

THE FIRST MARINERS EXPEDITIONS

KYTHIRA – CRETE – GAVDOS



PROGRESS REPORT

This report covers fieldwork during September and October, 2013, on both Kythira and Crete. On Kythira we cut, bundled and stored nearly 5,000 lengths of the cane which will become the body of the 12 metre raft which will carry us to Crete and Gavdos Island in July, 2014. At least that is the plan.

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Arundo Donax is not a Serbian rock star. No. It is the botanical name for a sturdy, bamboo-like flowering cane; each piece about as thick as a broomstick, which flourishes around the temperate shores of the Mediterranean. In Greece it is known as ‘Kalamia’ and for 20 days in the strident heat of September we waded into the far-flung outcrops of it with our machetes until when our team left Kythira there wasn’t much of it left standing. Some 4,800 stalks were left under cover to season, lighten up and await our return at the beginning of May, 2014 to turn the pile into a raft on the beach in the picture postcard village of Kapsali.

Very little has changed on Kythira in the decade since I was last here. Motorists still stop in the middle of the road to have a chat, its ever-changing landscape, conifer forests, stands of broad-leafed palms and stone walled villages have lost none of their charm. The towering cliffs of Antikythira Island still rise majestically from the morning mist 22 nautical miles southeast of Kapsali, and beyond that on very still, clear mornings or at sunset there lies Crete, the largest island in Greece, it’s most legendary and our destination, just as it was 125,000 years ago when - in accordance with our theory - when Europe’s first mariners took to the sea.

Above: Kapsali

Below: Kapsali’s small boat harbour

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above: *Chamaerops humilis*

below: Kytheria's Conifers

An ongoing and continually difficult to enforce principle of The First Mariners activities over the past two decades is to maintain a die-hard authenticity, to cut corners only when there is no way out. The Kythira raft is no exception. The historical record of the present *kalamia* reaches back only 5,000 years so we are assuming that there was a palaeolithic version of it. And in any case primitive man would have utilised whatever material was available at the time. We are closer, though, to the genuine ancient source when we start building the raft timber skeleton from the island's distinctive and revered conifer 'Pencil Pine' (*Cupressus sempervivens*). The majestic tree is a native of the Peloponnese and keenly protected. But conveniently for us it is prone to succumb to extreme low temperatures which come along once or twice in a decade, killing a selection of trees which begins a lengthy seasoning process.

The raft's single rectangular sail will be woven from the fronds of Europe's only indigenous palm, *Chamaerops humilis*, also prolific on Kythira, whose shredded fronds will also provide some of the two kilometres of cordage to lash the cane bundles to the frame and each other. Otherwise we will use sisal which is hardly a local product but an organic fibre nevertheless. What fibre the hardy inhabitants of the Peloponnese would have twisted into rope 130,000 years ago is anybody's guess. But according to botanist Manolis Avramakis of the Natural History Museum of Crete, it can't have been our first choice - the sturdy grass-like local 'psathi' which is woven into the seats of chairs in Greece and everywhere else around the shores of the Mediterranean. This is *Gynerium argenteum*, a native, unfortunately of South America where it is known as 'pampas grass.'

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Along with the sail, which will have to be laboriously woven on a primitive frame, the raft will be propelled by the crew standing and pushing oars shaped also from the flexible dried and seasoned tips of the ‘pencil pine.’

To largely work the various materials into an ocean-going vessel the project is fortunate to have the support of palaeontologist Christos Matzanas who is replicating from quartz an assemblage of the ancient tools that were found on the islands of Crete and Gavdos. Dr. Matzanas with Prof. Katerina Kopaka co-authored the first paper dealing with the discovery of the ancient tools. As part of the raft project he will give a workshop on stone tool making and utilisation to University of Crete students at the end of May in Kapsali at the site of the raft building.

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Kalamia hunters

The First Mariners initial team of six begins raft building May 01 at a beach site at Kapsali's 'second' harbour arranged by archaeologist Theodore Koukoulis, Mayor of Kythira, and will be assisted at the end of the month by local volunteers and Prof. Kopaka's group of students from the University of Crete. It is hoped that the main work on the hull will be completed before the end of June when work can begin on its rig, oars and sail in preparation for launching and trials at the beginning of July.

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Sea conditions and wind direction will determine the start of the voyage to Crete and then Gavdos which is scheduled for the last week in July which is from personal observation and the advice of local mariners *not* the ideal time for the 97 nautical mile journey, especially to cover the initial shallow and turbulent 21 nautical mile crossing to Antikythira which was once joined to Kythira and the Peloponnese.

There is a further 40 miles to the southwest coast of Crete and the harbour of Paleochora before the 36 mile crossing to Gavdos in the Libyan Sea.

The raft's intended route to Gavdos.

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Until recently there was nothing in the historical record or scientific evidence to support what we are attempting to achieve here on Kythira other than the rather bold model of the late Dutch palaeontologist Dr. Paul Sondaar who based the very early presence of modern humans on Crete on the extinctions of a menagerie of dwarf-sized animals who had found their way to the island. When stone tools were discovered on Crete and Gavdos by American amateur palaeontologist Prof. Thomas Strasser it was clear that Paul Sondaar was on the right track; that the assumed human presence on Crete was not 12,000 years but more like 130,000 years.

There is still no proof that these immigrants, these first European sailors, set off to the south from the bottom of the Peloponnese. Prof. Katerina Kopaka, who heads the University of Crete's faculty of palaeontology, believes they did come from the north - from Kythira - where Crete can be seen. But colleague, Prof. Nena Galanidou is less certain. She is open to three different source directions but both are firmly convinced that the recent stone tool finds on the island are only the tip of the iceberg; that already Acheulean-type tools - indicating that *Homo erectus* could have been responsible - have turned up in other parts of Greece and that the mariners could have even come from Libya in North Africa, a considerably longer journey to a destination that could not be seen.

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Negotiations continue with various film production companies to produce the documentary film of the raft project. Funding possibilities are also still being sourced but until now the cost of the undertaking is being undertaken by The First Mariners personnel, volunteers and other innocent bystanders. It is an age old formula which relies more on personal devotion, enthusiasm and public cooperation than hiring an accountant.



Acknowledgments

Our time on Kythira was made pleasant and successful by the enthusiastic support and generosity of the Kytherian people of Kapsali, Chora, Livadi and in fact every other hamlet and village our determined search for *kalamia* led us to. While it is generally inappropriate to isolate names, it is also impossible to not mention those who went beyond the usual welcome the people of Kythira are famed for lavishing on their visitors. These recipients of our eternal gratitude, are - **Dimitris Baltzis, Alexandros Zeidoros, Mayor Theodore Kaukoulis, Kapsali Harbourmaster George Kaligeros, Panayotis Defterevos, Geronimos Tzannes, Tatiana Komninou, Manolis Duponte, Adonis and Georgia Tseri-Dupont, Manolis Pieros, Christos Vardas, Dimitris Nomikos, Nikos Kalligeros, Harry Mitchell, Penelope Tzortzopoulos, John Fardoulis, Jakob Kouvaras, Panayotis and Maria Leythesis.**

Bob Hobman

Crete at sunset from Kapsali.