

Evidence suggests Neanderthals took to boats before modern humans

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The Reconstruction of the Funeral of Homo neanderthalensis. Captured in the Hannover Zoo. (Via Wikipedia)

(PhysOrg.com) -- Neanderthals, considered either a sub-species of modern humans or a separate species altogether, lived from approximately 300,000 years ago to somewhere near 24,000 years ago, when they inexplicably disappeared, leaving behind traces of their DNA in some Middle Eastern people and artifacts strewn all across the southern part of Europe and extending into western Asia. Some of those artifacts, stone tools that are uniquely associated with them, have been found on islands in the Mediterranean Sea, suggesting, according to a paper published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science*, by George Ferentinos and colleagues, that Neanderthals had figured out how to travel by boat. And if they did, it appears they did so before modern humans.

The stone “mousterian” tools are unique to [Neanderthals](#) and have been found on the islands of Zakynthos, Lefkada and Kefalonia, which range from five to twelve kilometers from mainland Greece. Some, such as Paul Pettitt from the University of Sheffield, suggest they could have swum that far. But that doesn’t explain how similar tools found on the island of Crete got there. That would have meant swimming forty kilometers, which seems extremely unlikely, especially since such swimmers wouldn’t have known beforehand that Crete was there to find.

Ferentinos et al suggest the evidence shows that Neanderthals not only figured out how to build boats and sail but did so quite extensively well before modern humans ever got the idea. They say because the tools found on the islands are believed to date back 100,000 years (and the islands have been shown to have been islands back then as well) Neanderthal people were sailing around that long ago. Thus far, evidence for modern humans sailing dates back to just 50,000 years when they made their way to Australia. If true, that would mean Neanderthal people were sailing around in the Mediterranean for fifty thousand years before modern people built their first boat.

Others have suggested that hominids have been sailing for as long as a million years; [stone tools](#) found on the Indonesian island of Flores date back that far. It could be that both modern humans and Neanderthals were boating around for hundreds of thousands of years and we just don’t have any evidence of it because the boats back then would have been made of wood and evidence of their existence would have decayed to nothing long ago.

More information: Early seafaring activity in the southern Ionian Islands, Mediterranean Sea, *Journal of Archaeological Science*, In Press, Corrected Proof. [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2012.01.032](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2012.01.032)

Abstract

This paper summarises the current development in the southern Ionian Islands (Kefallinia and Zakynthos) prehistory and places it within the context of seafaring. Archaeological data from the southern Ionian Islands show human habitation since Middle Palaeolithic going back to 110 ka BP yet bathymetry, sea-level changes and the Late Quaternary geology, show that Kefallinia and Zakynthos were insular at that time. Hence, human presence in these islands indicates inter island-mainland seafaring. Seafaring most likely started some time between 110 and 35 ka BP and the seafarers were the Neanderthals. Seafaring was encouraged by the coastal configuration, which offered the right conditions for developing seafaring skills according to the “voyaging nurseries” and “autocatalysis” concepts.

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