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**ARCHAEOLOGY** 

## Ancient mariners may have set sail 130,000 years ago

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The modern Kon-Tiki raft demonstrates ancient boatbuilding techniques FILM COMPANY



When did we first become sailors? The oldest-known remains of watercraft are around 7,000 years old, but new evidence from Greece suggests that we, or a species ancestral to *Homo sapiens*, might have ventured from dry land hundreds of thousands of years ago.

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10,000 years ago, on islands that were never joined to the mainland, is circumstantial evidence for just such voyaging, say Duncan Howitt-Marshall and Curtis Runnels.

Writing in the *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, they note that anatomically, and perhaps intellectually, modern humans existed from around 45,000 years ago in the Mediterranean zone. Neanderthals, and before that *Homo erectus*, were present in the region much earlier, with the latter's distinctive "handaxes" known from perhaps a million years ago.

"Until recently the consensus has been that seafaring did not emerge until around 12,000 years ago", they say, although this has been challenged by a number of discoveries on the Greek islands. Many of today's islands, including almost all of those along the Turkish coast now separated by the narrow straits made notorious by the current refugee crisis, were in fact part of the mainland during the lower sea levels of the Ice Age.

Some were not: Rhodes, Karpathos and Crete, and a block comprising the central Cyclades, all remained islands when the sea stood 130 metres (422 ft) below its present level, but "the distances to be crossed are difficult to calculate, ranging from as little as five kilometres to as much as 40. We accept that there are Palaeolithic sites on islands and some might have required watercraft to reach them."

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abilities for the construction of watercraft and the planning of open sea-crossings" requiring some navigational skills. Some scholars assert that only modern humans have such abilities: the authors suggest that evidence from as long ago as 130,000 years shows that earlier hominids had them also.

A compelling new piece of evidence has just been recognised from Cyprus, always an island but also visible from the Turkish and Levantine coasts: a handaxe from Kholetria-Ortos in the southwest of the island, of local stone but similar to tools from southwest Asia, complements an earlier find from Zygi on the Cypriot south coast, and also recent discoveries on Crete (The Times, January 18, 2010) and at Stelida on the Cycladic island of Naxos. "We conclude that there is prima facie evidence that Palaeolithic hominins reached some of the Greek islands," the authors say. Human ancestors left Africa by 1.8 million years ago, spreading east across southern Asia: the diminutive so-called "hobbits" from the Indonesian island of Flores might have crossed a narrow sea channel as early as 840,000 years ago. This diaspora bolsters the Greek evidence, that pre-modern hominins "manifested a significant degree of effective communication and some level of narrative thought": those who made tools such as handaxes and calculated the risks of sea-crossings might already have had some form of language.

What sort of watercraft they used remains speculative: the earliest surviving remains are of a papyrus raft waterproofed with bitumen 7,000 years old from Kuwait, and a slightly older log



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archaeological record from a million years ago onwards.

Wooden rafts such as Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki*, or reed boats of the sort used in the Iraqi marshes and on Lake Titicaca in Peru, skin boats such as the Welsh coracle or the Inuit umiak, and log canoes are all candidates for the earliest craft: what is clear is that the technical capacity to build them, and then to use them to cross water both within and beyond sight of land, lay within the intellectual capabilities of our more distant — and until recently putatively more "primitive" — ancestors.

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