Argonauts of the Stone Age

Early maritime activity from the first migrations from Africa to the end of the Neolithic

Andrzej Pydyn

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978 1 78491 143 0

This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

For Sylwia, Karolina and Magda

Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I owe thanks to my wife and daughters, who had to sacrifice many weeks of family life so that the book could come into being. I also thank my parents, who for years motivated me to write the book.

I had an opportunity to discuss the ideas included in this book with the late Professor Andrew Sherratt, to whom I am grateful for many valuable and motivating remarks. Discussions with Professor Barry Cuncliffe allowed me better to understand changes occurring in the region of Atlantic Europe, while my conception of early means of water transport was enhanced during seminars with Professor Sean McGrail, which I attended many years ago.

Reviews and critical comments on the Polish version of this book made by Prof. Krzysztof Cyrek, Prof. Janusz Krzysztof Kozłowski, Prof. Romuald Schild and Prof. Paweł Valde-Nowak allowed me to eliminate the shortcomings of the original version of this work.

A British Academy Fellowship as well as a stay at the Institute of Archaeology in Oxford allowed me to collect most of the necessary materials. They were supplemented during visits financed by Nicolaus Copernicus University (UMK). The final transfer of the contents of the book on to paper was possible thanks to the organisational and financial support of Nitecki Acquisition and its President Jacek Nitecki, for which I am very grateful.

For their valuable contribution to the final version of this work in the form of their editorial remarks, I would here like to thank Dr Anna Rembisz, PhD, Dr Anna Gręzak, PhD and Dr Magdalena Sudoł, PhD. Most of the graphic material was prepared by Marcin Majewski, MA and Natalia Krybus, MA from P.A.G.maciejewski.archaeologist.

The English version of this book would not have been possible without the help and commitment of Beata Luc, M.A. and Hazel Pearson, M.A. I am also grateful to Dr Bruce Ross-Smith for his numerous linguistic suggestions.

Andrzej Pydyn

Introduction

The importance of the marine environment in prehistory was marginalised by researchers for most of the 20th c. The attitude has changed over the past two decades, especially in the context of research on the migration of early hominids (hominins) and the spread of physically modern humans (anatomically modern) (Baily & Flemming, 2008). Cultural, and even ethnographic, stereotypes led to underestimation of the importance of the marine environment and also its resources in the studies on the Pleistocene and the Early Holocene. What makes the situation still more difficult is the fact that 90% of the Pleistocene coast is currently flooded and below sea level (Bailey & Flemming, 2008, p. 2095). The vast majority of the coastal zone inhabited by humans until 4000 BC is presently inaccessible. Therefore, the development of underwater research is potentially of great importance for studies of the maritime zone of the Pleistocene and the Early Holocene.

For many decades, coastal communities, known from both archaeological and ethnographic sources, were considered technologically, culturally and socially backward. Such an opinion was confirmed by Charles Darwin's superficial observations, made during his stay among Indians from Tierra del Fuego in South America (Darwin, 1839). He argued that the climate and environment present there forced the 'unfortunate' living in the region into constant migration in search of food. He also claimed that it was negatively reflected in the material culture and the appearance of Indians living there. A few decades later, one of the founders of ethnology, Lewis Henry Morgan (1877), categorised coastal Indians from the north-west of North America as a community representing the lowest state of 'savagery', while at the end of the 19th c. one of the founders of European prehistory, Sir John Lubbock (1895), compared communities inhabiting shell middens in Mesolithic Jutland with the 'primitive' inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego. The opinions formulated in the 19th c. were echoed in the work of numerous subsequent archaeologists, e.g. Graham Clark (1952), John Gwynn Evans (1969) and Mortimer Wheeler (1954).

In the opinion(s) of the Stone Age specialists, *Homo erectus/Homo ergaster,* Neanderthals and anatomically modern humans were primarily engaged in the exploitation of the land area, mainly for food and possibly for other valuable resources. However, the early migrations associated with leaving Africa and populating Europe and Asia required crossing watercourses, bays and straits. For most of prehistory, seas and the maritime zone were not a barrier, but were communication channels and areas of safe shelter, abounding in numerous food resources, especially at the times of dramatic climate deterioration (Bailey & Flemming, 2008). Rich marine resources meant that from the earliest times humans travel out to sea in order to exploit these resources. Early seafaring ability probably also enabled the fulfilment of other needs of the Stone Age communities. On the one hand, modes of water transport facilitated outside contacts, including far-reaching contacts, which gave access to raw materials and objects of prestige. On the other hand, the coastal zone, located between land and sea, often experiencing significant tides related to the phases of the moon, would very likely have played a significant symbolic and religious role in the prehistoric communities.

In this work many aspects of early human maritime activities are presented, e.g. migrations and colonisations, exploitation of the sea environment and navigation. Particular attention is paid to navigation and the interpretation of early forms of water transport. The presented opinions are supported with direct and indirect arguments, archaeological as well as anthropological, geological, environmental, genetic and other. Being aware of the fact that a part of the interpretation of early navigation is hypothetical, we should note that interpretation of most areas of the life and economy of the Stone Age communities is of a similar character.

Along with the analysis of early maritime activity, this work touches on many key issues of the Stone Age, e.g., the evolution of the *Homo* species, migrations from Africa, relations between the Neanderthals and modern humans, 'the Upper Palaeolithic Revolution', colonisation of post glacial Northern Europe as well as the emergence and expansion of the Neolithic model of social and economic behaviour. Despite the author's comments on many of the issues, his intention is not to settle them as they significantly extend beyond the scope of this work.

In geographical terms, the areas discussed are in particular the Mediterranean Basin and Europe, which for most of prehistory were inextricably linked. Due to the limited number of sources, the oldest evidence for crossing sea straits by representatives of *Homo erectus/ Homo ergastus* will be discussed in the area of the whole Old World. The significance of Middle Palaeolithic navigation towards Australia and that of the Upper Palaeolithic in the direction of the Americas underpinned the decision to include these matters in this work.

The book has a cross-sectional character in both chronological and geographical terms, which required a selective choice of analysed sources, for two reasons. The first reason was to corroborate 'the sea perspective' of changes taking place in the Stone Age, while the second was to refer to the most crucial cultural, economic and social events occurring in the period discussed. Special attention is devoted to sea coasts and, in particular, to straits and islands. In the absence of direct evidence for early navigation in the form of vessels, an analysis of these regions seems particularly important. Potential early sea journeys are proved by the distribution of skeletal remains of early representatives of the *Homo* species and characteristic stone inventories. Colonisation or systematic exploitation of islands, which, even at the times of substantial sea regression, remained separated from the mainland, seems undeniable evidence for early maritime activity. Therefore, much attention is dedicated here to islands located in the Mediterranean Basin and Northern Europe. The book is written from the archaeological perspective and archaeological sources constitute its basis. However, other valuable information such as faunal, palaeogenetic and palaeogeographic is also used.

In the chapters dealing with the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic, dates quoted in the work (e.g., 200,000 years or 15,000 years) are calculated from the present day. However, in the case of the Neolithic, a far more practical system seemed to be the system of BC dates, which should be regarded as calibrated dates (cal BC). I would also like to note here that, especially in chapters on the Final Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic, care was taken to quote calibrated dates whenever possible. It refers to dates calculated from the present date and BC dates. Application of other dates is noted in the text.