

ORIGINS

The First Americans -Hot on the Trail

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A cluster of questions about the 'first Americans' has challenged the scientific community and intrigued the public probably ever since Columbus bumped into the Bahamas en route to the Indies. The questions have been phrased in a variety of ways, but essentially they can be summarized as follows:

- 1 - Where did 'native Americans' come from originally?
- 2 - When did they come?
- 3 - How many migrations took place and when?
- 4 - What routes were used?
- 5 - Did they travel by land or by sea, or both?
- 6 - Who else might have followed the original migrants to these shores in more recent millennia, right up to 1492?

The search for answers to these questions has largely depended, until relatively recently, on cultural and physical anthropologists and archaeologists. It is they who have formulated and promoted the various theories in response to these questions. And it is they who have most vigorously defended their theories when faced by contrary ideas of mavericks both within and outside their profession.

In recent decades, these scientists have been joined by others from such disciplines as geology, geography, botany, linguistics, astronomy, and most recently, genetics. The search has both intensified and become more collaborative. At the same time, new evidence is forcing the re-examination of old dogma, and other questions are being asked, questions that only a few years ago would have been considered 'unacceptable,' or so radical as to threaten careers. Even the near-sacred theorem that Beringia was the only significant migration route is under siege. We now hear key players asking: "Is it possible that Clovis era humans in North America are the descendants of Europe's Solutrean people?" or "Was there a circumpolar culture with water-borne traffic around both the North Atlantic Crescent as well as the North Pacific Rim?"

Dr. Robson Bonnicksen, Director of the Center for the Study of the First Americans at Oregon State University, told the April 1997 Biology Colloquium conducted by his center that the long-dominant "Clovis-first" model explaining the initial peopling of the Americas is being replaced by a more complex "early-entry" model. Bonnicksen cautions that there are still "enormous unanswered questions," but that "We now have new scientific methods coming on line that will allow us to look at the paleobiology of the first Americans." (Mammoth Trumpet 12:3, 1997)

Among those speaking at the Oregon State colloquium was D. Gentry Steele of Texas A&M University who reviewed current research on the earliest human remains in the Americas. He stressed that these earliest New World peoples were significantly different from all contemporary populations. They should not be described, he said, by traditional terms such as 'Caucasoid' or 'Mongoloid.' Steele cited the work of a number of colleagues in skeletal and cranial research, including some very sophisticated computer methodology for multivariate analysis. In his report on the colloquium, Don Alan Hall said that the specialists tend to agree that "early Holocene Americans did not look much like modern native Americans. ... Steele, looking specifically at fossils known to be older than 8,500 years, found they resembled some prehistoric and modern Eurasians or Pacific islanders more closely than they did later American peoples." In sum, writes Hall, "the data analysis suggests that ancient North American skeletons represent a unique population" (Mammoth Trumpet July 1997). Some of the scholars whose research was reported by Steele are Richard Jantz of the University of Tennessee, Douglas Owsley of the Smithsonian, W.W. Howells of Harvard, and C. Loring Brace of the University of Michigan.

A major event contributing to broader recognition of the validity of the early-entry model was the unanimous acceptance in the spring of 1997, by a panel of distinguished archaeologists (including Bonnicksen, C. Vance

Haynes, Dennis Stanford, J.M. Adovasio, and Dena Dincauze), of at least 12,500 years before the present for the Monte Verde site in southern Chile, excavated more than a decade ago by Tom Dillehay, who was also on the panel. That was the acceptable date for the upper strata; further work needs to be carried out to verify a possible date of 33,000 BP for the lowest level. And let's not forget that a claimed even earlier date for the lowest levels of the Pedra Furada site in northeastern Brazil still furrows the scientific brows..

But listen to Dr. Dennis Stanford, chair of the Anthropology Department of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (on the Smithsonian web site: <http://nmnhwww.si.edu/arctic> -- click on Northern Traces): "It's been a really exciting time in Paleo-Indian studies in the last year or two. We've learned so much about the Paleo-Indians or the first people in the Americas. And it's totally changed our point of view on the evolution of early cultures in the New World and their ties to the Old World." Stanford continues:

"From looking at the artifactual evidence we now have from North America and from Northeast Asia as well as the physical remains, it's very clear, at least to me, that we are looking at multiple migrations through a very long period, of many different peoples of many different ethnic origins, if you will, that came in at different times ... by studying all these skeletons, particularly the DNA and the morphological differences and similarities, I think we'll eventually be able to figure out how many groups and from where they came. And it's clear that we have to have a very broad mind about the issue and not ignore some seemingly impossible migration theories."

One of the most intriguing events recently to erupt on this complex origins scene is "Kennewick Man," the name being applied to a 9,300 year old skeleton found last year along the Columbia River in Washington state. The most surprising characteristic of this individual, we read on the Smithsonian web site in a feature by historian/filmmakers Ted Timreck and Bill Goetzmann, "is that the skeleton may be Caucasian, or more accurately, some prototypical racial example that differs from the region's modern native population." (Some analysis, including the dating, has been carried out, but further scientific analysis awaits political and legal decisions related to reburial rights under NAGPRA, the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.)

The significance of "Kennewick", both legal and scientific, is discussed in a remarkable article in the June 16, 1997 issue of the New Yorker. Author Douglas Preston cites the growing interest in a possible connection between Clovis and Solutrean, and here we are talking about a time frame possibly more than fifteen thousand years ago when sea level was hundreds of feet lower and the North Atlantic rim was a sheet of ice. Preston has talked with Stanford and Bonnicksen and many others, and his reportage includes the following:

- Several forensic anthropologists who examined Kennewick confidently described the remains as Caucasoid, one saying plainly "Male Caucasian."
- Kennewick has an Archaic-style spear point embedded in his pelvic bone.
- "This skeleton cannot be racially or culturally associated with any existing American Indian group." (Grover S. Krantz, physical anthropologist, Washington State University).
- Six other well-preserved Paleo-American remains found in North America also have Caucasoid features in varying degrees (Douglas Owsley, Division Head, Physical Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution).
- "Kennewick Man has the potential to change the way we view the entire peopling of the Americas" (Dennis Stanford, Smithsonian).
- If Clovis people came from Asia, we would expect to find similar stone tool technology in Asia, but we don't, notes Bruce Bradley, a leading expert on early flaked stone technology. That technology, he states, occurs in Europe and in parts of Russia. Comparing the artifacts of Old World Solutrean and New World Clovis, Bradley asserts: "The artifacts don't just look identical; they are made the same way ... I call these deep technologies. These are not mere resemblances -- they are deep, complex, abstract concepts applied to the stone. ... There is no evolution in Clovis technology. It just appears full blown, all over the New World, around eleven thousand five hundred years ago."
- "When I look at Clovis and ask myself where in the world the culture was derived from, I would say Europe. ... If you want to speculate, I see a band moving eastward from Europe through Siberia, and meeting people there, and having cultural differences ... maybe it just drove them right across the Bering land bridge." (Dr. C. Vance Haynes, Jr., professor of anthropology at the University of Arizona and a top Paleo-Indian geo-chronologist).

As for the maritime capabilities of early people, we would do well to take another look at Alice Kehoe's paper "Small Boats upon the North Atlantic" in *Man Across the Sea*, the seminal 1971 volume published by the University of Texas drawing on presentations at a symposium during the 1968 Santa Fe meeting of the Society for American Archaeology. An anthropology professor at Marquette University, Dr. Kehoe pays particular attention in her paper to the early maritime skills of the Scandinavian peoples. Thirty years later, we find not only greater receptivity to such analysis, but a growing tolerance of similarly unorthodox ideas, partly because we know so much more, but also because we are coming to realize that the picture is far more complex than we previously realized. Still, we would agree with Dennis Stanford's comment on these early peoples that "Humans are humans and these are modern humans like you and me, with well-developed brains that can reason and figure out. Ocean-going travel isn't that much, and they could do it." With that in mind, it is useful to recall a poignant moment at the 1989 "First World Conference on the Peopling of the Americas," (organized in Orono, Maine, incidentally, by Rob Bonnicksen) when some of us heard Canadian anthropologist Ruth Gruhn observe that perhaps the first migration, rather than struggling over the rugged and hostile Beringia terrain, was accomplished by "women paddling their craft along the edge of the ice."

Let me wrap up this short report with the comment that Timreck and Goetzmann make at the conclusion of their web site essay: "Only within the last couple of decades have scientists begun to recognize the advanced maritime capabilities of earlier cultures in northern Europe. ... The identification of the Maritime Archaic and the discovery of their settlements in northern Labrador were among the first research efforts accomplished by the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Center. Following the story of this investigation effort offers a clear example of how long-accepted ideas about the prehistory of Native America are still capable of being radically changed." To that observation, and in reaction to the volume of new information becoming available to us almost every day, I would just like to add one more question to the list which I placed at the beginning of this article:

Are we in the process of constructing a new diffusion paradigm?