

The English Institute

Unit Two

The First Australians

We may never know when or where the first people landed on an Australian beach, but it was probably more than 50,000 years ago. Their campsites are now underneath the sea, on the edge of the continental shelf that was exposed as dry land during the ice ages, so there is little chance of finding any evidence of the earliest campsites. At that time much of northern Europe and Canada was covered by huge ice-sheets, and everywhere the climate was much colder and wetter than it is today. Because so much water was kept frozen as ice, the world's sea levels were about 120 metres lower than they are now. This meant that more land was exposed. Land bridges connected Tasmania and Papua New Guinea to the rest of Australia. Even so, the nearest islands, such as Timor, were at least eighty kilometres from the coast.

Of course nobody knows from which direction the first Australians came. Island hopping from the mainland of Asia would have meant crossing several stretches of open water. The crossing to Timor, from islands to the north, was less than thirty kilometres, but the crossing to the Australian coast from Timor was about eighty kilometres. From Java and Kalimantan, any one of several routes could have been followed.

How Did They Get Here?

It is possible that the people who lived among the islands of South East Asia 50,000 years ago were skilled in the use of rafts, or water craft of some kind, so that crossing a stretch of ocean fifty to seventy kilometres wide may not have been a very difficult task. But how did they know there was any land across the water? They may have watched migrating birds travelling south, or seen the smoke from bushfires along the horizon.

For some of them it must have been a terrifying journey, and we can only guess at the motives for undertaking such a hazardous voyage. Was it just chance, or did invading tribes drive them out? These first Australians probably arrived on rafts made from bamboo or mangrove logs, for canoes are not likely to have been stable enough for open sea travel. As well, the rafts may have been driven forward by the strong tides of up to

ten knots, which are known to have swirled among the South-East Asian islands.

Writing exercise

Imagine that you are an early Australian about to start crossing across the water. How do you feel?

What sort of preparation did you make for your journey?

Explain how you made your sails. How did you steer?