

IS ASTERIS FROM HOMER'S *ODYSSEY*  
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Identification and study of the landscapes described by Homer in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey* have been subjects of interest since the time of Strabo and others. Over the centuries researchers have vacillated between firm belief in Homer's accuracy and ardent skepticism. A recent interesting review with suggestive interpretations of Homer's landscapes is available in Luce's book (1998).

Ithaca, an island of the west coast of Greece, is generally accepted as the place where Odysseus once lived (and where he returned), as described in Homer's *Odyssey*. Several landmarks from the *Odyssey* are still relatively easily identifiable in Ithaca: the Arethusa fountain, Korax rock, Phorcys Bay, the cave of the Nymph, and perhaps the island of Asteris.

The location of Odysseus' fortress-palace itself is a matter of some controversy. J. V. Luce in his book places Odysseus's fortress in the northern part of Ithaca –the Pilikata region– and disputes the opinion of Prof. Symeonoglou (1984: 91-109) and (1988: 32-39), who places the fortress in the Mt. Aetos area below the Isthmus that separates the southern and the northern parts of Ithaca. Interestingly, Schliemann (1869: 26-36), a firm believer in Homer's descriptive accuracy, visited Ithaca and worked briefly on the Mt. Aetos summit in 1868. He discovered several ceramic vessels there and felt that that is where Odysseus' palace could have been located.

It seems, however, that Odysseus' palace itself may never be found, bearing in mind that "Odysseus was plowing his fields when summoned for the Troy expedition" [Hyginus (80-81)], that "he built his bedroom around

a wild growing olive tree” (*Od.* 23. 190), and that Telemachus was astonished, indeed, upon seeing the palace of the wealthier Menelaos (*Od.* 4. 75). It appears conceivable that Odysseus was not a very rich, though a powerful king. Correspondingly, his flimsier residence might not have survived several millennia...

In this paper I would like to concentrate only on the identity of Asteris, as described by Homer (*Od.* 4. 844 -7):

‘There is a rocky isle in the midst of the sea,  
*midway between Ithaca and rugged Samos, Asteris, of no great size,*  
 but therein is a harbor where ships may lie, with an entrance on either side’.

(*Od.* 16. 365-8):

Day by day watchmen sat upon the windy heights,  
 watch ever following watch, and at set of sun we never spent  
 a night upon the shore, but sailing over the deep in our swift ship  
 we waited for the bright Dawn, lying in wait for Telemachus,  
 Translated by A.T. Murray (Harvard Univ. Press, London 1919)

Underlined words characterize the areas of Asteris.

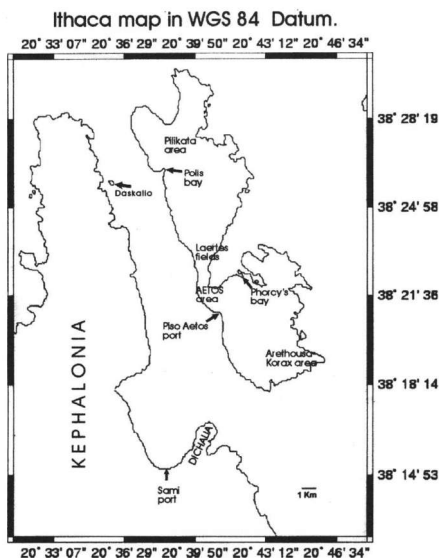
The name Samos obviously points to Kephallonia, while ancient Ithaca has retained its name [Luce (1998:172)]. Geographically, Asteris has to be located somewhere south of Odysseus’ palace and its harbor, in the channel between Ithaca and Kephallonia, in order to fulfill the role ascribed to it by Homer: a place from which the returning ship of Telemachus could be intercepted.

A small islet called Daskalio in the Ithaca channel near Polis Bay in northern Ithaca is believed to be and is generally accepted as Asteris. It is in the right location for the Pilikata region, but it does not really satisfy Homer’s other descriptions of having twin harbors, of being hilly, and of lying in the middle of the channel. However, three millennia of earthquakes and other changes could, perhaps, be responsible for the present shape of the islet. Prof. Luce suggests still another interpretation of Asteris’ locality: It has 2 bays, harbors on the Kephallonian coast close to the Daskalio islet, as the spots really meant by Homer in his perception of Asteris’ topography [Luce (1998:208-212)].

In the opinion of others, Daskalio is simply unacceptable as Asteris [Schliemann (1869:67-71)], [Merry, Riddel, Monro (1901: book 4, commline 846)].

For reasons mentioned below, Prof. Symeonoglou's judgment favouring the Mt. Aetos area as the location of the ancient Odysseus' city seems more attractive. However, the absence of a nearby Asteris-like island where suitors could have kept watch for returning Telemachos is a sticky point in accepting this site. Prof. Symeonoglou believes that small island Ligia [Symeonoglou (1988:38)], nowadays called Perapigadi, fulfills Homer's description of Asteris. However, geographically it lies eastwards and close to Ithaca coastline, not in the strait between Ithaca and Kephallonia.

Repeated personal observations of the Aetos area disclosed that there are, indeed, no islets around it in the channel as noted by Schliemann. However, a land structure or a promontory of the Kephallonian coast, easily visible from the Aetos summit or from Piso Aetos harbor, appeared interesting. If observed from Aetos area, it gave an impression of being an island. According to current maps, however, it was in reality a peninsula, nowadays called Dichalia [see map (Fig. 1)]. After some contemplation and more explorations of the site, Homer used the word *nêsos* describing Asteris: [Homer, *Od.* 4.844-6].



*Fig. 1*

ἔστι δέ τις νῆσος μέσση ἀλί πετρήεσσα  
 μεσσηγὺς Ἰθάκης τε Σάμοιό τε παιπαλοέσσης,  
 Ἄστερις, οὐ μεγάλη· λιμένες δ' ἓνι ναύλοχοι αὐτῇ ἀμφίδυμοι·

The word *nēsos* is here reevaluated. In the ancient Greek language *nēsos* could have meant not only an island but also a peninsula [Luce (1998:173)], as in the compound word “Peloponnesian” [Frisk (1961:317)], [Liddell (1980:465)], or a promontory [Liddell (1968:104)]. If, as convincingly argued by Luce (1998:172-175), Dulichion from the *Odyssey* equals the present isle of Lefkas, then in Homer’s verse (*Od.* 9.22) the word *nēsos* would find further confirmation as a peninsula. Lefkas in Homer’s times was actually a peninsula [Luce (1998:172)]. Interestingly and similarly, Homer’s isle of Dulichion could be related to the Kephalonian peninsula Pali on the west coast, where ancient city Palé once stood. According to Pausanias, its citizens were once called Dulichians [Paus. (6.15.7)].

Brief exploration of Dichalia revealed that it is a Kephalonian peninsula extending eastwards into the sea channel between Ithaca and Kephallonia, south from the Aetos area. It is about 2200m long, 900m wide, and hilly. On the hill, close to the base of the Dichalia peninsula, one can find remnants of an ancient acropolis. The same acropolis was part of Kephallonia’s tetrapolis (Same, Pronnoi, Krani, and Pale), [Thucydides (11.30.2)], [Strabo (10.2.13)]. One can well imagine that this could have been one of the places Penelope’s suitors had come from. The peninsula itself has bits and pieces of a relatively recently deserted old village. Importantly, the Dichalia peninsula has bays on either side, suitable for the landings of ancient ships. Especially the one on the southern side, close to the Antisami bay (which itself is situated at the base of the peninsula), has a small valley leading into the peninsula. It would seem very suitable as a landing place for the suitors’ ships (Fig. 2) and for reaching the “windy heights”. Hills on this peninsula offer an excellent vantage point for the surveillance of ships returning from the Greek mainland (Pylos) to Piso Aetos. (*The Mt. Aetos area has an old harbor nowadays called “Piso Aetos” on the channel side, facing Kephallonia. It is still used by ferries. The distance from Piso Aetos to the excavation sites at the Mt. Aetos area is about 600m.*) Close to the Dichalia peninsula base is the Kephalonian port of Same. Its distance to the nearest Ithaca coastline is about 8000m. Interestingly, the closest distance from the tip of the peninsula to the Ithaca coastline is about 4000m!



Fig. 2 Legend: South-easterly part of Dichalia peninsula with a bay.

Accordingly, then, the topography of Dichalia peninsula seems to fit Homer's description of Asteris almost perfectly. It appears to lie in the middle of the channel between Ithaca and Kephallonia and in the right location for the Aetos area. It is rocky, hilly, and has twin harbors.

If one were to accept Dichalia as being the true Asteris, the Aetos area would have a much greater probability of being the place where Odysseus' palace and the ancient city once lay. It certainly has the sea on both sides with corresponding harbors (*Od.* 21.252). Similarly, Laertes fields, where Odysseus went to see his father (*Od.* 24.205), are depicted north of Mt. Aetos on some maps available in Ithaca. They are about 3000m away from the Aetos area and appear suitable for orchard and vineyard purposes as well. They were known to and explored by Schliemann (1869:37-39), but are not mentioned in Luce's book. Personal experience of walking on steep, rocky, and slippery hills in the hot climate of Ithaca, where a noon-day siesta is a must, suggests that a trip for the old shepherd Eumaios from the Korax rock area to the palace and back in one day (*Od.* 16.452) is more plausible to the Aetos, rather than to the Pilikata area, given the distance, terrain, and climate. Published data by Schliemann (1869:28,61), indicate also that in the year 1868 he needed a good 4 hours to negotiate the one-way distance from the Arethusa area (Eumaios' farm) to the Mt. Aetos area.

Could the Dichalia peninsula be what Homer meant by Asteris? Perhaps. It should be stressed that literature review showed W. Gell as the first who suggested this location for Asteris in his book on Ithaca geography [Gell (1807:79)]. He was though aware of the linguistic problems his suggestion might cause. However the Asteris problem as an

islet (Greek word *nêsos*) versus peninsula (Greek word *chersónesos*) has been excellently dealt with in recent book by Bittlestone, Diggle and Underhill (2005:138). Even though authors place Asteris and ancient Ithaca onto present Kephallonia island's peninsulas, they argue that Homer did not obviously know the word *chersonesos* and even if he did, it would have been difficult to fit the word into the metre of epic verse. This view is supported by personal memo from Prof. A. Bartonek (2003), who confirmed that in his review of Mycenaean vocabulary the word *chersonesos* does not appear.

Despite all that, different translations of the *Odyssey* in several languages invariably describe Asteris as an island. Even Strabo's (10.2.16) note on Asteris, in an English translation of his works, refers to an islet between Ithaca and Kephallonia. A recent detailed survey of the archeological geography of Greece also recognizes Asteris as an islet [Kirsten, Kraiker (1962:722)]. It remains, therefore, to be seen what further archeological, linguistic, and other explorations of the relationship between Homer's *Odyssey* and the islands of Ithaca and Kephallonia might bring.

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#### SUMMARY

This article deals with some aspects of the topography of Asteris, as mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*. A suggestion is made that Homer's word *nêsos* as related to Asteris, could have had the meaning of "peninsula" rather than "island". Examination of the Kephalonian peninsula Dichalia, near Ithaca's coastline revealed that it fulfils nearly completely Homer's descriptions for Asteris in the *Odyssey*. This interpretation of the Asteris topography would support the location of the ancient city of Ithaca and of Odysseus' palace in the Mount Aetos area.