Down through the centuries Homeric scholars, explorers, and navigators have debated if the places Odysseus visited could ever be located. Two schools of thought developed for interpreting the events described in Homer’s epic poem. The literary scholar’s approach claims that all the incidents following the moment when Odysseus passed Cape Malea must be purely mythical and imaginary. Whereas the historic geographer’s approach sees plenty of evidence that whole sections of this work incorporate ancient Phoenician pilot’s instructions for known coastlines and tales based on authentic experiences of those ancient mariners. By careful study of The Odyssey text, the latter school has put forward many theories as to where to look in the Mediterranean area for the nine landfalls that Homer described.

In 1624 Philipp Clüver, a professor in Leiden, Holland, published one of the earliest studies on the route of Odysseus and he put Calypso’s Ogygia Island in Malta. (Wolf 1968) In the centuries that followed many others published their own confused theories, some of which were so far-fetched as to put Odysseus in the Caspian Sea, or the Black Sea, or as far north as Norway, and even in Iceland. In the last decade of the 19th century, one of the first serious researchers working in the field was Samuel Butler who located the Cyclops Cave of Polyphemus near Trapani in Sicily. Between 1906 and 1912, Victor Bérard did much to advance the research, although some of his sites do not conform well with the text. In the early 1920s, Richard Halliburton traced his own logical route. Then in the 1950s, Lewis Pocock placed most of the landfalls in or near Sicily and Gaetano Baglio proposed yet another route. One of the most consistently reliable geographers, Ernle Bradford, sailed to all his proposed sites during the 1950s. Around 1963, Attilio Gaudio visited the landfalls indicated by Bérard. Tim Severin sailed a route in 1985 to establish that Odysseus must have encountered the Cyclops in Crete and then sailed up the west coast of Greece, right past his homeland of Ithaca. Recently, at the turn of the century, Jean Cuisenier, summed up some of the earlier theories and sailed to many of his own chosen sites.

Each author seemed intent on promoting their own original ideas regarding the routes followed by Odysseus, ignoring most of the previous research. Frequently researchers would lock onto one seemingly accurate landfall and then build the entire route around that. Homer’s text is cited when it nicely corroborates their theories, but Homer’s troublesome little details are systematically omitted when they do not conform to a chosen landfall.

The text tells us that, after the leaving the land of the Lotus-Eaters (probably in Tunisia), his squadron of twelve warships arrived in the land of the Cyclops in a “thick fog” and beached on the shores of a “luxuriant island” located “not very far from the harbor of their coast, and not so near either…which was the home of innumerable goats.” Many writers on Homeric geography, intent on tracing the route of Odysseus, have skipped over and neglected to locate this Goat Island or have found some island off a likely coast but found that it lacked a landing beach. Bradford tells us that the Isle of Favignana, off the northwest coast of Sicily was called “Aegusa” or Goat Island in classical times, and, that when approaching it from the south with the south winds blowing, one often finds these islands enveloped in fog. At the head of the harbor on this island, Homer writes “there is a stream of fresh water, running out of a cave in a grove of popular trees.” Bradford noted that at Cala Grande on the southwest coast here there was a shelving sand beach where Greek warships coming from the south could easily land. The Italian Touring Club guidebook lists seven caves for Favignana Island, some of which were found to contain either Paleolithic or Neolithic remains. (del Salvio et al. 1989) Any cave near Cala Grande that shows signs of a discharge point aught to meet the requirements.

Seeing the smoke from the fires in the neighboring land of the Cyclops, Odysseus decided to take his ship and investigate. Sailing “no great distance to the mainland coast …as we approached its nearest point, we made out a cave there, close to the sea, with a high entrance overhung by laurels. Here large flocks of sheep and goats were penned at night, and round the mouth a yard had been built with a great wall of stones.” Various extravagant ideas have been put forward to localize the Cave of Polyphemus, some even as improbable as the Canary Islands. Bérard puts the cave at Posillipo near Naples, but this is an entirely artificial tunnel dating to Roman times and never visible from the sea. Several researchers, starting with Butler in 1897, locate this cave not far from Favignana Island, about five kilometers north of Trapani near Pizzolungo Point. Halliburton hiked out there in the 1920s and took shelter from the rain in a walled-in sheep pen cave near the coast called Grotta di Polifemo, which he estimated to be fifty feet (17 meters) square and thirty feet (10 meters) high. Thirty years later Bradford checked out this same cave and agreed that “a band of men could easily be trapped” here.

After loosing the rest of his fleet to the cannibal Laestrygonians, Odysseus arrived on his ship at Aeaea Island, the home of the goddess-sorceress, Circe. He climbed a crag to reconnoiter and found that the island was “for the most part low-lying, as all round it in a ring I saw the sea stretching away to the horizon.” Later Circe tells Odysseus “to drag your ship onto dry land and stow your belongings and all the ship’s tackle in
a cave,” and then come and stay as her guests. They would need to hide the oars, rigging, and plundered treasures from local thieves. The ancient Greek geographer, Strabo, situated Circe’s home at Monte Circeo in Italy and numerous Homeric geographers since have agreed. This 540-meter-high promontory is attached to the continent by flat marshlands today, but in the Late Bronze Age the sea may have covered this lowland. Over 30 marine caves run around the base of this limestone mount and many of them could have served as a boat storage cave. Bèrard proposed the Grotta delle Capre which he measured at 36 meters long, 25 meters wide, and 10 meters high. Today tourists are shown a large marine cave, Grotta Azzurra della Maga Circe, but the text clearly states that Circe lived in “a well-built castle of dressed stone.” Among other likely locations for Circe’s Island, Gaudioso has proposed the low-lying, volcanic Isle of Ponza (27 kilometers south of Mount Circeo) as fitting the island’s description more suitably and Pocock proposed the Isle of Ustica (70 kilometers northwest of Palermo) with its Grotta della Barche, where boat tackle is stored even today.

Next Odysseus must visit Hades, the Underground-Cavern of the Dead and Circe tells him that the North wind will blow him to a “wild coast and to Persephone’s Grove.” Homer puts the entrance to Hades’ Kingdom where “the River of Flaming Fire and the River of Lamentation, which is a branch of the Styx, unite around a pinnacle of rock to pour their thundering streams into Acheron.” Traditionally there are at least four entrances to Hades: two in Greece and two in Italy. At the southernmost point of Greece, in the ancient Tenarian settlement on the tip of the Mani peninsula in the Peloponnese is a marine cave entrance that Orpheus used when he went to bring Eurydice from the Underworld. In Epirus of northwestern Greece at the confluence of the Acheron and the Cocyteus, the River of Woe and the River of Wailing, is a rock where another entrance can be found. In central Sicily, near Enna, a cave on the south shore of Lake Pergusa is where Hades came out of the Underworld, kidnapped Persephone, and took her back underground to be his bride. (del Salvio et al. 1989) But the traditional location in Italy, for consulting the oracle of the dead and entering Hades, was at the Lake Avernus, north of Baiae and west of Naples. Many think that the latter location is where Odysseus went to dig a trench and offer sacrifice so as to be able to converse with the dead spirits that came forth to meet him. But, as Severin points out, the entrance to Hades in Epirus fits better with the directions given in Homer.

Returning to Circe’s Island, Odysseus is given precise sailing instructions that will get him back to his home in Ithaca. After safely passing the Sirens at the Galli Islands, he continues south and must pass through the Strait of Messina. Now the early Phoenician mariners knew the whirlpools of Charybdis on the Sicilian side and the headland at Scilla in Calabria. The strait is from three to four kilometers wide, but in Mycenaean times the dangerous currents and whirlpools of Charybdis must have been quite formidable for a war galley. So Circe warns him to hug closely the high rock promontory of Scylla and beware that, “halfway up the crag there is a misty cavern, facing the west and running down to Erebus, past which, your investigation Bérard persists in ignoring that Perejil Island is situated close to the mainland, not in “the middle of the seas,” and it is far too distant, almost 2000 kilometers, from the Strait of Messina for someone drifting on a mast-keel raft, with a speed of at best one knot, to be able to reach in nine days.

As early as the 3rd century B.C., the director of the library at Alexandria, Callimachus, had proposed the Isle of Gozo, just northwest of Malta, as Calypso’s Ogygia Island. An old engraving shows this cave as an arched opening at the north end of a limestone escarpment above Ramla Bay. In the 1920s, Halliburton estimated the cave at thirty feet (10 m) square and ten feet (3 m) high and “hung with beautifully shaped stalactites.” There were “signs of the chisel everywhere,” indicating that some portions of the cave were artificial. Later massive collapse occurred due to local quarrying near and over the cave. In 1952, Shaw wrote that “the interior of the cave consists of a series of low crawlways between shattered chambers floored with angular fragments of rock.” While visiting this cave in 1986, I found it much the same.

After seven years, Odysseus built a raft, sailed east for seventeen days, and reached Scheria (modern-day Corfu) where the Phaeacians heard his tale and escorted him south to his homeland of Ithaca. He landed there in the cove of Phorcys and hid the treasures he had received from the Phaeacians in a nearby cave. The text reads, “At the head of the cave grows a long-leaved olive tree and nearby is a cavern that offers welcome shade and is sacred to the Nymphs whom we call Naiads. This cave contains a number of stone basins and two-handed jars, which are used by the bees as their hives; also great looms of stone where the Nymphs weave marvellous fabrics of sea-purple; and there are springs whose water never fails. It has two mouths. The one that looks north is the way down for men. The other, facing south, is meant for the gods; and as immortals come in by this way it is not used by men at all.” Nearly all Homeric geographers...
and scholars are in agreement that this cave is Marmarospilia or the Cave of the Nymphs, located south of Dexia Bay near Vathy. Its entrance faces northwest and a second skylight entrance is 80 meters to the northeast. Ancient terracotta lamps and figurines were recovered there which are on exhibit at the Vathy Archeological Museum. Much vandalism of the “looms of stone” has occurred and broken stalactites have become sad ornaments on the terraces above the entrance.

From this cave, Odysseus followed a path to Eumaeus’ hut at the Raven’s Crag in the southern part of Ithaca, where he stayed until returning to his home to fight the suitors. The swine herder, Eumaeus, watered his pigs at the Spring of Arethusa, just below these cliffs. This discharge point is in a shelter cave of thin-bedded limestone in a small gorge that occasionally carries surface water from the cliff. Homer tells us that, while Odysseus slept at the hut, Eumaeus “went off to pass the night where the white-tusked porkers slept, under an overarching rock sheltered from the northerly winds.” This rock shelter is either the one at the base of the Raven’s Crag or the one I noticed further north across the slope. Homer’s vague descriptions of distant Mediterranean landfalls were probably gained from oral tradition and mariner’s tales, but some feel that his accurate mastery of the geography of Ithaca was based on a personal knowledge of that island.

At Polis Bay in the northern part of Ithaca in 1873, a local man found a bronze sword and a tripod-cauldron under the remains of the collapsed Louizos Cave. Following this lead, Sylvia Benton, working for the British School at Athens in 1932, found in this cave shrine twelve more bronze tripod-cauldrons, dated from the tenth to early eighth century B.C. (Benton 1938) Now the number of bronze tripods that Odysseus had been given as parting gifts by the rulers in Scheria was thirteen according to Homer. So the tantalizing question remains: did Homer know about these thirteen tripods in the cave at Polis Bay and decide to work them into his epic poem? (Luce 1998) Benton also dug up a fragment of a terracotta mask dating from the second or first century B.C. and bearing the words, “Votive offering to Odysseus.” This was clear proof that the cult of the hero Odysseus had been associated with this cave in the Hellenistic period.

Thanks to The Odyssey we know more about Odysseus than about Homer himself. Never an adventure seeker, “Odysseus of the nimble wits” used his intelligence to conquer obstacles, which were placed in his path. He had all the makings of a great caver - prudent, ingenious, perseverant, and courageous. He showed that the true power of a man or woman lies not in their muscles or their technical knowledge, but in their ability to think.

All this debate about the different landfalls is not terribly important. What is essential is Homer’s Odyssey - one of the first true classics of Western literature. If cavers - both science and sport cavers - would only develop the cultural side of their education, maybe we could all better spread the message of how beautiful caves are and how important it is to protect them. This epic poem has shown all generations for almost three thousand years the beauty of nature and the weakness of man in face of that nature.

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Par Catherine et Jean-Carlo FAIT

Parfum de Grèce

Spéléo-club de La Ciotat (Bouches du Rhône - France) qu’ils dirigent de main de maître depuis 25 ans.


Après avoir été pendant longtemps trésorière du Spéléo-club de La Ciotat, Catherine REGNAULT-FAIT est aujourd’hui présidente de la Maison des Falaises, créée en 1993, pour gérer et valoriser le site naturel classé des plus hautes falaises maritimes d’Europe.


Cette communication est dédiée à mes parents, Silvio FAIT et Rosette FAIT, née TOMMASI, décédés brutalement début 2004 ; et à Marcelle REGNAULT, née Grégeois, qui vient de nous quitter en ce début d’avril 2005.

Résumé:

Catherine et Jean-Carlo FAIT, sont membres fondateurs du Spéléo-club de La Ciotat (Bouches du Rhône - France) qu’ils dirigent de main de maître depuis 25 ans.


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Abstract

In La Ciotat, Jean-Carlo and Catherine Fait founded, in 1980, the Spéléo-club “La Salamandre”, then in 1993 the Cliffs-House , with a main aim : to give the opportunity to discover and add value to this natural site of the highest sea cliffs in Europe. The Mineral World Institute was finally created in 1999.

Jean-Carlo Fait explored more than 1500 caves, wrote different books and realised films on La Ciotat’s cliffs and cavities, that is nowadays the most respected specialist of them.

The dynamic support of his wife relayed his activity in the field, in cooperation with local actors of the sportive and associative life in La Ciotat, and with nature lovers. The couple has 30 years of practice in organisation of various kinds of events, outings and courses for all ages and types of groups. And their activity strengthened the speleology in La Ciotat area. Therefore, they are extremely interested in participating in this congress and transmitting their experience, since Jean-Carlo, born greek of an Italian father and a French mother, took his wife and his mother back to his roots, eighteen years ago, on the Astraka table-land where the mythical Provatina abyss opens, with a great enthusiasm.

Now, with an increased motivation, they wish to take advantage of this 14th congress to take their children with them and transmit them the “parfume of Greece” and bring together the speleological interest of La Ciotat through the presentation of the film on the Draïoun Cavity, the most important of Calanques.

Ici Commence L’aventure

Je suis né à Karditsa, en Thessalie, à quelques kilomètres des célèbres « Métaizers », le 5 décembre 1959 au matin. Le premier air que j’ai respiré en venant au monde est donc « le parfum de la Grèce ! », mon pays natal. Mon père, Silvio Fait, italien de nationalité, a quitté son tyrol natal en venant au monde est donc « le parfum de la Grèce ! », mon pays natal.