

THE SEARCH FOR ANCIENT ITHACA



JOHN CRAWSHAW explores the archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos's very appealing hypothesis that Homer's Ithaca was actually located at Paliki, the western peninsula of Kefalonia

"He told us that this land – Paliki – was once ancient Ithaca, and that with our excavations we were looking for clues."

So spoke Antonis Rigatos at the age of 92 as he sat sipping a soft drink in the main square of the town of Lixouri on the island of Kefalonia. He was talking about Spyridon Marinatos, the famous Greek archaeologist who was born on Kefalonia and became famous for his work on Crete, on the mainland of Greece and, most of all, on the island of Santorini, where he uncovered the ancient port city of Akrotiri. The latter was wealthy and renowned in the Bronze Age until it was covered in ash by the explosive eruption of the volcano that engulfed Thera (now Santorini) in about 1550 ±50 BC.

This simple statement – that Paliki was once ancient Ithaca – was both profound and energizing. For many years people have questioned the disparity between Homer's description of Ithaca in the *Odyssey* and the island called Ithaki by Greeks today. Homer's hero Odysseus describes his homeland thus:

*"Bright Ithaca is my home...
Around are many islands, close to each other,
Doulighion and Same and wooded Zacynthos.
Ithaca itself lies low, furthest to sea
Towards dusk; the rest, apart, face dawn and sun."*
HOMER, *ODYSSEY* 9.21; 22–6,
TRANSLATED BY JAMES DIGGLE

But modern Ithaki is not low-lying, it is mountainous; it is not the furthest out to sea and it does not face towards dusk; nor do the nearby islands face towards the dawn and sun. And where are Doulighion and Same?

But if Paliki – the western peninsula of Kefalonia – was once ancient Ithaca, many puzzle pieces fall into place. This concept, simply articulated by Spyridon Marinatos in the 1950s, has been developed as a fully-fledged hypothesis in *Odysseus Unbound: The Search for Homer's Ithaca* by Robert Bittlestone, with James Diggle and John Underhill (Cambridge, 2005). Their hypothesis suggests that Paliki was once a separate island that became conjoined to the eastern half of Kefalonia as a result of earthquakes and landslides triggered in this tectonically most active region of the Mediterranean. More than 15 years of rigorous scientific research have been devoted to testing this hypothesis. One of the earliest findings is of sedimentary evidence for the existence of an ancient marine channel of Quaternary age (c. 400,000 years BP) in the valley between eastern and western Kefalonia.

Paliki is low-lying – the highest mountain is Mount Lakties at 525 metres. It is on the western side of Kefalonia, and the other islands lie to the east, facing dawn and the sun. Eastern Kefalonia glories in a water-front town called Sami – which suggests that eastern Kefalonia could plausibly have been called Same after the name of the town, as was often the case in ancient times. And the island called Ithaki today could instead have carried the name Doulighion – as indeed some late-mediaeval cartographers have suggested. If one embraces these assumptions, Homer's poetic description is a better fit with the geography.

But how credible are our sources? Let us learn more about Antonis Rigatos and his unexpected connection with Spyridon Marinatos.

Antonis Rigatos was born in 1927 in the hilltop village of Kaminarata in western Kefalonia. He was 26 when a devastating earthquake struck Kefalonia on 12 August 1953 and he remembered working in the main square of Lixouri afterwards, laying stones to repair the damage. He knew Marinatos from about this time and worked for him through the 1950s and into the early 1960s. Antonis first met him in this very square in Lixouri. Marinatos, needing workers for his excavations, approached Antonis, apparently already knowing he was a good worker.

By this time, Marinatos had already established his reputation as a brilliant archaeologist.

Spyridon Marinatos was born on 17 April 1901 in Kondogennada, another hilltop village in western Kefalonia. Kondogennada has a history: it was an important place in Byzantine times, and an 11th-century Byzantine chapel with its original frescoes is still standing near the centre. The village is located just a few kilometres from the larger town of Lixouri, and Marinatos was always very proud to call himself a "Lixouriotan". (There was a long-standing fierce rivalry between citizens of the two main towns – Argostoli and Lixouri – on

Kefalonia.) This has led many sources to state incorrectly that his birthplace was Lixouri.

After school in Kefalonia, Marinatos completed his undergraduate education at the School of Philosophy in the University of Athens (1916–1921), followed by two years of postgraduate studies (1927–29) at the universities of Berlin and Halle in Germany, where his distinguished professors in classical literature and archaeology included Noack, Karo, Rodenwaldt and Wilamowitz.

He then worked on Crete, where he was appointed Director of the Herakleion Museum in 1929 and conducted a number of successful excavations. He met there Sir Arthur Evans and although they clashed initially, they became close. Marinatos acknowledged that he learned much from Evans. He especially admired Evans for his conceptual insights and judgements.

At about this time, Marinatos was fortunate to be introduced to Dr Suzanne Goekoop de Jongh, the widow of a wealthy Dutchman, Adriaan Goekoop, with whom she had shared a love of antiquity and classical archaeology. Just as her husband had financed William Dorpfeld's excavations on Ithaki, Dr Suzanne Goekoop decided to sponsor Marinatos's excavations on Kefalonia. According to Marinatos's daughter Nanno, "he and Mrs. Goekoop de Jongh agreed that Kephallenia, rather than Ithaca, was the island of Odysseus. Why else were the people called Kephallenians by Homer?" For the next decade, Marinatos included Kefalonia in his programme of excavations, with the support of Mrs Goekoop.

In 1937, Marinatos was appointed Director of Antiquities and Historic Monuments for Greece based in Athens. Two years later, he was appointed Professor of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Peoples of the East and the Prehistoric Peoples of the Mediterranean at the University of Athens, where he taught the prehistoric archaeology of mainland

Greece and of Crete, and the cultural history of Anatolia and Egypt.

In 1955, Marinatos was again appointed Director of Antiquities and Historic Monuments for Greece. It was in the 1950s that he returned to Kefalonia to continue his excavations at Bronze Age sites. And it was here, in the main square of Lixouri, that he called upon Antonis Rigatos to join his team of excavators and look for clues about the past history of Kefalonia and, more specifically, the western peninsula called Paliki.

BELOW A Google Earth map showing Paliki peninsula on west side of Kefalonia © 2022 Google LLC



The Paliki peninsula owes its name to the city of Paleis, one of the four leading cities (or tetrapoleis) of Kefalonia in the classical Greek and Hellenistic periods. Paleis was mentioned by both Herodotus and Thucydides in their histories, and the city was located on and around a small hill overlooking the sea, just north of where Lixouri is today.

Antonis Rigatos was blessed with a good memory, although some of those memories were painful. He remembered the Second World War, in which he served. He remembered the German occupation of Kefalonia and said he was standing in the main square, near the quay, when the Germans hanged three people. In direct contrast, he had positive memories of the Italian occupiers and he learnt to speak Italian from them.

ABOVE The café where Antonis Rigatos and the author shared some time together © John Crawshaw



ABOVE A Late Bronze Age tomb site on Paliki © John Crawshaw

"It was noon, the sun parched the whole world, and all the living beings were hidden. The Earth was burning, and the blazing atmosphere was set alight. Everything was deserted. This is, as is well known, the time which, together with midnight, summons the wicked shadows back onto the Earth. Suddenly the long-serving convicts felt a muffled thud from below ground that made them shake. Soon they became certain that they were standing in front of a cavity, which echoed ominously to the blows of their pickaxes. Deep inside the solid rock, little by little, a tomb was brought to light, mysteriously discovered inside the massive solid limestone foot of the mountain.

The grave was shaped like an asymmetrical cave, the mouth of which was blocked by huge slabs. The convicts removed the slabs and then a new terror took control of their wretched souls. Their confusion was such that, unfortunately, we do not have exact descriptions of the spectacle which caught their eyes. However, we have an approximate, but reliable, description of the interior of the tomb:

Inside the tomb, the skeleton of a huge man was lying face up, with open arms and, according to the account of the most credible and composed of the convicts, he was certainly over 2.5m. They were particularly impressed by the thickness of the bones and the enormous head on the body.

Around the skeleton were discovered a great number of bones and teeth from sheep, pigs and calves. These were later interpreted by the convicts as snatched and stolen animals, which were sacrificed to the tomb of the dead giant, and probably their interpretation is correct.

*.....
... From the finds, archaeologists inferred that the skeleton belonged to the prehistoric era, and the absence of any kind of metal in the tomb, [apart from the coin described], led them to the conclusion that it belonged to the "pre-Mycenaean era", that is circa 1500-2000 BC..."**

Could this have been the inspiration for one of the giants described in the *Odyssey*? Polyphemus? Or a Laestrygonian? Or did the newspaper reporter in 1937 exaggerate what was found in an early example of imaginative reporting, or as we would describe it today, fake news?

While the huge bones have long since disappeared, perhaps in the losses caused to the archaeological museum's storage area by the massive 1953 earthquake, a late-Roman vase found at the same time still exists at the Archaeological Museum of Argostoli. Here is an excerpt from the register of excavation findings:

"No 1745 Glyfada, Livadi, the item was found by convicts of the local prison in a quarry on June 15, 1937... A globular oil flask of simple clay in the shape of the caricature head of a branded slave. Nose crooked, mouth wide and oblique, eyebrows oblique and short, forehead narrow, furrowed and marked. Shaven beard, moustache and head, apart from a small ponytail at the back of the skull.

*On the top of the head, the flask mouth together with two holes for hanging. Condition very good."**

Of course, this late-Roman vase, together with the reference to the discovery of a coin, might well imply that the skeleton was from the Roman era, instead of prehistoric as was suggested in the newspaper report at the time.

And, on another occasion, so the story goes, a Roman male corpse was uncovered, standing in an upright position, with an obol in his mouth to pay Charon the ferryman to take him across the river Styx to a resting place in Hades or in the Elysian Fields. The upright posture would be an unusual feature, but rather than being a cultural anomaly it might indicate that the quarry itself had been tilted through 90 degrees by earth movements caused by one of the many very significant earthquakes that have occurred on Kefalonia, both before and after the Roman era. Kefalonia lies at the meeting point of several tectonic plates which slide

underneath and beside one another, creating a stress field that leads to massive earthquakes at regular (often centennial) intervals.

Marinatos talked often with his workers about Kefalonia's western peninsula, called Paliki, and about the history of ancient Ithaca. He made a point of telling Ithaca and the others that Paliki was ancient Ithaca and that, with their excavations, they were looking for clues. Was this simply an exhortation to inspire the excavators to work harder, as they were digging for their homeland's history, or was it more than this? Antonis himself was convinced that this was a deeply held belief of Spyridon Marinatos.

Marinatos went on to provide an explanation for the enigma of modern Ithaki's name. He declared that the name Ithaca became associated with Ithaki because people left the original Ithaca and settled on north Ithaki, bringing the name with them. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised at this explanation. The emigrants of the Greek diaspora have typically

Antonis said that he worked as a labourer on all of Marinatos's excavations around Parisata, Damoulianata, Kondogennada, and at other locations in the 1950s. Antonis indicated that the tombs they excavated contained mainly broken pottery sherds as they had already been robbed.

ancient artefacts long ago.

On one occasion, Marinatos and Antonis went to Atheras Bay and looked at a cave there. Apparently, the cave is on the outer (seaward) side of the northwest headland (the left headland as you look from the shore). The entrance was an opening of about four metres by four metres, and the dolomite cave continued inward from that point. There was nothing to be found in the bottom of the cave and Marinatos declared that this was because the winter storms must have washed away any

Antonis said that he and Marinatos visited the small hill at the north end of the Gulf of Argostoli but did not carry out any excavations there as the site was being used to make concrete columns to rebuild the island's houses after the devastating 1953 earthquake. Antonis was probably describing the small hill with a quarry located just north of Livadi when he said this.

This quarry has reportedly been the source of interesting discoveries in its time. In July 1937, so the story goes, a massive skeleton was uncovered by workmen conscripted from the nearby prison. It was described as being 2.5 metres tall and 4,000 years old, and it was a source of great wonder. The story bears telling in the dramatic words of an earlier report:



ABOVE Town of Lixouri, the main square © John Crawshaw

* FROM 'THE MYSTERIES OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SCIENCE – THE PROGENITOR OF LIXOURI', ECHO, 1937, PP. 9-11, AS REPORTED IN "ARCHAEOLOGIST", FROM THE RECORDS OF SOTIRIS KARAVAS.

taken their culture and customs with them, and on occasion a massive earthquake in the Ionian Islands, such as the 1953 earthquake on Kefalonia, was the precipitating reason for their departure to a new home.

Marinatos told Antonis that Paliki's landowners were rich because the land was fertile and produced good crops, specifically mentioning the small grapes which were dried in the sun to become currants. These rich families went back many generations in long family lines. The implication was that Paliki had produced wealthy landowners going back a long way in its history. And we know from the Church Records of AD 1264 that Paliki was far and away the wealthiest part of the island, and the place where the Byzantine Church had most of its holdings of land and property, as well as its seat, or *καθέδρα*. In Paliki, near Dematora, was built the very first St George's Castle on the island, at the 385-metre summit of what is now called St George's Hill, with sweeping views to the east across the Gulf of Argostoli and to the west towards the Ionian Sea. It was the perfect spot from which to protect the Church lands from marauding pirates or buccaneers, whether approaching from the east or from the west.

Antonis concluded his story by declaring that Marinatos was a reliable paymaster, which of course he appreciated, calling him "a good man and a gentleman". After Marinatos left the island, Antonis became an agricultural labourer for the remainder of his working life. But he did not lose touch with Marinatos. Every so often, Marinatos would telephone Antonis to chat, greeting him cordially as "my fine fellow". And Antonis never forgot what Marinatos had told him about Paliki: "He told us that this land – Paliki – was once ancient Ithaca, and that with our excavations we were looking for clues."

Spyridon Marinatos died on 1 October 1974 on Santorini from a fall at the very site which was the culmination

of his archaeological career. One of his students wrote afterwards: "At midday on the 1st of October 1974, when he was standing up to supervise the work of excavation, the wall he stepped on gave way and threw him into the most important site of his life as an excavator. He must have been overjoyed!" He was 73 years old.

In his wildest dreams, could Spyridon Marinatos possibly have imagined that, almost 50 years after his death, a multi-cultural, multi-disciplined team of scientists, academics and Homeric enthusiasts would be engaged in the very same task of looking for clues to determine whether "this land – Paliki – was indeed once ancient Ithaca"? Surely his joy would have known no bounds. [A](#)

FURTHER READING

WEBSITE www.odysseus-unbound.org

M. P. GOFA 'Marinatos at the University and at his Excavations', in Mantzourani, H., and N. Marinatos (eds.), *Spyridon Marinatos 1901-1974: His Life and Times*, Kardamitsa, Athens, 2014, pp. 35–41

N. MARINATOS Foreword in Goekoop, C. H., *Where on Earth is Ithaca? A Quest for the Homeland of Odysseus*, Eburon, Delft, 2010

F. MIKLOSICH AND I. MÜLLER *Acta Et Diplomata Graeca Medii Aevi Sacra Et Profana Collecta*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, tr. Ioanna Faraklou, 1887 (For Records of the Latin Diocese of Kefalonia (1264 AD))

BELOW The quarry near Livadi where unusual discoveries were made by prison work crews in the 1930s © John Crawshaw



RESTORING THE ANCIENT THEATRE AT NICOPOLIS



DIANA BENTLEY visits the astonishing monument in Epirus and speaks to the archaeologist leading the project to revive it

ABOVE An aerial view of the theatre before work began.
© Ephorate of Antiquities of Preveza

In the lush region of Epirus, in northwestern Greece, where the Ionian Sea flows into the Ambracian Gulf, an ancient theatre is being restored to life. Recovered from the earth that cloaked it for centuries – and repaired with painstaking effort – the Theatre of Nicopolis is an imposing sight once more.

The theatre has a special significance in the history of both Greece and of Rome owing to its origins. On 2 September 31 BC, the naval forces of Octavian, great-nephew, heir and adopted

son of Julius Caesar, vanquished those of his rival and former fellow triumvir, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra VII of Egypt off the southwest coast of Epirus, near the cape of Actium. When Antony

and Cleopatra met their deaths in Alexandria one year later, Octavian, later the emperor Augustus, assumed supreme power in Rome, ushering in a new era in the ancient world.