

ON THE HIGH SEAS: EARLY NAVIGATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

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There can be no doubt that early man plied the eastern Mediterranean. Evidence for seafaring is provided by the Early Neolithic habitation of the islands of the eastern Mediterranean by 9 kyr. Even earlier in the Holocene, Mesolithic foragers were exploring, if not occupying, the coasts of Crete and Cyprus. Earlier still, in the Upper Palaeolithic, the circulation of obsidian in the Aegean from Melos attests to human exploration of the offshore islands. And in recent years the discovery of Middle and Lower Palaeolithic artifacts on islands such as Kephallinia, Melos, and Crete suggests that the exploration of the Mediterranean seascape began well back in the Pleistocene. There is no reason to believe that the beginning of sea crossings must be tied to a specific technological change or cognitive advance amongst early hominins. The technology required for the construction of seagoing vessels was not particularly challenging, and there is a large body of historical and ethnographic evidence for boats and rafts, some of very simple construction, capable of crossing large bodies of open water. Only simple tools were necessary to make them. While polished stone axes were no doubt an improvement, the same types of actions were possible with flaked stone tools, such as handaxes or cleavers, especially when they were used in conjunction with fire. Nor do we need to assume a cognitive advance from the Pleistocene to the Holocene: if early hominins were capable of spreading from Africa across Eurasia to the Indonesian archipelago and ultimately to Australia, Japan, and Taiwan, there is no reason to doubt their intellectual ability to overcome any difficulties presented by barriers of water. In short, neither technical nor cognitive challenges confronting human beings wishing to cross Mediterranean waters were particularly challenging. Instead of asking what kind of boats early hominins may have been able to construct, or what kinds of tools they had at their disposal, or whether they were smart enough or daring enough to attempt the crossing, the question asked here is: How did they navigate the unknown waters of the Mediterranean in the Pleistocene? Ethnohistorical data suggest that many simple navigational techniques and aids have persisted for long periods of time in the Mediterranean. A consideration of these traditional methods, when coupled with palaeoenvironmental reconstructions of the wind and current patterns in the Pleistocene Mediterranean, could be used to predict the likely preferred pathways for early hominin seafarers.