

COASTAL FORAGING ON CYPRUS AND EARLY VOYAGING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

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The paper will present an overview on the work that we have done at early coastal sites on Cyprus and consider some of the questions that we need to ask about how voyaging began in the eastern Mediterranean. It starts with a few words on how this Odyssey itself began in 2003. It then turns to the discovery in 2004 of two new early sites, Nissi Beach and Aspros, on coastal formations of aeolianite, lithified old sand dunes. A pebble-and-flake based lithic reduction technology was used at both of them, and the same is the case with the other early sites on the aeolianite that we have identified on the coastline.

When I first went out to Cyprus, little was known about coastal foraging on the island. No one had looked for prehistoric sites on the aeolianite before. The only convincing pre-Neolithic site on Cyprus was the collapsed rock shelter called Aetokremnos where Simmons had done pioneering work. Now pre-Neolithic sites were coming to light all around the island, and we would have to face the task of learning how to do aeolianite archaeology. While the formations of aeolianite provide good conditions of visibility for mapping and collecting lithic scatters on the land surface, their thin and patchy soils pose a considerable challenge for the excavator. On the positive side, the tops of the formation – with their elevated positions overlooking the surrounding landscape and seascape, their lack of vegetation to clear and their dry soils – were good places for the coastal forager to make short-term campsites. Moreover, the aeolianite has its own special attraction in the summer months: the opportunity to collect of high-quality sea salt right at the water edge. In short, the aeolianite was great for seasonal campsites but not for more permanent forms of occupation.

The paper then goes on to discuss briefly what we have learned when it comes to the following four topics: (1) the underwater work in front of Aspros, (2) the new cycle of lithic studies undertaken by Kaszanowska and Kozłowski, (3) the evidence for tsunamis on the coasts of Cyprus and their role in site formation processes at Nissi Beach and Aspros, and (4) the hypothesis that links the advent of voyaging on a regular basis in the eastern Mediterranean with the roller-coaster ride of climate change known as the Younger Dryas. The last section will turn to several questions of a broader nature – how often were voyages made, who took part in the trips across the sea, how risky were such voyages for the coastal forager and is seafaring really the right term for the kind of voyaging we are talking about – that we now need to ask in order to gain a better understanding of voyaging in the time before the Neolithic period.