

THE AEGEAN MESOLITHIC: MATERIAL CULTURE, CHRONOLOGY, AND THE NETWORK OF CONTACTS

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Contacts across the sea lining the mainland with the Aegean islands as early as in the Middle Palaeolithic are suggested by finds from the Northern Sporades (Alonessos) and recent discoveries on the island of Agios Efstartios in the northern Aegean. In all likelihood, some of the islands of the Cyclades were also frequented in Upper Palaeolithic times (e.g. site KT-21 on Kythnos and the site of Stelida on Naxos).

At the beginning of the Holocene, more frequent, early Mesolithic voyaging to the Aegean islands is now fairly well documented. This involved two different cultural traditions: (1) the Balkan Epigravettian, which dominates in the eastern continental Greece and (2) the Antalyan, the culture unit typical of the Epigravettian tradition of western Anatolia.

The tradition represented in the Mesolithic layers of the Klissoura Cave and in the Franchthi Cave evolved on the substratum of the local Epigravettian. It displays some stylistic influences from the western Mediterranean: initially Sauveterroïdal features and in the later phase possibly Castelnoidal traits.

The presence of the Mesolithic on the Aegean islands – first of all the Cyclades (Kythnos and Naxos), the Northern Sporades (the Cyclops Cave on the island of Gioura), and the islands of the southeastern part of the Aegean (Ikaria and Chalki) – was the consequence of several migrations from the continent and the navigation between the islands beginning from around the first half of 9th millennium cal BC (Maroulas on Kythnos and Kerame on Ikaria). The evolution of the Mesolithic on the Aegean islands lasted until the beginning of the 7th millennium cal BC, as indicated by the radiocarbon dates for the younger Mesolithic layers at the Cyclops Cave.

Lithic industries of the Aegean Mesolithic display techno-morphological links with the Greek continental Mesolithic, such as the domination of flake technology and the presence of backed tools most importantly: arched backed flakes or irregular blades. The large quantity of end-scrapers, mainly on flakes, also retouched flakes and notched-denticulated implements is similar to their number at continental sites (among others at Franchthi, layer VII – the X to IX millennium cal BC transition).

The increase in the number of flake tools is even more marked. In the Late Mesolithic levels (e.g. the Cyclops Cave, and sites on Naxos and Chalki), some few trapezes and regular blades occur as well. The assemblages of the Aegean Mesolithic show adaptation to local raw materials (e.g. quartz), but also they express the transition from hunter-gathering economy of the continental Mesolithic to the coastal foraging of the island Mesolithic at the time.

The sites of the Aegean Mesolithic are interconnected in networks of raw material distribution, notably the procurement of obsidian from Melos and Ghiali. Melian obsidian also occurs in continental Mesolithic contexts (e.g. Franchthi).

The groups of the Aegean Mesolithic must have been able to navigate across considerable distances: for example, at the site of Nissi Beach on Cyprus (investigations by A. Ammerman) the pebble-flake lithic industry shows several features common with the Aegean Mesolithic.

As a consequence of contacts with early sites on Cyprus (e.g., Nissi Beach), the way of life, economy and architecture of the Aegean Mesolithic changed (e.g., Maroulas on Kythnos), and the hypothesis of voyaging over some distance may help to explain the process of change. In addition, the analysis of an assemblage from aceramic layer X from Knossos on Crete (dating to around 7,000 cal BC) shows a number of techno-morphological components and raw materials (the presence of Melian obsidian) in common with the Aegean Mesolithic.

On the other hand, the Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic sites in the northern part of the Aegean Basin, notably on the island of Lemnos (e.g. Ouriakos, Fisini) exhibit close techno-morphological associations with the Early Holocene Epipalaeolithic industries of south-western Anatolia, especially with the Antalyan (e.g., the Beldibi and Belbasi Caves). In the assemblages at Ouriakos, the microblade technique (based on single- and double-platform cores) is now well documented, and microlithic segments are common. The exploited raw materials all appear to be local siliceous rocks.

Recent work on the Aegean Mesolithic reveals broad networks of contacts across the entire Eastern Mediterranean –over the arc of time the beginning of the 9th millennium cal. BC through around 7,000 cal BC (i.e., the years leading up to the appearance of the full “Neolithic package” in the Aegean and the transition to a Neolithic way of life).