



Stone Age Sailors: Paleolithic Seafaring in the Mediterranean

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BOOK REVIEW

STONE AGE SAILORS: PALEOLITHIC SEAFARING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, by Alan Simmons with contributions by Katelyn DiBenedetto, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, Abingdon, 2014, 264pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN-13: 978-1611321142

Stone Age Sailors arrives in the midst of a paradigm shift. For decades, based on a limited amount of artifactual data, scholars have debated whether Pleistocene foragers crossed the Mediterranean Sea. Much like the pendulous “pre-Clovis” debate in North America, it is only recently that a pre-Neolithic presence in the Mediterranean Basin has been considered in serious detail. Here, Alan Simmons (with contributions by Katelyn DiBenedetto) provides both a concise and an accessible review of this evidence that will certainly be consulted by those interested in island ecology, prehistory, and archaeology, for years to come. It is in the direction of these future researchers that this book is oriented, as the authors use this text to sound a clear and compelling call for the disposal of traditional agricultural-centered research in the region—an approach, they argue, that is ill equipped for the study of early Pleistocene foragers. With such a thesis in mind, the authors divide *Stone Age Sailors* into nine chapters in order to demonstrate the need for a more systematic and interdisciplinary approach to Mediterranean Island prehistoric archaeology.

Stone Age Sailors covers both the eastern and western Mediterranean, although the east is particularly emphasized. Temporally, it spans the Lower Paleolithic to the Neolithic. After a brief introductory chapter describing the larger theoretical issues associated with pre-Neolithic claims in Mediterranean island prehistory, the authors place those issues into a global perspective. For example, Chapter 2 briefly discusses the current evidence for Paleolithic seagoing in a variety of areas, such as the initial colonization of Australia by Upper Paleolithic *Homo sapiens*, the pre-*sapiens* occupations on the island of Flores, the Pacific Coastal Migration model for the peopling of the Americas, and the trans-Atlantic Solutrean hypothesis. These case studies allow the authors to highlight two key research areas that are

inextricably linked to the issue of Pleistocene water travel: the issue of global sea-level rise and the challenge of understanding the evolution of the technological and cognitive abilities of the genus *Homo*.

In Chapter 3, the authors turn to the Mediterranean and ask readers to consider the environmental and geographic obstacles that Pleistocene foragers in the region may have had to overcome. Topics such as sea-level rise following the Late Glacial Maximum (LGM), late Pleistocene climate change, shifting tidal ranges and currents, the effects of changing wind patterns, and issues of island intervisibility are covered. Although the applicability of many of these variables prior to the LGM is questionable, the authors’ detailed consideration of which islands would have remained oceanic – or detached from the mainland – is of particular importance. As the authors note, this is because the configuration of Mediterranean islands throughout the Pleistocene must be understood at a more local scale before discussions of human dispersals can adequately be addressed.

The key issue of taphonomy is targeted in Chapter 4. Here, DiBenedetto and Simmons consider examples of both direct and indirect evidence for seafaring, such as the many types of prehistoric watercraft that have been encountered in the archaeological and ethnographic records (e.g., log rafts, buoyed rafts, bundle rafts, hide boats). The authors further outline one of the main reasons for an abandonment of agricultural-centric survey models: the issue that “pre-Neolithic sites are almost entirely stone tool assemblages, many of which come from the surface and are difficult to recognize” (97). To address the limited visibility of Pleistocene-aged sites, the authors argue that there is a need for interdisciplinary research that incorporates specialists, such as Paleolithic archaeologists and geoarchaeologists, to properly distinguish between ecofacts and artifacts and to incorporate survey

frameworks that target Pleistocene-aged sediments. Indeed, this was the exact approach used by Strasser *et al.* (2010) in order to find the first radiometrically dated Paleolithic sites on Crete.

Chapters 5 and 8 are best read as a pair, as the former provides a succinct and cautious consideration of pre-Neolithic finds from several Mediterranean islands since the 1970s, and the latter updates this list. Specifically, Chapter 5 reviews those more controversial claims such as the stone tools yielded from Cyprus, Corsica, Kythnos, Malta, Naxos, Sardinia, and Thasos, as well as the less controversial claims from Melos and the Ionian Islands (i.e. Zakynthos, Corfu, and Kefalonia). Concluding their chapter, the authors echo Broodbank (2006:204) and Cherry (1990:202) and again emphasize that “previous claims of Lower Paleolithic materials from the Mediterranean islands largely consist of limited numbers of surface finds of ‘early-looking’ artifacts that are in poor geological context” (182). Turning to Chapter 8, the reader is offered the chance to evaluate this claim with a review of the most recent discoveries on Crete, Lesvos, and Gavdos, and the continued research on the Ionian Islands. Those readers interested in the late Pleistocene and early Holocene will equally be satisfied with the inclusion of new Epipaleolithic and Neolithic discoveries on Ikaria, Ouriakos, and Kynthos.

Chapters 6 and 7 are dedicated to Cyprus and cover Simmons’ main research at Akrotiri *Aetokremnos* and the more recent pre-Neolithic claims on the island, respectively. Simmons begins the chapter by updating readers about the history of excavations at the site, and the general controversy surrounding it—namely, the debates concerning whether the late Pleistocene/Early Holocene-aged Stratum 4 is natural or cultural in origin. Readers both familiar and unfamiliar with the debate should appreciate Simmons’ well-constructed and organized arguments for a cultural origin of Stratum 4. As a geoarchaeologist, I would have enjoyed a more detailed review of Mandel and Simmons’ (1997) important research on site formation at the site, which provides the most compelling arguments for the *in situ* nature of the Stratum 4 materials. Simmons’ research will certainly serve as model for future prehistoric research in the Mediterranean Basin for years to come, and as Chapters 7 and 8 demonstrate, some of this research is already underway.

While the better part of *Stone Age Sailors* is marked by a cautious treatment of the literature,

it is in their concluding Chapter 9 that the authors shift to a more ruminative tone. The authors conclude that the Mediterranean Basin may not have served as a barrier for Pleistocene foragers, an argument that is becoming more commonplace in the field (Anderson *et al.* 2010 and references therein; Runnels *et al.* 2014; Strasser *et al.* 2011). DiBenedetto and Simmons also contemplate several important research questions that will certainly drive future research, such as: What does this pre-Neolithic evidence say about past hominin behavioral capacities? Were these voyages to the Mediterranean Basin purposeful or accidental? Who were these foragers and whence did they come? While these questions hardly exhaust the covered material, *Stone Age Sailors* makes a strong case that Mediterranean Island prehistoric archaeologists will soon move away from evaluating presence or absence questions, and begin reorienting research toward these more explanatory avenues. To this end, it is clear that a methodological and theoretical paradigm shift is occurring among those researching Mediterranean Island prehistory. As a result, it is no surprise that over the last half a decade, five new Paleolithic sites have already been announced. For those scholars interested in the past and current archaeological evidence that is beginning to crystallize this shift, *Stone Age Sailors* will certainly serve as a fundamental starting point.

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