

## The Cave of the Cyclops: Mesolithic and Neolithic Networks in the Northern Aegean, Greece. Vol. 1, Intra-Site Analysis, Local Industries, and Regional Site Distribution

By Adamantios Sampson (Prehistory Monographs 21). Pp. xxii + 461, figs. 129, pls. 76, tables 33, maps 13. INSTAP Academic Press, Philadelphia 2008. \$80. ISBN 978-1-931534-20-8 (cloth).

The archaeology of the last foragers and early farmers of Greece has been for years a fascinating but difficult subject because of the aging body of existing evidence and limited attempts to retrieve new data. This is even more apparent with regard to the demanding field research methodology (visibility, sea level changes, coastal dynamics) and the stimulating theoretical issues (colonization incentives, navigation capabilities) concerning the Aegean archipelago, where the application of world island archaeology models finds an ideal testing ground.

This was the period when the echoes of the increasingly confident and dynamic early farming communities of the Near East began to reach the last Epipaleolithic and Early Holocene hunters and foragers of the southernmost tip of Europe. This period—rather a long one—involved cultural changes, profound dynamism, and a mosaic of different social relations and economic choices triggered most probably by the cooling event of the Younger Dryas. Evidence of this period has in recent years been successfully sought in places such as Cyprus and Anatolia.

In the case of the Aegean islands, the pre-Neolithic or Mesolithic period, which appears to have lasted for more than 2,000 years (10th–eighth millennium B.C.E.), makes an intriguing scene: set in a rapidly transforming

coastal and sea environment, it features protagonists who, materially, still remain rather obscure and exist in circumstances yet to be defined. It is not surprising that this basically “maritime way of life” of the visitors and/or inhabitants of the Aegean islands—and the means through which this way of life could be documented—has been in recent years the focus of creative archaeological speculation. It is pitifully characterized, however, by little field action, followed by even less conclusively presented case studies.

Sampson’s fieldwork in the Aegean islands has been, until recently, the exception in this impoverished picture. His research efforts have been consistent despite his employing a rather indiscernible methodology, which, judging from its results, has proven to be particularly successful (cf. A. Sampson, *Η προϊστορία του Αιγαίου* [Athens 2006]). The book under review, written by Sampson and his associates and elegantly published by INSTAP, investigates the important site of the Cave of the Cyclops on Youra in the northern Sporades and is the first of several much-awaited final field reports for the authors’ work on the Aegean islands of Kythnos and Ikaria.

In more than 400 pages of text, tables, figures, and plates, the reader can find 12 chapters in which a number of experienced researchers present seven categories of archaeological

finds from the cave material. There is an account of the pottery typology and decoration of the Early, Middle, and Late Neolithic periods by Sampson and a thorough presentation by Katsarou-Tzeveleki of the impressive (and unique for the Greek Middle Neolithic) “canvas-style” painted ceramics with their imaginative varieties. The latter contribution is accompanied by a wide range of theories for interpretation, some of them not so persuasive (107). Also included are short analyses of the pottery of the Bronze Age (Mavridis) and the pottery of the historical periods (Sampson); a lengthy presentation by Koutsouflakis of the rich Roman lamp material found scattered in the cave deposit (a study apparently out of line with the “prehistoric” content of the rest of the volume); the analysis of ground-stone tool material from the different prehistoric periods by Sampson, including a short presentation by Orphanidis of the only Neolithic figurine found on the site; and the cranial remains of a Mesolithic skeleton presented by Poulianos.

The book also includes an account of the important chipped-stone (flint and obsidian) Mesolithic and Neolithic assemblages at the site (169), reported by Kaczanowska and Kozłowski. This much-awaited study reveals the true extent of a Mesolithic presence in the cave—which contains “179 Mesolithic chipped stone artifacts” (170), mostly flake—as well as the stratigraphic problems related to their position within the deposit (169, 172). Although the issue of “the homogeneity of the inventories in the various levels” (178) is noted—with the exception of the Lower Mesolithic—Kaczanowska and Kozłowski reject a “mass displacement of artifacts” within the sequence of the cave (178). The Mesolithic chipped material of the cave is thoroughly examined (raw materials, technology, typology) and its relation to other mainland Greek industries discussed, including the enigmatic obsidian geometric microliths, which, according to the stratigraphy of the site, first appear in the Upper Mesolithic levels. It is also noticeable that as far as the chipped-stone technology is concerned, a “radical change can be seen between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic levels” (177).

The book begins, as expected, with an introductory chapter by Sampson concerning the cave’s setting and stratigraphy. Reading this, one realizes the agonizing decisions the excavator had to face when dealing with a rather complicated stratigraphic situation (9–11).

In addition, of considerable interest for the prehistory of the area are the results of the archaeological survey Sampson and his team carried out in the neighboring uninhabited islands of the Sporades, although details of the methodology are not stated. The book also includes a useful reference to present-day animal husbandry and agricultural practices of the area, introducing the use of ethnographic parallels for understanding diachronic economic practices on the islands (201).

The book concludes with a short but adequate discussion regarding the archaeology of the Mesolithic period, by which the site had acquired its recent reputation in Aegean prehistory through earlier published preliminary reports. The placing of the Cave of Cyclops by the author in the wider eastern Mediterranean and Balkan Early Holocene gives him the chance to argue for a modified (“neo”) indigenist explanation for the beginning of the Neolithic in Greece and, more particularly, the Aegean islands. This approach does not refute a model of cultural diffusion from the East, but it attempts to accommodate a profoundly undocumented case for local Neolithization involving animal domestication (caprines) and cultivated wheat (225).

Overall, the volume is a welcome continuation of research in the same area, which began in the early 1980s with the excavation of the nearby permanent settlement of Agios Petros (N. Efstratiou, *Agios Petros, A Neolithic Site in Northern Sporades: Aegean Relationships During the Neolithic of the 5th Millennium* [Oxford 1985]). Sampson and his team should be lauded for their determination and skill in presenting the evidence from this enigmatic archaeological palimpsest of a seasonally occupied site, visited occasionally by hunters, foragers, fishermen, and farmers of the northern Aegean from the ninth millennium B.C.E. onward. Although important aspects of the archaeology of the cave (archaeobotany, archaeozoology, and paleoenvironment) are scheduled to follow in the second volume, the book at hand will certainly be appreciated by all those interested in the early prehistory of the Aegean islands.

NIKOS EFSTRATIOU

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI  
540 06 THESSALONIKI  
GREECE  
EFSTRATI@HIST.AUTH.GR