

# Bulletin



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## *Passage to Ithaca (Second Edition)*

A presentation by the author

*G. Paxinos-Kalatzis*

*This piece is a written version of the presentation made by the author on the launch of the second edition of *Passage to Ithaca* at Ithaca House, Melbourne on 5 March 2023. Some edits have been made.*

The second edition of *Passage to Ithaca* was published by the Ithacan Historical Society in 2022.<sup>73</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to talk a little about the experience of producing the work. With very little by way of previous experience in producing a large body of writing in book format, the road before me was far from clear. Typical of a first timer, the work was, perhaps, overly ambitious from the outset. The research was two pronged: firstly, a study of available sources on the establishment of Ithacan society and the complex, post-Byzantine political background and history that influenced that process. This aspect of the research took me to a number of libraries, both in Australia and Greece, each providing me with a rich and varied source of material.

The second focus of my research was to interview the islanders. I conducted extensive field work to amass the largest collection of nicknames produced to date. The nicknames were vital in so far as the work might ultimately serve as a companion to family history. I had fantasised that in the diaspora many generations removed, that the only vestige of past identity that remained might very well be an unknown name or word, reminiscent of a distant past, an Ithacan version of the ‘Kunta Kinte’ story. Subsequent search of the word in *Passage to Ithaca* would open a whole world of ancestral discovery.

<sup>73</sup> George Paxinos, *Passage to Ithaca* (Melbourne: Ithacan Historical Society, 2022, 2nd ed.).

## When does work on a subject begin?

It is hard to know when the seeds were first planted for the production of this work. It may have been as early as the late 70s when I first visited Ithaca as an adult. As it was winter, I turned my attention to searching documents for the purposes of family history. There is no doubt that the personal search led to interest in the wider Ithacan context. As I was not yet aware of the Historical Archive, I ventured only to the Registry of Civil Records, the *Lixiarcheio*. I relate this experience for the purpose of illustrating how rustic the process of getting a copy of a relevant page was at the time. The then Registrar, opened the folio size ledger at the appropriate page and sent me off to the other side of Vathi to have it photocopied at the local bookseller. So, at the height of winter, I walked with the already worse-for-wear ledger across my arms with the pages facing upwards. Should any rain have fallen, the ink of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries would have been dissolved never to be seen again. Upon reaching my destination, the shopkeeper, in order to get the ledger to fit the machine, bent it back without any restraint or care for the spine which cracked under the assault. The experience left me with an indelible impression of the vulnerability of precious documents that hold the key to our journey of discovery of our ancestral past.

It would be quite a number of years before I returned to Ithaca. In the meantime I entered into a busy correspondence with anyone who could add to my developing interest. This was in the years prior to the internet — no quick fix email as yet. During that time I became aware of the Ιστορικό Αρχείο Ιθάκης (the Historical Archive of Ithaca, now the ΓΑΚ Ιθάκης) and excitedly made contact with the then keeper Eleni Griva. I expressed an interest in the archive and anything she could tell me about it. In retrospect I believe this was a rare contact between Australia and the Archeio as borne out by her generous and enthusiastic response. Among other information, I was delighted to receive documents relating to my ancestors going back a few generations. Keeping in mind that at this stage there was no such thing as a photocopier at the Archeio, it was clear she had gone to some trouble. I was all the more grateful as I had not asked for anything of that kind. Needless to say I was hooked. To have a document with a great-great-grandfather's signature from around the time Cook came to Australia was

mind blowing. The indelible impression this contact made on me consolidated a deep desire to assist in the preservation of such material. I am most gratified to see that the Ithacan Historical Society has made this aim a high priority of its mission.

For about a year prior to embarking on the first of my longer stays on the island, I spent one day a week at the Ithacan club talking to both the gentlemen card players and the Bingo ladies. My inquiries centred on Andrea Anagnostatos' tentative list of unattached nicknames. I also explored the Club's book collection for any relevant material. It was not till the late 90s and early 2000s that I was able to make successive longer trips to Ithaca. The first was for about four months, where I spent much of my time developing relationships with the locals and following up any family history I could. The more I learned the more I became interested in the wider picture. This entailed many chats at the kafeneia, predominantly in the northern precincts where I was based. I also conducted many walks which offered me a better understanding the geography in relation to settlement patterns. My on site explorations were all documented with copious photographs. Unfortunately, I was using my old Pentax and did not realise that the light meter was not functioning properly until it was too late. So it wasn't all smooth sailing. Things did go wrong. The folkloric information took time because I did not interrogate my respondents. Information, which bordered on the personal, was gathered as part of a non-confrontational, casual conversation. I'm pleased to say I was able get down to business once my purpose was known and accepted.

Swallowing my pride and suppressing the initial embarrassment, I ploughed headlong into everyone I chanced upon. The spiel was simple enough: 'Hello, I'm doing such and such, can I trouble you for your surname and *paratsoukli*'. After a while, I was truly immersed and invested, and little by little I started to add significantly to the collection of nicknames. My zeal must have reached fever pitch when waiting to be served at a restaurant, and in order not to waste an opportunity, I zeroed in on a group of women at the next table. Half way through my spiel I noticed they were a little downcast and ... all dressed in black; yes they had come from off shore to pay respects to a dearly departed member of the family, whose nickname I was in the process of insensitively collecting. I was lucky they welcomed the distraction and approved of my project. It was the same

all over. My greatest apprehension was that I would be met with disdain, even rudeness, which had been known to happen to at least one previous researcher. My experience overall proved the opposite.

During a particularly hot Ithacan summer there was a routine to my working day. All the notes collected during the early part of the day needed to be tidied up and cross referenced with information from other sources. This would take place during the siesta time. As the house I stayed in was a post-earthquake cement sheet construction, it was a freezer in the winter, and a *tserepa* in the summer. Due to the excessive heat inside, my computer would struggle and I could not afford it to collapse, as I kept no other notes. We resorted to freezing containers of ice and after wrapping them in a towel the computer would be placed on top. My afternoon's deliberations would conclude with a short list of doubtful entries, which needed further confirmation. Armed with these notes I would hit the town in the evening and depending on the gathering would target likely suspects. Invariably, I ended up with Giorgi Paro and Mitso Flokka, who tended to solve most of my outstanding questions. They became used to the routine and seemed to enjoy it. Other locals had also become so invested in the project that on one occasion with another group at *Margarita*, during a lull in conversation, I was pressed: 'go on, ask us a question!'. As nearly all of my respondents (of 20 odd years ago) were octogenarians and older, it is safe to assume they are sadly now all dearly departed.

I had put Vathi off for too long as I had no contacts there. I was eventually informed that I should seek out retired lawyer, Gianni Kandilioti, 'who frequents the *kafeneio* round the corner'. I spotted a likely character and introduced myself, expecting to be told to 'bugger off' and not annoy people in their retirement. He pondered seriously on the matter for some minutes before answering 'Come back in two weeks'. A man of few words, who I suspect appreciated my direct approach; no go-betweens. About a week later I was in Vathi around 2am with local acquaintances at the Exedra cafe. The waiter, having exchanged some pleasantries with the local familiars turned to me, a hitherto unknown, and said, 'aren't you the one who is collecting the *paratsouklia*?'. 'Yes', I answered, 'but how do you know?'. He said Gianni had been rousing everyone around for days to collate material. I was most surprised and chuffed to have made that much of an impression in this alien southern locale. But how did he know it was

me? They know! ... they know! You may think you are invisible but you are not. Gianni and his friend, a Mavrokefalo, came good with a host of names and attendant *paratsouklia*. But they came with a caveat! They drew on names from all over the island as he did not believe that I should compartmentalise the island. Needless to say I was duly grateful and refrained from arguing my case. Gianni's information formed the core of my siesta cataloguing, cross checking and eliminating. It should be noted that at no time did I resort to speaking English during my interactions with the locals so, I was pleasantly surprised when upon departing one turned to me and asked if I was going to translate the work to English! Alas, though a Greek translation has been attempted, it has not come to fruition.

The quest persisted well after the first edition. One nickname that had eluded me to the point of distraction was 'Klapatsouras'. I had scratched my head for years over what that meant. You would think the people would just tell you, but often they assume you know. You would also think I would have asked, but I was often not speaking directly to the person in question, and equally often the interviewee pleaded ignorance. During a pre-pandemic gathering of Ithacans at the Club in mid-conversation on another topic, I just blurted out, 'does anyone know etc etc...?'. Luckily Spiridoula Coutsouveli was in attendance and thought that perhaps it was from 'klapa', a Greek work for a 'hinge'! It was that simple.

As I have already said, the project was not entirely free of hassle. A most dire experience occurred on our return to Athens, content in the knowledge that the work was in the final stages of completion. After the six hour journey by boat and bus to Athens, hot and bothered and a little dazed on a 40 degree day, I took the computer out of the suitcase and placed it on the bedside table in case I had a brilliant idea. Hot and exhausted, we fell asleep. I was suddenly rudely awakened by my wife screaming and the vision of a fearsome fellow staring at us as he squatted in the now widely opened window. Adding my own screams, I charged the window sending him off. At this point there was a sense of great relief. That was until the moment when my wife asked the blood curdling question; where was the computer, and hastily adding 'you stupid idiot! Why did you take it out of the suitcase?!' It being nowhere in sight my only thoughts were whether to jump out the window to my assured death or paraplegia. Today the feeling of loss would not be so great but unfortunately this was a time before I had



become accustomed to back-ups and USB sticks. Certain in the knowledge that the work of some years, involving so many oral testimonies and travels, could never under any circumstances be repeated, I was inconsolable.

On reassessing the event as the minutes went by, we were even more chilled by the realisation that in order to get to the computer the thief had to have entered the room. There was no way his arm could have stretched from the window to the bedside table. Eventually something drove me to the window again and on closer inspection I saw the computer sitting ever so tentatively on the outside ledge. In other words but for a minute's reaction on our part the project would have vanished and my sanity with it. My wife would argue that the computer would have been the bigger loss of the two. Calm was restored; suicidal thoughts abated. Exhausted from our trip and travails I half latched the shutter as I had done before, thinking he would surely not return. Resting with one eye open I soon heard the scratching noise of his attempt to unlatch the shutter as he had successfully done before. Having to fend him off a second time was the last straw and we got the hotel to ring the police. Needless to say that was the last time we stayed in cheap hotels without air conditioning, where you got a discount if you were a friend of Dennis Skioti's.

### **The second edition**

Remembering that this was meant to be a talk on the occasion of the second edition I must stress that the second edition is by no means a mere reprint. I will spare the reader a detailed outline of all the amendments and revisions. However, notes and observations were kept from the time of the first publication. Apart from the privilege of being given the chance to revise the text with the benefit of hindsight, the second edition has also been beneficiary of references to recent and relevant works such as Athanasopoulou's publication of the Census of 1807 (of which the IHS is wisely preparing a second edition with an English introduction). It has also benefited from advice from respected scholars and the greater availability of information on the Internet. The second edition represents an important milestone for both the work and the publishers. It has cemented The Ithacan Historical Society's commitment to acting as a publishing

house under the logo of IHS. I am most appreciative that this work was its first publication and that any proceeds will go towards furthering its good work in the future.

I will conclude on a humorous anecdote, which serves as another example of how the work continues to grow. Over the years I have come to know Gerry Shannos from Newcastle. When I last saw Gerry at 'Kourvoulia one', I told him that I had put his father in the first edition of my book. His father was 'Pentakosias', a nickname acquired because he was famous for saying that as soon as he could amass 500 pounds he would return to Greece. Gerry's amusing reply was that as a consequence of being 500's son he was called 250! And so the tradition continues in a new land.