

Swimming, floating, paddling and/or sailing to Cyprus: Pygmy Hippopotami and Seasonal Occupation at Akrotiri-Aetokremnos, Cyprus

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Cyprus was geologically formed from the Eastern Mediterranean sea bed and was never connected to the Anatolian or Syro-Palestinian mainland. Therefore, the first animals and humans on the island must have crossed a substantial body of water. Pygmy hippopotami (*Phanourios minutus*) appeared on Cyprus in the 10th millennium B.C. at the Late Pleistocene/ Early Holocene interface, and these animals traversed the water either on driftwood or by swimming. Excavations conducted by Alan Simmons at the cave of Akrotiri-Aetokremnos in south central Cyprus have revealed an astounding cache of pygmy hippo bones (218,000+) associated with human activity (1,000+ anthropogenic artifacts) dated to calibrated 9500 B.C. This unique evidence for human interaction with Pleistocene fauna identifies man as a catalyst for the species' extinction. The importance of the cave for meat processing, such as cooking, has been readily acknowledged. However, it is debated whether humans occupied the site long-term or utilized it sporadically. A re-examination of the cave stratigraphy will reveal periodic use. A theoretical model, influenced by John Cherry's scholarship, will suggest that individuals seeking hippo meat made semi-regular voyages to Cyprus. Numerous bones of hippos under one year old indicate such journeys. Furthermore, hearths within the shelter, countless burnt bones (fuel?) and a nearby salt lake suggest that meat was cured through smoking and salting for long-term preservation. This paper argues that Akrotiri-Aetokremnos was utilized periodically by mobile, mainland hunter-gatherers who exploited pygmy hippos and preserved the meat within the cave in preparation for transport back to the mainland.