

# Spatial context of *Odyssey* 5.452 to 6.317<sup>1</sup>

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This paper is part of a larger project in which I study the presentation of space in Homer and Herodotus to identify the spatial schemas underlying them. It takes advantage of the recent development by cognitive linguists of the grammar of space and the understanding of its cross-linguistic features. The work by linguists agrees with that of theoretical geographers in distinguishing two styles of spatial knowledge: coordinate systems and topologies. A topological space is conveniently defined by Stephen Levinson as concerned with relations of ‘coincidence, contact, containment, contiguity and proximity’.<sup>2</sup> That is, a topological relation is indifferent to or gives no information about measures either of distance or direction. Frames of reference, on the other hand, presuppose an abstract notion of extension of space and express the ‘where’ of objects within it. In this paper I explore what kind of system of spatial reference, if any, is revealed in one particular passage of the *Odyssey*: the famous episode of the meeting of Odysseus and Nausikaa in Books 5 and 6.<sup>3</sup>

## Part 1: Describing the space

Their meeting takes place beside river and sea once the river god has brought a shipwrecked Odysseus safe to land at the river mouth. Odysseus is exhausted so he decides, after observing the terrain, to move out of the river to seek shelter under some bushes, where he falls asleep until woken by women’s voices. The women have been doing clothes washing in the river which has convenient washing pools. By this time they had spread out the clothes on the shore to dry and were playing a ball game. The excited shout raised when the ball goes in the river wakes Odysseus, who then introduces himself to Nausikaa as a suppliant and requests guidance to the city and some clothes. Nausikaa declares herself willing to help and recalls her women from where they have fled on Odysseus’ disreputable appearance. They lead him to the river to wash and return to their mistress. When he has washed and dressed Odysseus goes to sit apart on the shore. Finally, the clothes got in, they all set off together back to the Phaiakian palace with the mule cart, leaving the river.

The small-scale space in which this action takes place is never described for its own sake; its nature and extent are indicated by single words and short phrases scattered through 358 verses from Book 5.452 to near the end of Book 6 at verse 317. The episode, defined in spatial terms, begins when Odysseus gets to land and ends when all actors get to what is clearly a different place: a grove sacred to Athene between shore and city. I will discuss these locative expressions (tabulated below) in turn and then interpret them in terms of contribution to spatial meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr Colleen Chaston and Professor Elizabeth Minchin for comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and to Dr Rachel Hendery for a post-conference critique.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Levinson *Space in Language and Cognition: Explorations in Cognitive Diversity*, Cambridge, 2003, p72 and definition of topological space at p69; see also David Mark ‘On giving and receiving directions: cartographic and cognitive issues’ in *Auto-Carto 8, Proceedings, 8th International Symposium on Computer-Assisted Cartography, Baltimore, Maryland, March 29 – April 3, Falls Church Virginia, 1987*, pp562-571 at p 563-4.

<sup>3</sup> This passage and others for comparison will be marked up in TEI P5.

place	line	actor	phrase
land (sighted)	5.392-3	Odysseus	ὁ δ' ἄρα σχεδὸν εἶσιδε γαῖαν ὄξυ μάλα προΐδων, μεγάλου ὑπὸ κύματος ἀρθείς.
river mouth	5.452-3	Odysseus	πρόσθε δέ οἱ ποίησε γαλήνην, τὸν δ' ἐσάωσεν <u>ἐς ποταμοῦ προχοάς</u>
river	5.462-3	Odysseus	ὁ δ' <u>ἐκ ποταμοῖο</u> λιασθείς σχοίνῳ ὑπεκλίνθη
slope	5.470	Odysseus	<u>ἐς κλιτὺν ἀναβάς</u>
wood	5.475	Odysseus	βῆ ῥ' ἴμεν <u>εἰς ὕλην</u> .
wood	5.475-6	Odysseus	τὴν δὲ <u>σχεδὸν ὕδατος</u> εὔρεν <u>ἐν περιφαινομένῳ</u>
bushes	5.476	Odysseus	<u>δοιοὺς δ' ἄρ' ὑπήλυθε θάμνους</u>
river	6.85	Nausikaa + women	αἰ δ' ὅτε δὴ <u>ποταμοῖο ῥόον περικαλλέ'</u> ἴκοντο
washing pools	6.86	located object	<u>ἐνθ' ἧ τοι πλυνοὶ ἦσαν ἐπηετανοί</u>
river	6.89	mules	καὶ τὰς μὲν σεῦαν <u>ποταμὸν πάρα δινήεντα</u>
holes (in river)	6.92	women	στεῖβον δ' <u>ἐν βόθροισι</u> θοῶς
shore	6.94-5	clothes	ἐξείης πέτασαν <u>παρὰ θῖν' ἀλός</u> , ἦχι μάλιστα λάιγγας ποτὶ χέρσον ἀποπλύνεσκε θάλασσα.
river banks	6.97	women	δεῖπνον ἔπειθ' εἶλοντο <u>παρ' ὄχθησιν ποταμοῖο</u>
river eddy	6.116	ball	ἀμφιπόλου μὲν ἄμαρτε, <u>βαθείη δ' ἔμβαλε δίνη</u>
bushes	6.127	Odysseus	ὡς εἰπὼν <u>θάμνων</u> ὑπεδύσετο δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς
sand spits?	6.138	women	τρέσσαν δ' ἄλλυδις ἄλλη <u>ἐπ' ἠϊόνας προῦχούσας</u>
river	6.210	Odysseus	λούσατέ τ' <u>ἐν ποταμῶ</u> , ὅθ' ἐπὶ σκέπας ἔστ' ἀνέμοιο.
river	6.216	Odysseus	ἦνωγον δ' ἄρα μιν λουῖσθαι <u>ποταμοῖο ῥοῆσιν</u>
shore	6.236	Odysseus	ἔζετ' ἔπειτ' ἀπάνευθε κιῶν <u>ἐπὶ θῖνα θαλάσσης</u>
river	6.317	mules	ἡμιόνους· αἰ δ' ὦκα λίπον <u>ποταμοῖο ῥέεθρα</u>

<b>another place</b> - grove of Athene	6.321-2	N+O+ women	δύσετό τ' ἠέλιος καὶ τοὶ κλυτὸν ἄλσος ἴκοντο ἱρὸν Ἀθηναίης, ἴν' ἄρ' ἔζετο δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς
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To begin a little before the beginning, Odysseus sights land when raised up on a wave at 5.392 (ὁ δ' ἄρα σχεδὸν εἶσιδε γαῖαν) but does not get into the river (as a halfway house to getting to shore) until sixty verses later. Those verses represent his struggle with the sea and are important for the formation of the hearer's mental model. They ensure that the audience's point of view is subsumed in Odysseus': in the sea looking toward land. The river-god halts the flow so as to make a peaceful place in front (line 452-3 πρόσθε δέ οἱ ποίησε γαλήνην). At this point Odysseus is probably in a river not flowing (a billabong).<sup>4</sup> He is not on the bank yet as when he does get out we are told so explicitly at 5.462 (ὁ δ' ἐκ ποταμοῖο λιασθεῖς). Observing that there is a shady wood up a slope (5.471 ἐς κλυτὸν), he goes there (5.475 βῆ ῥ' ἴμεν εἰς ὕλην). The wood (or clump of trees) is near the water and visible all round (5.476 ἐν περιφανομένῳ), that is, we might say it was an isolated clump of trees.<sup>5</sup> When he gets there he gets under two bushes (5.476 δοιούς θάμνους), growing so intertwined that they exclude sun and rain, and makes a bed from a heap of leaves (5.483 φύλλον γὰρ ἔην χύσις ἤλιθα πολλή).

A further 94 verses closing Book 5 and beginning Book 6 are taken up with a simile, a spatial digression and other narrative<sup>6</sup> which introduces a new actor, Nausikaa. We now follow her journey as she leaves the palace with cart, clothes and attendants (6.81-84) and reaches a river (6.85 αἰ δ' ὅτε δὴ ποταμοῖο ῥόον περικαλλέ' ἴκοντο). Her objective is a particular part of the river (6.86 ἔνθ' ἦ τοι): the washing pools. These are described as ever reliable (ἐπηετανοί) and the source of abundant fine water (6.86-87 πολὺ δ' ὕδωρ / καλὸν ὑπεκπρορέει) with the present tense marking them as 'a permanent feature of the landscape'.<sup>7</sup> The river itself is the objective of the mules, who crop the grass beside it (6.89-90 τὰς μὲν σεῦαν ποταμὸν πάρα δινήεντα | τρώγειν ἄγρωστιν μελιθδέα). The women wash the clothes in the river (6.91-3) but spread them out to dry on the pebbly shore (6.94 παρὰ θῖν' ἄλός) so it is certain that the scene remains near the mouth of the river, as we expect. Nausikaa and the women eat lunch by the bank of the river (6.97 παρ' ὄχθησιν ποταμοῖο), then throw a ball to each other, reminding the poet of Artemis and nymphs on a mountain (6.102-108) which makes a spatial digression. During play the ball goes into a deep eddy (6.116 βαθείη δ' ἔμβαλε δίνη) indicating that they are still near the river. Odysseus is woken up by their shouts of laughter<sup>8</sup> and sets off to meet them. The attendant

<sup>4</sup> Professor John Davidson pointed out to me that the river god's stopping the flow probably denotes the effect of a tidal river mouth so I now discount a second possibility that a dry river bed is to be imagined.

<sup>5</sup> Note that this is not the same as saying it was 'in a clearing', which in English conjures up a three-part structure; see for example the Murray-Dimock translation 'near the water beside a clearing' (Homer, *The Odyssey, Books 1-12*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Athene visits Nausikaa 6.2ff incorporating the history of the Phaiacians 6.4-12 and Nausikaa and father and mother in palace 6.48-80.

<sup>7</sup> J.B.Hainsworth in Alfred Heubeck, Stephanie West, J.B. Hainsworth, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, Volume I, ad loc.

<sup>8</sup> Echoing the poet, Odysseus thinks of nymphs inhabiting mountain-tops, creating another spatial digression:

women, though not Nausikaa, scatter in different directions toward the projecting spits of the beach (6.138 ἐπ' ἠιώνας προύχουσας). There is some doubt about the meaning of this expression:<sup>9</sup> the plural might refer to sand spits at either side of the river mouth if we are to think of a tidal river with flat outflow; but quite certainly the young women would not be running out onto both - they must all be on the same side of the river as each other. So for the time being we will have to think of it as spits formed randomly in the shoreline. At 6.236 Odysseus washes and goes to sit apart by the shore (ἔζετ' ἔπειτ' ἀπάνευθε κίων ἐπὶ θῖνα θαλάσσης), indicating a separation of the washing part of the river and the beach.

Nausikaa now wonders at Odysseus' beautiful appearance (6.237), which indicates to the audience that he is within sight of her, but she speaks to the women as though in private and out of earshot of Odysseus, indicating that she and the women are together and separate from Odysseus. The women are, then, not at the river and not on the shore but in some polygonal space between. There is a spatial digression created by Nausikaa as she speaks to Odysseus and describes the city and harbour of the Phaiacians. Then the mules, driven by Nausikaa and followed by Odysseus and women, leave to return to the city (6.317 αἶ δ' ὤκα λίπον ποταμοῖο ῥέεθρα) and we hear no more of the place beside river and sea.

## Part 2: Interpreting indications of space

In considering these data there are two aspects which need to be discussed: potentialities for the audience to create spatial mental models (outputs) and the attributes of language which express space (inputs). The multiple mentions of the river and its appurtenances – grass, banks, washing pools, eddies – certainly facilitates visualisation. A spatial mental model, however, is more than just a single image or set of images. It is established experimentally that readers of a coherent text form a generic mental model incorporating all locative relationships regardless of whether the text gives the information in the form of a route description, or gives it hierarchically in survey form (as a description of a layout). The test for the generality of a mental model as something independent of literal memory for words is that, having read a route description, subjects can subsequently answer survey-style questions about spatial relationships of objects which are only implied in the text. The converse is also true: readers of a survey-style description can describe routes.

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αἶ ἔχουσ' ὀρέων αἰπεινὰ κάρηνα  
καὶ πηγὰς ποταμῶν καὶ πῖσσα ποιήεντα 6.123-4

who tenant the steep tops of mountains  
and springs of rivers and grassy meadows

The real scene has a river, but not the sources of a river, and not mountains. Thus the scene of nymphs and their habitat as briefly imagined by Odysseus is sufficiently different from the real scene to mark these verses as another spatial digression.

<sup>9</sup> The B scholia gloss προύχουσας as προβεβλημένας or προεχομένας and explain the geographical term as projecting in the sense of a mountain spur, but this scarcely makes sense if ἠίων means shore or beach. The meaning of ἐπ' ἠιώνας προύχουσας is doubtful partly from the ambiguity of ἠίων and partly from its use in the plural with the present participle of προέχω. A meaning of 'projecting beaches', that is, 'spits' is possible. Merry and Riddell's commentary on the previous use at 5.418 ἠιώνας τε παραπλήγας (which occurs when Odysseus is in the sea looking shoreward and describing what he wants to find) queries ἠίων remarking that its etymology is unclear. By assuming the use at 6.138 of ἐπ' ἠιώνας προύχουσας refers to the same feature, they are able to conclude that 'the general result from a comparison of these passages seems to be that ἠιόνες are jutting horns of shore, especially such as are found at the mouths of rivers, for the most part lying low, though not always.'

And when the text is coherent they can do this accurately and demonstrate it by drawing maps.<sup>10</sup> Of the *Odyssey* passage we can ask three things:

- a) whether there is enough information to create a mental model;
- b) whether the passage offers a survey description or a route description (or neither);
- c) whether the spatial information is coherent or contains inconsistencies.

For the purposes of this paper I will answer the first question for the time being in the affirmative offering only a single item of evidence: the consciousness of my own mental model of the space.<sup>11</sup> In answer to the second question, it is clear that information about the relation between objects in space in a layout sense is not given independent of the point of view of a character; and there is no explicit distance information.<sup>12</sup> As far as relative positions go, natural topography gives us river mouth adjacent to shore; and Homer gives us a solitary vertical relation in the statement that the bushes are uphill from Odysseus's position in the river. Nausikaa comes to the river from the opposite direction from Odysseus. A meeting between them – though not the place of the meeting – had been prefigured at 6.14 by the poet's representing Athene's intention (νόστον Ὀδυσσῆι μεγαλήτορι μητιόωσα) well before the palace scene; and washing pools are mentioned as part of the instructions to Nausikaa in her dream at 6.40. However the audience does not hear explicitly of her intention to go to a river until 6.58-9 (ἵνα κλυτὰ εἶματ' ἄγωμαι / ἐς ποταμὸν πλυνέουσα). Since it cannot be supposed that the subsequent conversation, which has so charmed all commentators since, involves their shouting at each other across the river, Nausikaa must be brought to the same side as Odysseus. So the minimum information we needed was a statement of which bank Odysseus got out on. Logically, this by itself will fully determine whether Nausikaa has the river on her left or right as she approaches from the other, inland, direction. Actually, to reduce cognitive load Odysseus' space should be specified as left / right bank and the route description for Nausikaa overdetermined by inclusion of a right / left statement, to enable the hearer to integrate her route to Odysseus' space before he has explicit knowledge that they are the same space. In summary, we can say that the locative information given, though not internally inconsistent, is underdetermined for an actual space: it could represent a space on the left bank or on the right bank of the river. The two possible topologies are shown in the figure below.<sup>13</sup>

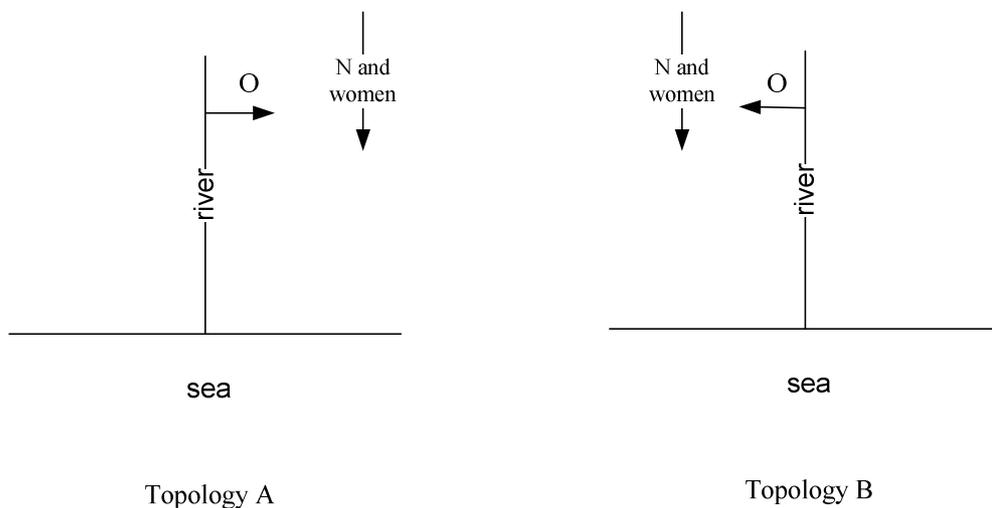
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<sup>10</sup> The above is a summary of the conclusions reached in the influential paper by Holly Taylor and Barbara Tversky, 'Spatial Mental Models Derived from Survey and Route Descriptions', *Journal of Memory and Language*, 31:2 (1992):261-292, which presents results of four experiments demonstrating that a spatial mental model is formed independent of literal memory for text.

<sup>11</sup> So that the reader might more readily accept this assertion, I can state that in my mental model I see Odysseus (from seaward) emerging from the river on the Left bank (i.e. to right of my vision).

<sup>12</sup> Distances, however, are certainly implied. Michael Nagler has pointed out the importance of the 'as far as one can shout / be heard' motif which is present a little before our passage at 5.400 as Odysseus swims along the shore looking for a place to get to land. Michael Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition: a Study in the Oral Art of Homer*, Berkeley, 1974, pp29-30.

<sup>13</sup> More properly I should call them enantiomorphs.



This passage in the *Odyssey* is not a specification of a false space as in an Escher painting. It describes, rather, an underdetermined real (though of course not necessarily actual) space. Change of focaliser in the narrative as occurs here would already present difficulties beyond those in the Taylor and Tversky mental model demonstrations which I have discussed,<sup>14</sup> and the spatial digressions may also interfere with ability to carry a mental model of a single space. Given that on this analysis there is indeterminacy, we should ask what its significance is and whether there are alternative explanations.

In addition to the topological relations already discussed, a distinct frame of reference may also underlie the expression of spatial relations. Levinson defines three linguistic frames of reference which he names 'intrinsic', 'relative' and 'absolute'. The three frames have 'distinct logical and spatial properties' and although some expressions may be shared between them (giving rise to ambiguity) 'often each frame will have distinct linguistic expressions associated with it.'<sup>15</sup> Unlike topological relations, a spatial expression which makes use of a frame of reference is implying a coordinate system and a sense of extension in space. A topological relation is naturally extended in particular to an intrinsic frame of reference - also a two-part relation specifying the position of one object (the figure) with respect to another (the ground). But an intrinsic frame of reference, by referring to a part of the ground object ('the man is standing at the front of the garage'), opens up a space around the ground object (the garage) which has intrinsic orientation so that the figure (the man) is oriented with respect to the space defined by the garage. Contrast this with a similar expression utilising a relative frame of reference 'the man is standing in front of the garage' where 'front' does not refer to the intrinsic front of the garage, but rather means that the man is between the speaker and the garage (so that he could be at the back or side of the garage). In our passage we have mostly topological relations extending into intrinsic frame of reference. However, there is a final possibility which may remove the ambiguity of Topology A vs Topology B. The third frame of reference defined by

<sup>14</sup> Though the experiments presented by Taylor and Tversky in the cited paper did not involve texts presenting multiple points of view, the authors cite previous work which suggests change of point of view can in fact be taken into account even if 'changing perspective apparently takes time and effort', op. cit. p 262.

<sup>15</sup> Levinson, *Space in Language and Cognition*, p 38. See chapter 2 (pp 24 to 61) of that work for justification for this classification and reasons for identifying (only) these three systems; his Table 2.2 on page 39 lists the primitive or irreducible notions which underpin frames of reference in language. Chapter 3 (pp 62-111) of the same work offers cross-linguistic (and cross-modal) discussion.

Levinson is the absolute, which typically employs canonical directions, such as the north / south / east / west orthogonal axes used in modern European languages. Other canonical axes are also possible, such as ‘the monsoon direction’ employed in some Australian languages. And in some languages the absolute frame of reference may not consist of a fixed grid at all but rather may consist of a set of culturally significant places or specifiers.<sup>16</sup> In this passage, an obvious candidate for such a culturally significant specifier is the river. In nearly all references to the river it forms the ground (relatum) and the position of other objects is expressed in relation to it: Odysseus gets out of the river, the ball goes into the river, they lunch beside the river. An absolute frame of reference which employs linguistic markers and concepts very unlike our own may be difficult to recognise, as Levinson points out:

‘the very wide distribution of systems of these sorts may have been missed because the terminology in terms of hillsides, river directions, coastal features, wind directions and so on, may have appeared directly referential, while in fact being fully abstract.’<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, although the space is under-determined by the expectations of a culture which uses a fixed-axis, fully symbolic absolute frame of reference and for which statements about rivers (‘the boat has gone upstream’) must refer to a particular river on a particular occasion, we need not assume this was true for Homer’s audience. If we are looking at the traces of an absolute frame of reference here then the failure to specify left bank or right bank and so choose between our two topologies is a non-issue. When the poet sang τὸν δ’ ἐσάωσε / ἐς ποταμοῦ προχοάς ... ὁ δ’ ἐκ ποταμοῖο λιασθεῖς his audience would hear more than we do.

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<sup>16</sup> Levinson, *Space in Language and Cognition*, p 49.

<sup>17</sup> Levinson, *Space in Language and Cognition*, p 91; note also the comment in end note 12 (p335): ‘the danger is that we recognise as true cardinal directions only those that look like our own’.