. Introduction

The status of Homer's epic poems has changed over the last 150 years from being considered simply fables or mythical creations of people and places associated with Bronze Age Mycenaean kingdoms (Figure 1). Many commentators now view them as more nuanced and fact-based accounts of Mycenaean heroic adventures and Bronze Age life from approximately 1400 to 1100 BC (Late Helladic III A, B & C). Others also suggest that they include depictions of some aspects of Iron Age life in the time of Homer himself. In this context, Homer provides highly insightful descriptions of the society and culture. Ainian (2006) provides a useful discussion of the continuing role of high-status individuals (basilies) following the Mycenaean period. Both ancient and modern Greeks themselves are captivated by the meaning of two very relevant terms-*filotimo* (φιλοτιμο), love of honour; and *polytropos* (πολυτροπο) much travelled, shifty, versatile/wily etc. Other early writers that followed Homer were also influential in shedding light on ancient life such as Thucydides, Strabo, Herodotus and the intrepid Greek geographer/traveller Pausanias (1918).

Against these Homeric realists the remaining skeptics cast doubt on the poems' accuracy (Souyoudzoglou-Haywood, 2019). These skeptics remain doubtful due to the reliance on oral history, the lack of firm historical evidence and the problem of selective interpretations (confirmation bias) where evidence is matched to the theory.

The first theme of this paper is a review of how Homer's epics have influenced Mycenaean archaeology discoveries. In what way have these poems guided research by providing important insights into Bronze Age society even if they do not always seem to provide infallible guides to people and places? Claims that seem precise can be conflated with actual accuracy. The second theme focuses on Homer's writings about the life and culture of Bronze Age Western Greece and the archeological legacy that is gradually being discovered. It attempts to elucidate more completely an unsolved but vital part of a puzzle - the most probable locations of the Ionian Islands as listed by Homer in the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. In some cases the legacy is unfolding due to the ongoing discovery of rich and truly significant archeological finds. In others it has become a highly-contested if not political process that has sidetracked progress on rounding out our understanding of Mycenaean civilizations and the nature of palace societies located on the periphery of the Mycenaean world as discussed by Feuer (2011).

COMMONS

**File:Mycenaean Palace States.svg**

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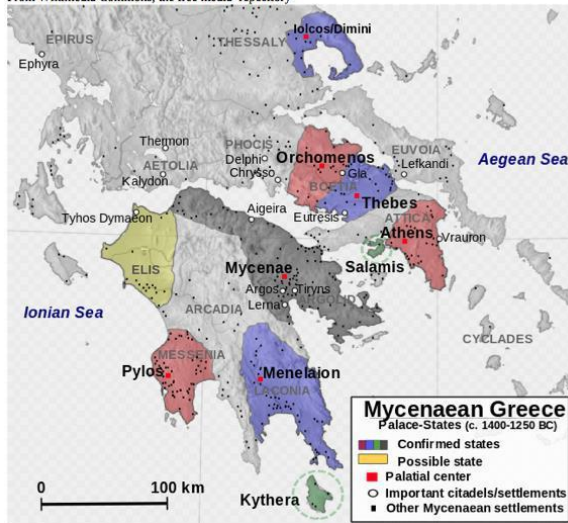


Figure 1. Mycenaean Greece

The ultimate goal of this paper is to attempt to provide a fresh and updated perspective on understanding the people, places and culture of an area of Greece that was very much on the periphery - far removed from the mainstream heartland of Mycenaean Greece. The study of pre-history is hampered not so much by lack of evidence but by our unwillingness to see and understand this evidence.

### Schliemann's Legacy

In the 19th century many people came to believe that Homer's poems were based on historical facts and real locations. Chief among them were Heinrich Schliemann and his wife Sophie. Although not trained in the nascent field of archaeology, Schliemann, very much an amateur, was the first modern European to rely on Homer's account of the Trojan Wars in *The Iliad* and Odysseus's trials and journeys in *The Odyssey*, in order to search for real places in the Levant for excavation purposes. Dörpfeld, a later assistant of Schliemann's (and a leading archaeologist in his own right who went on independently to develop much more sophisticated and exacting measurement/surveying techniques) was very much part of the realist school. Other archaeologists, such as Blegen in the 1930s, followed using Homer to understand the connections between place, palace culture and the primary Mycenaean kingdoms throughout Greece. (Although the term 'Mycenaean' is used throughout this paper there was in fact no unifying term for the Achaeans-Greeks during the 14-12th centuries).

Schliemann's theories, interpretations and practices have come under heavy criticism - based, justifiably, on their ignorance of more recent rigorous standards but sometimes made outside of the context of their time. Schliemann was particularly vexed by the criticisms of his excavation practices at Troy (Hisarlik vs. Pinarbasi) and continued skepticism of the location from his German colleagues such as the Olympia excavators, Curtius and Borlase (Schindler, 1992& Moorhead, 1994). It was the American vice consul, Frank Calvert, who ultimately convinced Schliemann that Hisarlik (Turkish for fortress) was the site of Troy (Moorhead, 1994).

While Schliemann was a mercurial figure at best and a privateer at worst, he was remarkably successful in using Homer to find the kinds of treasures he was looking for in his excavations at Troy (Hisarlik), Mycenae (Gr. Mykenes), Tiryns and Orchomenos. In the case of Crete, Schliemann was unable to excavate because of no access rights to the land and political intrigue from the Ottomans (Moorhead, 1994).

Pre-history was in his blood and he never lost faith. As McKendrick (1981) argues: "In an age when Greek scholars scorned everything pre-classical, Schliemann devoted his efforts entirely to pre-history" (p. 4). Homer served as a kind of North Star for Schliemann and the all-important link, however imperfect, to that pre-history.

While excavations provide vital information to reconstruct pre-history, the use of writers such as Homer to interpret those findings is essential. McKendrick (1981) in referring to the work of the French archaeologist Amandry at the oracle site in Delphi reminds us that, "progress is to be made not only by excavation but by the correct understanding of ancient texts" (p. 189).

Much of what Schliemann found was not actually what he believed it to be. His faith and creative thinking were not balanced by sound archaeological science. Huge chronological errors were made in excavating and interpreting Trojan stratigraphy creating irreparable damage ('savage and brutal' according to some; Blegen was more forgiving) with improperly recorded trenches in several areas. He also concealed Mycenae's fortification walls with overburden. His premature and unfounded claims regarding the discovery of 'Priam's treasures' or 'Agamemnon's death mask' mislead as much as enlightened. Although some errors could be forgiven because Schliemann did not have the shoulders of other archaeological giants to stand upon, Schliemann remains an unpopular and divisive figure in both Greece and Turkey.

While Homer's accounts indicated that there were other Mycenaean kingdoms in and around the Ionian Sea, Schliemann, despite some brief efforts, was not successful in discovering them. He never found the Mycenaean palace centres associated with Homer's heroes - Nestor, Menelaus or Odysseus. One possible hypothesis was that they could not be found because these individuals never really existed in a historical sense but later discoveries of Pylos and, more recently, settlements near Sparta and on Kefalonia justify the idea that he was simply looking in the wrong places.

Schliemann was not the only archaeologist who looked to Homer's epics for guidance as to where to search. Others such as Dorpfeld, Stamatakis, Blegen (Troy), Blegen/Kourouniotis (Pylos) and Tsountas/Mylonas (Mycenae) relied heavily on Homeric epics as well as other authors such as Strabo and Pausanias to try to determine probable locations of the main Mycenaean palaces in a more systematic and scientific way. Their later discoveries, first in Pylos and more recently in a location near Sparta, have provided insurmountable archaeological evidence that Mycenaean palaces/kingdoms existed in both locations just as Homer described.

To summarize, systematic excavations and other research at Troy, Mycenae, and Tiryns have confirmed many of Homers references. Again and again, the accuracy of Homer's geography has been shown. Another example, geologists studying the coastline near Troy have found that the geological evidence from carbon dating of fossils in core samples confirms the details of the topography described in *The Iliad* (Ball, 2003).

It was the more recent excavators that began a systematic sophisticated interpretation of Mycenaean/Minoan palace culture by using Homer's epics in a second way- to give meaning and context to the stones and artifacts that they were uncovering. It is one thing to uncover the physical evidence of a society; it is another to understand the elements of that society that resulted in those stones and artifacts.

Homer was essential in this regard because, although primarily a storyteller, his descriptions of palace culture were confirmed by the presence of large halls and hearths as well as the location of specific artifacts.

Where did Homer derive details for his epics? There are no reliable accounts of Homer travelling and there are many theories about when and where he lived. Much depends on when he lived but, whenever that was; his Epics depended on the songs and poems written by the bards that lived during the Bronze Age or very shortly after. During the Iron Age, travel to oracle sites, Olympic Games and health centres (such as Epidavros) was common. Some theories also put forward the possibility that Homer lived at an earlier date close in time to the actual events. Some even suggest that he was the son of Telemachus and thus very familiar with all the events in full detail.

The importance of Homer's epics in Greek Bronze Age archeology cannot be over-stated. The two-way process of looking to Homer for locations and then interpreting the findings using Homer's descriptions of the culture allowed archeologists to connect the proverbial dots.

### **Confusion over Place and Missing Links**

Given that Homer's descriptions have been so successful in helping to locate significant Bronze Age sites, how do we account for the lack of consistency in following Homer in the search for Odysseus' lost palace of Ithaca?

Could one explanation for this be tied to a misunderstanding of historical geography or historical topography? Starting with Strabo, confusion has reigned. In numerous translations of the epic poems by philologists, there has been a tendency to make what we might call repetitive errors or to stick with received wisdom. One area is often confused with another. Often the introductions or postscripts of translations of The Odyssey reveal general confusion over Homer's descriptions - particularly with respect to reconciling Homer's accounts with inconsistent evidence for the location of Ithaca. Most translators, if they don't ignore the question totally, assume that the island called Ithaki today was the location of Odysseus' Bronze Age palace, Ithaca. The writings that accompany their translations provide little critical geographical enquiry. It is instructive to read the translator Fitzgerald's (1963) epilogue to The Odyssey. While he admits to being in a dilemma over the accuracy and received wisdom about the location of the harbor from which Telemachus set sail to Pylos, he continues to assume the correctness of the basic premise that Homeric Ithaca was today's Ithaki. However, he concludes, "The longer I look at this setting the more quarrelsome I felt with received wisdom." He goes on to add that [I am] "fond of my private reasons for dissent" (Fitzgerald, 1963, pp.467-68). To be fair to Fitzgerald, he provides in the epilogue a worthwhile discussion of the varying interpretations regarding our understanding of certain compass bearings during the summer period within the context of Homer's line about Ithaca lying toward the 'gloom' or what the Ancients would define as the West (Fitzgerald, 1963, pp. 466-467). In the case of Knox's Introduction to Fagles' (1996) translation, the following is instructive: "His description of Ithaca is so full of

contradictions that many modern scholars have proposed Leucas or Cephalonia as the real home of Odysseus rather than the island that now bears the name.” (Knox in Fagles, 1996, p. 26). In keeping with this sentiment, Dorpfeld retired to Leucas (Leufka) believing that this island was the centre of the kingdom of Odysseus.

It is not just philologists who have questions. The highly experienced and well-known Greek archaeologist Spyros Marinatos (Μαρινάτος, 1962) says, “matters are complicated as regards Homeric geography.” This is a tactful understatement from the former head of the Greek archaeological services.

Archaeologists focusing on Mycenaean civilizations, have until recently paid little attention to what Adonis Vasilakis, calls ‘Ionian Mycenaean civilizations’ (Vasilakis, 2012).

For example, McKendrick (1981) summarizes archaeological work throughout Greece but there is no discussion of Mycenaean discoveries on Lefkada, Zakynthos, Ithaki and Kefalonia. The significant discoveries of Mycenaean tholos tombs, chamber tombs, necropolises and shaft graves at numerous locations on Kefalonia are omitted. This draws attention to critical gaps in the traditional attention and focus of international archeologists in this region. No less an authority on ancient Greece than Cahill (2003, p. 190) opines, “the world sung by Homer in his two great epics, The Iliad and The Odyssey, set, so far as we can judge, in Aegean Greece...” (emphasis added). Fortunately, since that time, exceptions to this neglect have been made in the work of Klavs Randsborg (2002) and Christina Souyoudzoglou-Haywood, (2019).

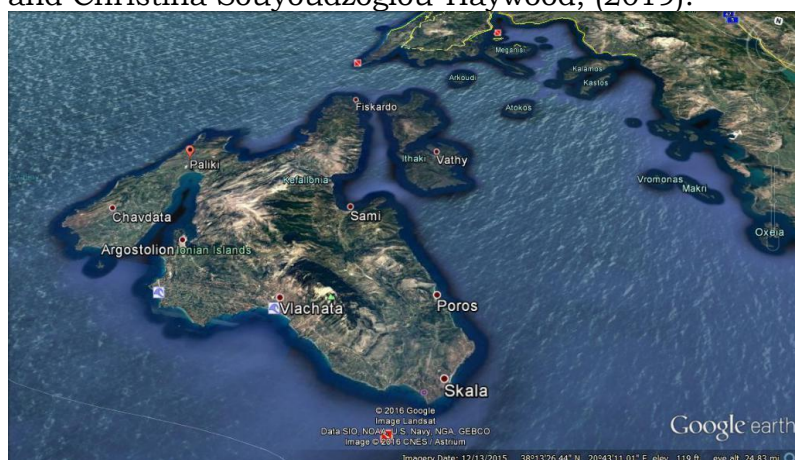


Figure 2. Kefalonia and Ithaki

Perhaps the lack of attention paid to the Ionian Islands is understandable given the magnetic pull of so much evidence in the Peloponnese and other parts of Greece. It is primarily the Kefalonian, Marinatos in the 1950s and 1960s, who focused much of his attention on Kefalonia (Figure 2), specifically the Mycenaean sites at Lakithra, Mavrata, Mazarakata, Kokolata and Melissani Cave. (The royal tholos tomb at Tzannata had yet to be discovered.) Deger-Jalkotzy (2006) provides an analysis of warrior graves at Lakithra and Dhiakata in Kefalonia.

The necropolis at Mazarakata, in particular, is monumental in scale indicating the existence of a nearby thriving Mycenaean settlement(s) over a long period of time. A series of excavations date back to the early 19th century: first led by the Swiss engineer De Bosset; one hundred years later by Panayiotis Kavadias; followed in 1951 by Spiros Marinatos; and, most recently, during the past decade by the then Ephor, Andreas Sotirou (Figure 3). Seventeen tomb chambers



containing over eighty tombs holding many skeletons were carved into the limestone base. The chronology of the site is complicated (with significant damage to the cave chamber due to seismic activity) but it is safe to say that it contains grave sites from the palatial and post-palatial periods from 1350 to 1050 BC and possibly into the Byzantine period.



Figure 3. Mazarakata, the remnants of a collapsed chamber tomb showing chamber tombs and entrances.

Archeologists have identified the presence of amber at the Late Helladic sites at Lakithra and Mazarakata confirming the importance of trade with Italy and the Balkans. Evidence from later excavations at the Tzannata tholos tomb suggests that this trade also happened during the palace period in the time of the Trojan wars (Albanese, 2022).

In the context of the search for a Mycenaean palace in the Ionian, most of the archaeological work has put its effort and resources into research on the island of Ithaki. However, despite a long list of archaeological digs, even before Schliemann, and most recently from a team at the University of Ioannina, there is very little physical evidence of a large Mycenaean settlement there, let alone evidence of a Mycenaean palace itself.

Other aspects of Homeric Ithaca have also created many questions. Homer's account of Mt Neriton on Ithaca does not match the topography of Ithaki of today but it does match Mt Ainos on Kefalonia. This mountain, the highest peak in the Ionian Islands, is dominated by a large alpine fir forest-abies cephalonica – which was a valuable resource in the Bronze Age for construction and ship building (Pierce, et al. 2018). At lower elevations it is distinguished by large swaths of arable and grazing land and equally important abundant water resources capable of supporting a large population. Today, Ithaki's water resources are in short supply and are supplemented by a desalinization plant. These differences highlight significant geographical/ecological factors that cannot and should not be ignored.

In conclusion, the Ionian Island region as a whole has remained a backwater of archeological attention throughout most of the twentieth century. Confusion over Homeric geography has added to the difficulties. It is only in recent decades that some significant discoveries are encouraging some archeologists to take a renewed look at potential Mycenaean settlement sites and Ionian Island Mycenaean culture.

### **Completing the Puzzle**

Will it be possible for modern researchers to complete the puzzle created by Homer's epics that has confounded so many scholars for so many years?

As did earlier amateur archaeologists, recent researchers have been using the sometimes seemingly contradictory clues in Homer to decipher possible locations for a major Ionian Island Bronze Age palace. Preliminary work/analysis confirms a rich and diverse Mycenaean society supported by a very productive agricultural system.

Many theories have been put forward over the last hundred years. Souyoudzoglou-Haywood (2019) provides a very useful account of the number of locations on the island of Kefalonia where there is significant evidence of Mycenaean occupation and possible palace headquarters. Earlier in the 20th century, the Dutch archaeologist, Adrian Goekoop, a wealthy businessman from The Hague, supported digs in Greece in association with Dorpfeld. He, and his wife after his death, ultimately put forward their own theories (1908) identifying Kefalonia (around Livathos) as the centre of Homeric Ithaca.

It must be stressed that there are as many questions as answers to the riddle of Odysseus' existence and the location of the Mycenaean kingdom associated with him in *The Odyssey*. The question of whether Odysseus or other Mycenaean leaders were real historical figures should not overshadow the clear archaeological evidence identifying specific Mycenaean palace culture sites. These are real places and not the figments of Homer's poetic imagination.

### **Nestor's Palace**

Recent discoveries suggest that we are possibly in the process of solving the puzzle of Homeric geography with respect to the Ionian islands of Western Greece.

The pendulum of clarity swung in favour of a more significant role for the periphery with the discovery of Bronze Age palace sites along the Ionian Sea in the Peloponnese. The most well-known one was discovered by Blegen and Kourouniotis near Pylos in the late 1930s, now referred to as Nestor's palace, where new discoveries continue to this day. The location of a major pre-historical palace on the Peloponnese close to the Ionian Sea (sedimentation of the nearby estuary- as with Tiryns - has lengthened its proximity to the sea), with a major productive hinterland of Messina, makes this a potential bridge or transition between the Argolid and the Ionian Islands. The location of this palace could contribute to ultimately completing the puzzle of Mycenaean kingdoms. While most attention has focused on Pylos as the site of Nestor's palace there is evidence of earlier tholos tombs and Mycenaean palaces north of Pylos such as Peristeria in the district of Kyperissia originally excavated by Spiros Marinatos in 1960 and later by Georgios Korres.

The discovery of Linear B tablets and their ultimate translation by Ventris and later dissemination by Chadwick (1990) opened many previously closed doors to understanding the social, economic, political and administrative underpinnings of Mycenaean life generally and in southwest Peloponnese in particular. The archaeologist Odysseus Metaxas has pointed out (personal conversations) that these tablets were a type of short hand and more complete documents/inventories would likely have been recorded on material that would not have survived the ravages of time. Although left with incomplete records of this pre-historical age, we are very fortunate to have as much information as we do. Similar tablets, excavated



by Wace in Mycenae at the house of the oil merchant in the early 1950s, confirmed that Mycenaeans were early Greek speakers (McKendrick, 1981).

These tablets allow us to better understand the role of the palace in Mycenaean culture. The palace was an instrument of the ruling elite to maintain status and control. The procession and the feast, confirmed by Homer, were important rituals for promoting the legitimacy of the rulers and consolidating the Mycenaean identity. The palaces controlled land and were the focal points of a redistributive economy. While the palace elite did not control the detailed processes of production of items such as oil, grains/legumes, animal hides and spices, they took a share and also required service such as rowers and soldiers whose armor and weapons were provided by the palace. (See for example the detailed analysis of Mycenaean life, architecture and palace culture in Deger-Jalkotzy and Lemos eds, 2006). Some production such as textiles was carried out in the palace itself while other producers such as net makers, wool, armorers and goldsmiths worked outside the palace. The Linear B tablets and other discoveries demonstrate that Pylos was a centre for trade with Crete (Knossos) and with Egypt. Briars (1996, p.64) notes that, "the Linear B tablets reveal a tremendous bureaucracy centred in the palaces, which were almost self-contained units, with an elaborate social organization based on agriculture and to a lesser extent trade." He goes on to say that, "the picture of the Mycenaean civilization of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries.....is that of a number of kingdoms, probably independent, possibly recognizing one or another of the larger centres as suzerain."

In a similar vein Wright (2006) argues the following:

*In this form the palace is the focus of political, economic, social, ideological, historic and myth-historic practices and beliefs. In a real sense the palace is a cultural cloak that the ruling elite wrap around themselves, and in which they symbolically envelop their retinue, clients and commoners. But these structures were no mere symbols. (p. 37)*

In terms of the reproduction of the palace culture, Sherratt (1990) argues:

*The phases of active generation correspond to periods during which competing groups of rising elites seek to define their image and lifestyle through such devices as ostentatious burial and both visual and verbal representations of military and other prowess complete with the latest, most prestigious equipment. (p. 821)*

Finds, including gold jewellery and stone seals, from recent excavations in 2015 by Davis and Stocker (from the University of Cincinnati) of a Griffin warrior grave (outside the palace but very close to the restored tholos tomb), have confirmed the richness and diversity of Pylos' trade and also a superb level of craftsmanship. A remarkable seal, the Pylos combat agate, has been described as a masterpiece of miniature art. Davis suggests, "As in previously discovered shaft graves, the objects themselves are a cross-cultural mix. For instance, the boar tusk helmet is typically Mycenaean, but the gold rings, which are rich with Minoan religious imagery, and are on their own, a hugely significant find for scholars, reflect artifacts previously found on Crete." (Marchant, 2017, np)

It is typical of Mycenaean burials that objects from the past or similar to ones from the past are used to symbolize the status of those being buried. More recently the same archaeologists unearthed the foundations of two larger collapsed tholos tombs (Miller, 2019).

The recent discovery of a major Mycenaean palace 12 kilometers south of Sparta may put in place yet another piece of the Homeric puzzle. Many feel that

this could be Menelaus' palace. Once again, Linear B tablets have been found. This is a sign that the site is a palace and not just a settlement. Discoveries at many Mycenaean sites indicate that it was only the palaces that employed these elite scribes while, as a general rule, the Mycenaean population was illiterate.

Significantly, many of the writings on the Linear B tablets confirm the presence of a palace culture that is aligned with what Homer described. Using these two sources together can assist in the development of a more complete understanding of a culture and society.

There are also situations where physical findings can only be interpreted and understood by going back to Homer and other early writers. McKendrick (1981, 78) has said, "All the excavators of Mycenae from Schliemann to Mylonas were humanists, keenly aware that they were digging up not things but men: these weapons, wielded 3500 years ago, brought victory or defeat to real men, the vases once held priceless ointment for real women, the bones are of real people". He goes on to say in paraphrasing Mylonas, "Not the least reward of archaeology is to infer from withered flowers the hour of their bloom." This understanding of so many Bronze Age archeologists is due, to a great degree, to the descriptions Homer offers into Mycenaean life.

It is clear from both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* that there were strong connections among all the Mycenaean palaces including Mycenae itself, Pylos, the Kephallenians of Ithaca and Menelaus in Sparta. The overlap in artistic motifs indicates the sharing of artisans. Also, all were expected to contribute to what some have called the 'Viking raid on Troy'. In *The Odyssey*, Telemachus' journey from Ithaca to Nestor's palace and to Menelaus' palace supports the close connections.

Eumaeus, the swineherd in *The Odyssey*, describes other connections between the mainland and the kingdom of Ithaca. Odysseus' reputed ownership of considerable livestock and his control of grazing areas on the mainland (Eumaeus, Book 14 Line 110 - 118, *The Odyssey*) suggests that the area in and around Elis was part of the kingdom of Ithaca. Others in the *Odyssey* also speak of travel and livestock on the mainland. The map of possible kingdoms of Mycenaean Greece (Figure 1) shows that Elis, on the mainland, is potentially another kingdom in its own right. The numerous Mycenaean sites in the vicinity of Patras is a further indication of an important kingdom in that area.

*The Iliad* also gives us a clue as to the relative wealth and status of the various kingdoms. The Catalogue of Ships is key. It is stated that the Kephallenians (*The Iliad* Book II) sent 12 ships to Troy. By comparison Pylos sent 89!

If accurate the number of ships sent can be used as a surrogate for the wealth and size of the Ionian Island Mycenaean culture; but it could also reflect the varying level of commitments to the Trojan War.

We need to use care in using inferences about wealth and in turn influence. Woodruff (1993) translated Thucydides. To understand the scale of the Mycenaean effort to the Trojan War, "We should think of that army as indeed greater than those that went before it, but weaker than those we have now. This depends on our trusting Homer again on this point where he would be expected as a poet to exaggerate" (p. 7).

### **Odysseus I Dwell in Clearly Visible Ithaca**

H. Putman Cramer and G. Metaxas have spent the past three decades investigating clues to the location of Homeric Ithaca on Kefalonia- first in their 2000 book, *Homeric Ithaki* (Ομηρική Ιθάκη) followed by their blog *Odysseus- I Dwell in Clearly Visible Ithaca*. The authors provide an in-depth analysis of the various theories and studies, from the Renaissance to the present, regarding the location of Homeric Ithaca. They create a compelling case, based on the geography of the Western Mediterranean, for why Kefalonia, was most likely the location of the Homeric kingdom of Ithaca. Their analysis of the daily rhythm of wind patterns and direction shows that winds allow for possible frequent connections between south east Kefalonia, the mainland around Elis, the island of Asteris and the palace at Pylos. Their interpretation uses references in *The Odyssey* to names and locations such as Mt Neriton and the Cave of the Nymphs. Mt Neriton (Mount Ainos) and the Cave of the Nymphs (Melissani Cave) are two of the most dramatic, clear and plausible locations that lead to the conclusion that Kefalonia was the island of Ithaca. As well, Reithron Harbour, Raven's Cragg, Phorkys Harbor, and the Arethousa spring show that all of these meet the qualifications for the actual palace to be located in the Riza/Tzannata area of south east Kefalonia.

### **Significant Discoveries**

It was through a careful reading of Homer's text that south eastern part of Kefalonia was identified as the centre of Homeric Ithaca; and thereafter an in depth search was undertaken to uncover the archaeological record. In 1991 the archaeologist, Lazaros Kolonas, discovered a tholos tomb in Tzannata in the south eastern part of the island (Figures 4 & 5). This tomb is the largest found in north western Greece. Its significance is even more striking due to the discovery of a miniature gold double axe or labrys ((λαβρις) which is generally a sign of a royal tomb (Carr-Vaughn, 1959) and a royal seal showing a lion attacking a deer which bears a striking resemblance to the one Homer ascribed to Odysseus (Figure 6). Nearby is a major ossuary containing the remains of over 70 individuals.



Figure 4. The tholos at Tzannata shortly after excavations with the passage and entry in the foreground.



Figure 5. The interior of the tholos at Tzannata revealing tombs of at least seven generations. The tholos is built upon an earlier smaller tholos.

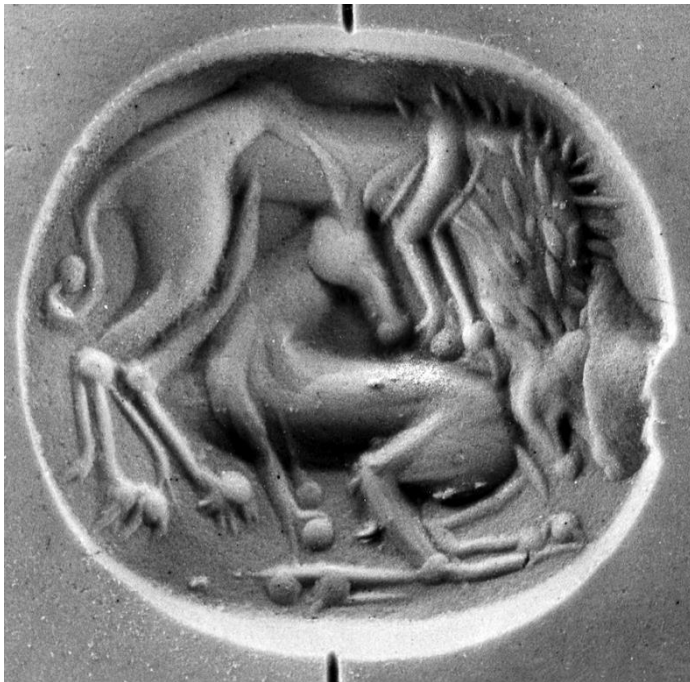


Figure 6. Seal from tholos tomb Tzannata, 12th century BC (reproduced and enlarged).

In 2012, the archeologist Adonis Vasilakis, led the excavation of an area known as Borzi Hill just above the tomb (Figure 7). The uncovering of a processional way leading down the hillside from a prominent peak to the tholos, and an even earlier elliptical megaron originally located on the route of the processional way are evidence of a nearby settlement and may confirm the important role of processions and ceremony in Mycenaean palace culture as portrayed by Homer. Preliminary inspection of the area strongly suggests evidence of a significant pre-historical settlement. The processional way suggests the persistence of a special reverence for the tholos (literally for centuries) based upon the dating and distribution of pottery shards. Equally significant is the strategic importance of the hill at the centre of the site since it affords a unique perspective of the harbor (Reithron) at the edge of the sea to the north.





Figure 7. Aerial view of excavations north and west of the tholos tomb indicating a megaron and processional way to the tholos by A. Vasilakis (13-12 century BC).

The two leading archaeologists of these excavations have stated:

*It is now certain that the Mycenaean presence in the neighbourhood of Tzannata was long-lasting and strongly marked, and it signals the existence there of a great Mycenaean city undoubtedly connected with the question of Homeric Ithaca (Kolonas, 2005, p.339).*

Now that we have located the Late Helladic/Mycenaean settlement at Poros as well as the nearby royal tholos tomb, where excavations started in 1992, we are led to reappraise our views on the historicity of the realm of Odysseus, ruler of the Kephallenians, and of Mycenaean Ithaca, which in our opinion was located here; and that opinion is now based on 'instructive' stratigraphic data from the excavations (Vasilakis, 2012, np.).

Many researchers are eager to follow up on the earlier excavations. Over the last five years, for example, Professor John Albanese from the University of Windsor in Canada has been conducting a scientific forensic analysis of the skeletal remains (both human and animal) from the royal tomb in Tzannata and the nearby ossuary. Evidence of blunt trauma in the skeletal remains at both sites speaks to an age where physical combat was the rule and not the exception, and confirms the importance of conflict in Mycenaean society. Homer's epics tell us about the lifestyle of his heroes. Their domestic life and habits were in sharp contrast to the life of war and violence that is at the core of *The Iliad*. Albanese's findings confirm the results from the skeletal analysis that was conducted earlier on the remains of skulls from Lakithra. Equally important his analysis suggests strong kinship ties among those buried and the presence of animal sacrifices due to cat and horse bones (Albanese, 2002).

Physical prowess went along with war. Just as Homer's Odysseus, the Achaean, was a superb bowman, other warriors excelled in other martial arts. That said, the borderlines between piracy, looting and adventure were weakly demarcated and understood (Briers, 1996). The islands adjacent to Kefalonia strategically located in the shipping channels in the Gulf of Corinth were known as pirate lairs from earliest times.



Figure 8. Skeletal remains from the tholos tomb and nearby ossuary.

Despite the significant findings in recent years, there are barriers preventing further excavations. In 2019 an international team (including the author) was preparing to embark on an exploratory excavation of the potential settlement in the vicinity of the tholos. The dig had formal approval but just a few weeks before its commencement it was cancelled with no explanation. This is the second major delay in following the logical trail of evidence in and around Tzannata. In commenting on the first delay in 2013, which centred on conflicts associated with Ephorate transitions and general bureaucracy, the society for the Study of Prehistoric Kephallenia made the following appeal:

*“It would also be disastrous to leave forever unanswered the logical questions that have accumulated during the twenty-five years of research in the neighbourhood of Tzannata. The worst that could happen in the coming years is that important archaeological sites which need immediate protection but are now exposed to the ravages of human neglect will continue to deteriorate gradually, perhaps even to the point of being lost altogether, while we ourselves sink into a state of hibernation, hoping that sooner or later the good times will return, allowing the onward march to reach its end.” (Putman Cramer and Metaxas, 2015, p. 5). A recently approved (2021) EU one million euro grant that would have begun the restoration/protection of the tholos tomb and the creation of a critically*



*important information centre has also been cancelled. Sadly, the tomb has not been open for public viewing for some time.*

## **2. Conclusion**

Homer's epic poems are still relevant and are being analyzed and re-interpreted on a continuing basis. They are providing a number of critically important clues to understanding Mycenaean geography, life and culture. Researchers are raising a number of interesting questions about Ionian geography and the possible location of a Mycenaean royal palace. These questions can be organized as follows.

Will the excavations at Tzannata on Cephalonia reveal some form of palace and, if so, will it be a small provincial palace, serving what Souyoudzoglou-Haywood (2019) refers to as local empowered elites, or will it be something more significant?

Will excavations in Tzannata uncover a large megaron or hall that meets the description in The Odyssey? Historians such as Burns (1972) refer to this structure as 'fanciful'.

Will excavations reveal a very long occupation of the site going back to a time earlier than the Trojan War? Some evidence suggests that some form of settlement existed as early as the 1500s BCE.

Will Linear B tablets or other evidence and records be found that will further confirm the connections and trade between the various Mycenaean kingdoms and the similarities or differences in their social organization and architecture? The presence of Linear B tablets has been associated with palace elite.

Will findings support Vasilakis' view that the Ionian Islands had their own distinct form of culture and society? Wright (2006) makes the point that notwithstanding the significant similarities in the structure and function of Mycenaean communities and ruling elite, there were nonetheless significant differences in palace architecture, trade patterns, burial practices and scale of regional influence.

Will the ruins be covered with ash indicating fire as the destructive force or will they reveal that earthquakes or some other force was the cause of their destruction?

Will evidence such as amber and gold items confirm that trade followed the same pattern in Late Helladic IIIA and B as in the LH IIIC sites elsewhere on Kefalonia?

Archaeologists have added real value to the Homeric epics by creating a wave of productive finds and with this a re-assessment of Mycenaean civilization prior to the Dorian invasion. In a reverse process, the Homeric epics provide meaning and context to the archeological finds allowing archeologists to visualize real humans living real lives.

Archeologists' tool kit has expanded enormously in the past two decades allowing them to answer significant questions that require fundamentally different analytical approaches - such as ancient DNA, digital mapping and spectral, isotope, dental and forensic analyses. These techniques have created and opened new doors for answering questions relating to longevity, diet, stature/physiology and migration. In the case of ancient mitochondrial DNA analysis, archaeologists know of the strong DNA overlap among Mycenaeans and Minoans and that major

components of Modern Greek ancestry were already in place in the Bronze Age (Lazaridis et al., 2017). Some three quarters of Minoan/Mycenaean ancestry comes from Neolithic sources mainly from Anatolia and earlier agricultural migration from the Near East (Turkey and Iran). The Caucasus region has also been identified in the case of the Mycenaeans. We can be certain that new and exciting connections will come as a result of the next phase of excavations, particularly on Kefalonia where so little has been uncovered so far.

An essential first step would be the use of LIDAR (laser imaging, detection and ranging) and GPR (ground penetrating radar) to uncover clues to the further distribution of possible gravesites and palace structures without actual excavations.

We have emphasized the importance of the findings at Pylos to understanding Mycenaean life and culture. Its location on the Ionian Sea, the closest known palace to ancient Ithaca, may make it a bridge to understanding Mycenaean life on the Ionian Islands.

The Odyssey and The Iliad have long been a source of inspiration for both classical scholars and Bronze Age archeologists. Today these epic poems have become a type of Rosetta stone for uncovering an important and distinct signature to our cultural origins. Homer's epic poems provide context and meaning to excavations of structures from a very distant past. As well, archeologists for the last hundred and fifty years have used his epics as a Mycenaean guidebook for uncovering a whole society that would otherwise likely have remained unknown or at best misunderstood. The important work since 1938 at Pylos is a reminder of the complexity of the tasks ahead but also the vital importance of cumulative discoveries in which the key to better understanding this period, region and people of the Bronze Age depends ultimately on further open scientific investigations triangulating multiple sources of information.

The web of Bronze Age history remains a complex and challenging topic to unravel, no more so than for those who tread in the footsteps of Homer and his 'protagonist' Odysseus. In this regard Souyoudzoglou-Haywood (2019, p. 58) agrees that more information will assist in revising the debate. "Although the arguments would have to be modified in view of the new evidence that shows a more substantial palatial period settlement on Kefalonia, the approach is probably the only one that will move the debate forward". At the same time, she is likely correct in being skeptical regarding the ability of further archaeological evidence to ultimately resolve the ongoing debate among Homeric realists and Homeric mythicists regarding the status of Homeric Ithaca. Whatever can be done to narrow the gap in our understanding and knowledge will allow scholars to feel more comfortable with determining balances of probabilities.

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