

AKROTIRI-*AETOKREMNOS* (CYPRUS) 20 YEARS LATER: AN ASSESSMENT OF ITS IMPACT

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In the not too distant past, most scholars were unconvinced that humans had made their way to many of the Mediterranean islands prior to the Neolithic Period. A handful of pre-Neolithic claims from several islands were largely unsubstantiated, especially on those that were never linked to the mainlands. Even the Neolithic on many islands was relatively late, with Cyprus having the earliest evidence, the aceramic Khirokitia Culture, starting about 7,000 B.C. Although the earliest Neolithic on any of the islands, this still was relatively late by mainland standards.

This standard reading of Mediterranean island prehistory was, however, dramatically challenged some 20 years ago by the small site of Akrotiri *Aetokremnos*, located on the southern coast of Cyprus, which dates to ca. 10,000 cal. BC. Since that time, there are now additional sites, both in Cyprus and elsewhere that have been presented as pre-Neolithic. These include claims of extreme antiquity from Crete (in excess of 170,000 years), as well as hints of Neanderthal uses of some islands. In Cyprus, a few sites appear similar to *Aetokremnos*, but claims for much earlier sites remain unsubstantiated.

In this paper, the impact and significance of *Aetokremnos* some two decades 20 after its original excavation is summarized, incorporating additional recent studies as well. The site was, and remains, extremely controversial, not so much because of its chronology, which is supported by over 30 radiocarbon determinations, but because of its association with extinct endemic pygmy hippopotami and elephants, which we claim was contemporary with the human occupation of *Aetokremnos*. While there are over 30 paleontological sites on the island containing these unique fauna, they have never before been associated with humans. We argue that people played a direct role in the extinction of these unique animals, thereby contributing to the controversial global debate on the role of humans in Pleistocene extinctions. All of these issues are addressed in this presentation, placing *Aetokremnos* into a regional context based on past and current studies. We conclude that *Aetokremnos* remains, for the time being, the best dated and stratigraphically intact pre-Neolithic site on the island, and that humans indeed played a major role in the demise of the island's endemic dwarf fauna.