

Who Were the First Americans?

They may have been a lot like Kennewick Man, whose hotly disputed bones are helping rewrite our earliest history. An exclusive inside look

By **MICHAEL D. LEMONICK** and **ANDREW DORFMAN**

JIM CHATTERS, A FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGIST, had been called in by the coroner of Benton County, Washington, to consult on some bones found by two college students on the banks of the Columbia River, near the town of Kennewick. The bones were obviously old, and when the coroner asked for an opinion, Chatters' off-the-cuff guess was that they probably belonged to a settler from the late 1800s. Then a CT scan revealed a stone spear point embedded in the skeleton's pelvis, so Chatters sent a bit of finger bone off to the University of California at Riverside for radiocarbon dating. When the results came back, it was clear that his estimate was dramatically off the mark. The bones weren't 100 or even 1,000 years old. They belonged to a man who had walked the banks of the Columbia more than 9,000 years ago.

In short, the remains that came to be known as Kennewick Man were almost twice as old as the celebrated Iceman discovered in 1991 in an Alpine glacier, and among the oldest and most complete skeletons ever found in the Americas. Scientists have found only about 50 skeletons of such antiquity, most of them fragmentary. Any new find can thus add crucial insight into the ongoing mystery of who first colonized the New World—the last corner of the globe to be populated by humans. Kennewick Man could cast some much-needed

light on the murky questions of when that epochal migration took place, where the first Americans originally came from and how they got here.

The scientific team that examined the skeleton was led by forensic anthropologist Douglas Owsley of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. Owsley and his team were able to nail down or make strong guesses about Kennewick

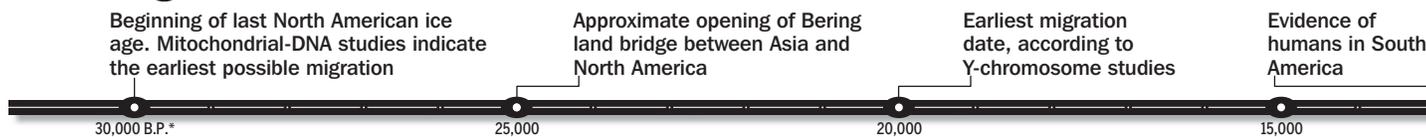
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Man's physical attributes. He stood about 5 feet, 9 inches tall and was fairly muscular. Previous estimates had Kennewick Man's age as 45 to 55 when he died, but Owsley thinks he may have been as young as 38. Nothing in the bones reveals what caused his death. Perhaps the most remarkable discovery: Kennewick Man had been buried deliberately.

The existence of Kennewick Man leads to the question: Who really discovered America? The conventional answer to that question dates to the early 1930s, when stone projectile points that were nearly identical began to turn up at sites across the American Southwest. They suggested a single cultural tradition that was christened Clovis, after an 11,000-year-old-plus site near Clovis, New Mexico. And because no older sites were known to exist in the Americas, scientists assumed that the Clovis people were the first to arrive. They came, according to the theory, no more than 12,000 years B.P. (before the present), walking across the dry land that connected modern Russia and Alaska at the end of the last ice age, when sea level was hundreds of feet lower than it is today.



Migration milestones



However in 1997, a blue-ribbon panel of researchers took a hard look at evidence presented by Tom Dillehay, then at the University of Kentucky, from a site he had been excavating in Monte Verde, Chile. After years of skepticism, the panel finally affirmed his claim that the site proved humans had lived there 12,500 years ago. If people were living in southern Chile 12,500 years ago, they must have crossed over from Asia considerably earlier, and that means they couldn't have used the ice-free inland corridor; it didn't yet exist. Instead, many scientists now believe, the earliest Americans traveled down the Pacific coast—possibly even using boats. Even if the earliest Americans traveled down the coast,

that doesn't mean they couldn't have come through the interior as well.

Genetics points to an original homeland for the first Americans. "Skeletal remains are very rare, but the genetic evidence suggests they came from the Lake Baikal region" of Russia, says anthropologist Ted Goebel of the University of Nevada at Reno, who has worked extensively in that part of southern Siberia. "There is a rich archaeological record there," he says, "beginning about 40,000 years ago." Based on what he and Russian colleagues have found, Goebel speculates that there were two northward migratory pulses, the first between 28,000 and 20,000 years ago and a second some-

Tools in the search

ARCHAEOLOGY

Skeletons like Kennewick Man are rare. More often scientists study and date other indications of human activity—remains of butchered animals, stone tools, spear points or even bits of burned charcoal. Unfortunately, such artifacts may never be found along coastal migration routes—they're now under water



GENETICS

Scientists use markers in DNA samples from indigenous peoples in North and South America to figure out when populations diverged from each other. DNA comparisons suggest the first Americans may have diverged from groups in the Lake Baikal area of what is now Russia as early as 26,000 years ago



LINGUISTICS

By studying native words and grammar, scientists can establish links and infer the amount of time required for different languages to evolve from a common origin. As of 1492, there were an estimated 1,000 languages in the Americas that may have developed from the original migrants



time after 17,000 years ago. “Either one could have led to the peopling of the Americas,” he says.

As always, the most valuable evidence will be the earthly remains of the ancient people themselves. Kennewick Man has already added immeasurably to anthropologists’ store of knowledge, and the next round of study is already under way. If scientists treat those bones with respect, the mystery of how and when the New World was populated may finally be laid to rest. ■

Questions

1. Why is Kennewick Man’s discovery important?
2. What do scientists know about Kennewick Man?