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Author(s): Raymond V. Schoder

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THE FORUM

ODYSSEUS' ROUTE

The geographical identification of places along Odysseus' route home from Troy cannot always be determined and has for centuries been a source of puzzlement and controversy. In ancient times, Crates of Mallos, director in the second century B.C. of the great library at Pergamum, maintained that all Odysseus' adventures occurred in Outer Ocean (the Atlantic) beyond the Pillars of Hercules (that is, West of Gibraltar). The great scholar Eratosthenes, head of the library in Alexandria a century earlier, had rejected any validity in identifying particular places with what Homer relates and held that all the locations were imaginary. He tartly said "You will find the route of Odysseus when you have found the fellow who sewed up that bag of winds." The Greek historian Polybius also doubted the reality of specific geographical identifications for sites in the poem. But the learned geographer Strabo early in the first century of the modern era stoutly defended old popular and local traditions on Odyssean sites as worthy of cautious consideration. He said that these ancient traditions should not be pressed to give accurate information in all instances; but neither should they be brushed aside as baseless and ungrounded in realities of the Mediterranean world.

Some places mentioned by Homer are clearly historical and certain, such as Troy itself and Cape Maleia on the SE tip of Greece. Some are obviously imaginary, such as the "floating island" home of Aeolus. But most can be plausibly located within the context of the Mediterranean shores and islands, though details are often poetic invention, and distances and directions between sites are frequently unreal — it is not likely that Homer had accurate knowledge or reports of all places he associates with Odysseus' travels or even cared for such accuracy; he was, after all, a creative poet, not a scientist or research scholar. Besides, the story is full of fantastic tales and events and is meant to be thought of as happening, at least in part, in an unreal fairyland beyond the known world familiar to its hearers.

Many modern scholars have attempted to locate the Odyssean sites, notably Bérard, Lessing, Bradford, Moulinier, Obregon, Luce. Some places all agree upon, others are variously interpreted — sometimes quite implausibly. The map offered here corresponds with these scholars' identifications of some sites but not all. It is *based on the actual data provided by the poem* and on the realities of Mediterranean geography, always with the assumption that what Homer says will not fit the topographical facts in every case, and that where he does locate adventures in places that can be identified, his statements of direction and distance and mutual relationship may not always be accurate in detail. Homer had no map to rely on and travellers' reports about places West of Greece were often vague and confused. And some scenes of action were conscious imaginative creations of the poet.

Troy is firmly enough located, since Schliemann rediscovered it. From there, the first place visited is the land of the *Cicones* and their town Ismaros, where Maron gave Odysseus the rich wine by which he later drugged the

Cyclops (*Od.*9.39–66, 196–98). Herodotus located the Cicones on the coast of Thrace, NW of Troy.

From there, Odysseus is blown by a wind from the North (*Od.*9.67) to the SE tip of Greece, *Cape Maleia*, and around the S edge of Cythera island (*Od.*9.80–81). He intended to sail northward home to Ithaca, but a strong wind from the N blew the ships for nine days, bringing them to the land of the *Lotus Eaters* (*Od.*9.79–85). The distance and direction locates this on the western coast of North Africa, very plausibly the small island of Djerba off modern Tunisia, where Strabo put it, following an ancient tradition.

Next they sail on to the land of the *Cyclopes*, with its mountains and caves and the nearby wooded island where Polyphemus lived (*Od.*9.105–19). In view of where Odysseus came from and next went, the Cyclopes are best located at the Western edge of Sicily—not, as many do, on the Eastern coast near Mt. Etna.

Aeolus' realm is described as a “floating island, with sheer rocky cliffs and on all sides an unbreakable bronze wall” (*Od.*10.1–4). This is patently imaginary, with no real existence or location. Since it is visited after the Cyclops episode and before the journey toward Ithaca, it must be visualized as lying South of Sicily. The route described in the *Odyssey* does not allow placing Aeolia North of Sicily, among the Aeolian Islands (Stromboli, etc.), which would require Odysseus to pass Scylla and Charybdis on his way from it to Ithaca—which he does not do. But Stromboli's conical shape and actively volcanic nature may have served as a model of the imaginary Island of the Winds.

Aeolus has all the winds except that from the West tied up in a bag, so that Odysseus may be blown homeward—clearly to the East and far away, as the voyage took nine days and nights (*Od.*10.25–28). The *Ithaca* which he seeks to reach is best identified with the island still so named, off the West coast of central Greece. Attempts to locate it elsewhere are not convincing, and the centuries-long tradition must be honored.

When the curious sailors untie the bag of winds and all are blown back to Aeolia (*Od.*10.47–55), the route again is clear and direct. Rejected by Aeolus, they row without help of any wind for six days and nights to *Laestrygonia*, with its deep harbor protected by high enfolding cliffs, in a distant region where the paths of day and night come close together (*Od.*10.76–91). This too is a land of mystery and will not match the location for it which some propose in Eastern Sicily or in Italy SW of Rome. It can plausibly be placed at Bonifacio in Southern Corsica, where there is a fine enclosed harbor far out of the usual Greek sailor's world.

Only Odysseus' ship escapes the fierce battle with the Laestrygonians and reaches *Aiaia*, Circe's island (*Od.*10.135–36), described as lying low in the endless sea where all directions are confused (*Od.*10.190–96). The ancients associated this with the heights lying off the West coast of Italy still called Monte Circeo, North of Terracina. Homer likely had no particular place in mind. The witch Circe suitably lived in some hidden area away from human abodes.

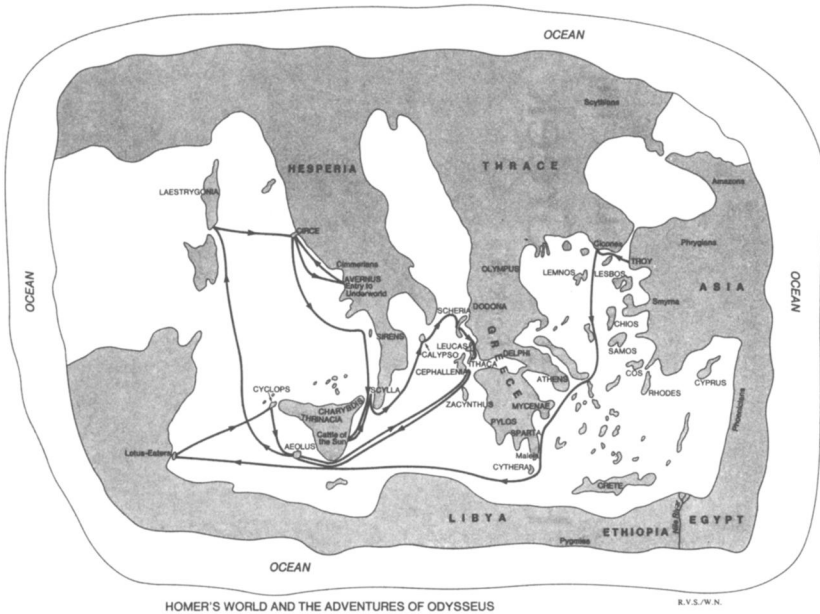
On Circe's urging, Odysseus goes to the edge of *Hades*, to consult the ghost of the prophet Tiresias. This is only one day's sail, with a stiff wind from the

North (*Od.* 10.507; 11.11). It is in the territory of the *Cimmerians*, who live in perpetual mist and darkness, never seeing the sun—perhaps a reference to copper miners working underground in central Italy (*Od.* 11.14–22). The location and distance would fit Lake Avernus near Naples, where Vergil clearly places the entry to Hades in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. But Homer's description of the area, along the distant stream of Ocean, seems influenced by the shrine of the Dead in Thesprotia, Western upper Greece, where the river Acheron was traditionally located. We should not look too hard for the Land of the Dead among the living. There is no reason from Homer's text to place Hades beyond the straits of Gibraltar in the far West, and that location will not fit the account of the short trip Southward from Circe's isle.

Odysseus returns without problem from the edge of Hades to *Aiaia* (*Od.* 12.1–17), where Circe instructs him on his further voyaging. She says he will pass the island of the *Sirens*, where he must not land (*Od.* 12.38–55). This has since ancient times been identified with the small I Galli islets in the Gulf of Salerno a bit South of Capri and Sorrento. It is therefore on his way to Sicily. He reaches it after a short voyage.

Circe tells Odysseus that after escaping the seductive Sirens he has the choice of two routes: either past the Wandering Rocks, whose sheer cliffs are pounded by the roaring sea and belch fire; or through the narrows where on one side dreadful *Charybdis* sucks whole ships into her whirlpool and destruction, while on the other side gruesome snaky-headed *Scylla* snatches sailors from the ships passing by (*Od.* 12.56–126). This sounds like alternative ways of getting around Sicily from a Northern approach—but highly colored with fantastic details and fairyland flavor. The Wandering Rocks, with their destructive fire, may hint at volcanic Stromboli and its companion Aeolian Islands off the North coast of Eastern Sicily. There is archaeological evidence that Mycenaean Age Greeks visited that area to get its valuable obsidian deposits. But some of the description, and the mention that Jason and the ship *Argo* passed there, imports details from a different site, associated with the Bosphoros entry into the Black Sea NE of Greece: a clear example of Homeric conflation of facts and legends. This route would take Odysseus along the Northern edge of Sicily and to a swing Southward and then Eastward past the big island in a homeward direction for Ithaca. Odysseus chooses the shorter, more direct route down the East coast of Sicily opposite lower Italy. *Charybdis* is on the Sicilian side, and the sea currents are still strong there, changing direction several times a day under influence of the powerful tides. A rock opposite jutting out from Italy well locates the cave of ravenous *Scylla* and is still named after her. Vergil and other post-Homeric authors place *Scylla* and *Charybdis* here, between Sicily and Italy at the narrowest point.

After escaping these monstrous dangers, Odysseus arrives “at once” at the Island of the Sun God Hyperion, *Thrinakia*, as Circe had said and where she sternly warned him not to harm the Sun God's splendid cattle (*Od.* 12.127–41). This must therefore be off the East coast of Sicily not far from the Northern tip. The name comes from $\Theta\rho\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\chi\acute{\iota}$, ‘trident.’ It was later called *Trinakria*, ‘triple heights.’ It is *not* Sicily itself, as often supposed, for which Homer uses the old designation *Sikanie* (*Od.* 24.307), after the historic early inhabitants there, the *Sicani*. Held on *Thrinakia* a whole month by winds



always blowing from the East or South (therefore pushing a ship away from Ithaca, not toward it; and indicating that Thrinakia is W of their goal and that Ithaca lies to the East), the restless and starving men defy the prohibition of Circe and kill and eat some of the cattle of the Sun. In punishment they are all slain, only Odysseus escaping, since he did not share in their sacrilegious guilt (*Od.*12.271–419).

Odysseus clung to the mast and keel of his shattered ship and was carried by the South wind back to *Scylla and Charybdis*, barely escaping once more with his life (*Od.*12.420–46).

From there, still clinging to part of his ship's wreckage, Odysseus is blown for nine days and nights until he is cast up on *Ogygia*, Calypso's isle (*Od.*12.447–49). The island is described as heavily wooded and "lying at the navel (i.e., center) of the sea" (*Od.*1.50–51). Though its direction from Scylla is not indicated, it seems to be Eastward and somewhat to the North, since the last-mentioned wind was from the South (*Od.*12.427) and it lies on his way home to Ithaca, as subsequent data reveal. If imagined to be below the "heel" of Italy, it fits these criteria, including being at the center of the whole Mediterranean sea. No actual island exists there. Like Calypso herself, her island is "hidden away" (καλύπτεται) and is legendary.

After being kept on *Ogygia* for seven years, Odysseus is finally released by direct command of Zeus, acting under pressure from Odysseus' patron goddess Athena (*Od.*1.44–88). With Calypso's help, he builds a sturdy raft, on which he sails for seventeen days until reaching the proximity of *Scheria*, land of the Phaeacians. Poseidon then wrecks his raft in a great storm and the hero has to swim in mighty waves for two days and nights and is dashed against harsh cliffs, but eventually with the help of Athena, who calms all the

winds except that from the North, lands on a smoother shore and climbs out of the sea to sleep in exhaustion, till wakened by Nausicaa and her companions and taken to the palace where he is welcomed, honored, and given passage home to Ithaca (*Od.* 5.30–42, 268–493). The Phaeacians' island has since ancient times been identified with Kerkyra, modern Corfu, off the West coast of upper Greece. Thucydides (1.25) reports that the inhabitants claimed descent from the legendary Phaeacians and had inherited their skill with ships. The fact that Odysseus steered his raft on the long voyage by always keeping the constellation Bear or Wagon (our "Big Dipper") on his left, as instructed by Calypso to do (*Od.* 5.273–280), shows that he was travelling basically Eastward. He would have missed Scheria, passing too far to the North, except for Athena's intervention in having the North wind blow him Southward to land. The island is described as looking "like a shield lying on the sea" (*Od.* 5.281) — which is apt for Kerkyra seen from the NW. Plausible locations on Corfu have been found for the various scenes and events mentioned in the poem. It seems to be the basis for that part of Homer's story.

Finally, Odysseus is taken home to *Ithaca* in a speedy Phaeacian clipper (*Od.* 13.70–138), deposited asleep near the bay of Phorcys, from which he goes up to a familiar cave of the local nymphs (*Od.* 13.96–199; 344–60), then to his farm and his palace, where he takes vengeance on the Suitors, who have been seeking to win Penelope, and is happily reunited with his loyal family. Places for all these events have been found in modern Ithaki, which claims by a firm tradition down the centuries to have been Odysseus' kingdom.

Just as he took some realities of the Trojan War and imaginatively expanded on them into the brilliant story of the *Iliad*, so also Homer took various legends and sagas of heroic adventures in the Mediterranean area and infused them with his extraordinary poetic style to create the *Odyssey*, which is a *poem*, therefore *something made* — a mixture of fact and fancy, in a setting sometimes real but often imaginary and fanciful. Our map of Odysseus' travels has to be a similar combination of geographic realities and poetic fiction. It is *Homer's* map, the only kind suited to be a context and guide to Homer's story.

RAYMOND V. SCHODER, S.J.

Loyola University of Chicago

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