

Unravelling colonisation and abandonment horizons in Mediterranean island archaeology

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The archaeological record of the Mediterranean islands comprises a palimpsest of colonisation, abandonment and re-colonisation horizons. The earliest permanent settlement of the Mediterranean islands is largely a Neolithic phenomenon but recent archaeological investigations point to other forms of “colonisation”, for different purposes, during earlier periods. On current knowledge, pre-Neolithic colonisation involved the largest islands both in the western and eastern Mediterranean (Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Crete, and Cyprus), as well as an increasing number of smaller islands in the Aegean, where geographical configuration was conducive to early maritime exploration. These discoveries are filling existing gaps in the archaeological record but inevitably raising even more questions. This paper will discuss a range of environmental, climatic, and socio-cultural factors which may have contributed to observed patterns in the colonisation and abandonment of islands in different areas and periods, and use these to reflect on the meaning we give to terms such as “colonisation”, “abandonment”, and “seafaring”.

