

World History 2019 - Ms. Goodwin - Period 3

How did the earliest peoples arrive in North America?

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In 1492, Columbus sailed from Spain and arrived in North America. People called it “the discovery of the new world.” But was it really a “discovery”? Was it really a “new world” that Columbus had seen? It turns out that humans already arrived on the North American continent even before the humans started living a sedentary lifestyle, and there were native people who lived on the continent for more than ten thousand years. But North America is far apart from any other continents by sea and it is unlikely that people at that time had sufficient ship-building technology—how did the early peoples go there? The earliest peoples arrived in North America through the Beringia land bridge that connected Siberia and Alaska. They first went to high latitude areas in Siberia and eventually migrated to northwestern North America by following the herd of animals, around 12,000 BP¹.

Since 2.6 million years ago until about 11,700 years ago, the Earth was experiencing an Ice Age. During the Ice Age, the rain and snow that came down mostly froze into glacial ice, converting the overall amount of liquid water to ice. As a result, the sea level was approximately 120 meters (or 390 feet) lower than what it is now,² allowing the shallow land to be exposed. Beringia was one of them. It was a grassy land bridge that connected Siberia of northeast Asia and Alaska of North America. (*Figure 1*) It existed at 12,500 BP when the humans first arrived in North America until 11,000 BP when the Ice Age ended and sea level ascended again.³ But humans were living in the regions near Beringia since a long time ago. Humans have been occupying arctic regions of Eurasia since 19,000 BP, thanks to the milder climates at the end of the Ice Age.⁴ Although the climate was calmer than other time periods of the Ice Age, it was still

¹ (BP = Before Present. e.g. 12,000 BP is approximately 10,000 BC.)

² David J. Meltzer. *First Peoples in a New World: Colonizing Ice Age America*. University of California Press, 2009. Accessed February 14, 2019. Questia School eBook. 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John F. Hoffecker. *A Prehistory of the North: Human Settlement of the Higher Latitudes*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005. Accessed February 21, 2019. Questia School eBook. 8-9, 99.

too cold for modern people⁵ to live without any cold-proof technology, especially in the northern areas. To overcome the harsh environment of the north, they used technology such as tailored fur clothing, portable lamps, heated shelters, and possibly the first mechanical devices. They also consumed high protein-fat diet and designed new instruments such as fired ceramics and woven textiles to expand their food sources.⁶ The diet and their technology helped the modern migrants to overcome the cold and their difficulties of long-distance travel, significantly improving their chances of survival and led to a successful settlement in the north.



Figure 1. Map of what was once Beringia⁷

Since 15,000 years ago at latest, humans have already crossed Beringia and were living in the eastern part of the land bridge.⁸ There are many theories of the specific routes that paleolithic people would have gone through to cross Beringia. (Figure 2) The theory of sailing from Iberia

⁵ ("Modern people" here means the current human species *Homo sapiens*, apart from the Neanderthals.)

⁶ Ibid., 70-71.

⁷ National Park Service. *Beringia*. Photograph. Accessed March 19, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/bela/learn/beringia.htm>

⁸ Ibid., 96.

or Australia is extremely unlikely since it requires the pioneers to travel more than five thousand miles by boat, which seems to be too challenging at that time. The trail across interior Beringia would have also been improbable because of the mismatch in time periods. Therefore, the most possible route was following the coast of Beringia, south around the glaciers. It is currently uncertain whether the settlers traveled by boat or on foot, but the evidence of the latter is increasing,⁹ making it the most reliable theory. The book *The Bering Land Bridge*, written by the leading scientist David Hopkins, also supports this.

| Location | General Path | Method | And Then . . . | Comments |
|-----------------------------------|---|---------|---|--|
| Siberia (Northeastern Asia) | across interior Beringia | on foot | south through the "ice-free corridor" | unlikely: ice-free corridor seems too late |
| | across interior Beringia | on foot | south after the glaciers melted | unlikely: people were south before ice melted |
| | following the coast of Beringia | on foot | south around the glaciers | quite possible: increasing evidence |
| | following the coast of Beringia | by boat | south around the glaciers | quite possible: but so far little direct evidence |
| Iberia (Europe) | across the North Atlantic following the southern limit of the ice sheets | by boat | into eastern North America | highly improbable: far too difficult, no real evidence |
| Australia | across the open Pacific Ocean to South America | by boat | then north into the rest of the New World | highly improbable: very difficult, no real evidence |

Figure 2. Possible routes and methods¹⁰

The time frame that the route was available were also limited due to the geographical reasons. For most of the ice age, humans were denied access to other parts of the North American continent by the massive ice sheets. It was 13,500 years ago when the ice started disappearing and the "ice-free corridor" opened for access to the inside of North America. It is known that the

⁹ Mark Q. Sutton. *A Prehistory of North America*. London, UK: Routledge, 2016. Accessed February 18, 2019. Questia School eBook. 25.

¹⁰ Ibid.

early peoples started arriving in the North American continent around the time of ice retreat. Meanwhile, the coastal route was available since 17,000 BP, allowing earlier settlements in South America around 15,000 BP.¹¹ There are some clues that prove that the early immigrants arrived at North America through the Beringia land bridge. Charcoals that have been discovered in the site of the Beringia Land Bridge National Preserve, where the estimated routes are located, is one of them. Nearly 5,000 artifacts have been collected from the site, including thousands of animal bone fragments, charcoal, bifacial stone tools, microblades, bladelets, and pieces of debitage, which are turned out to date at least 12,000 years ago. (*Figure 4*) The discovery of artifacts that were created in the Paleolithic Era where Beringia used to prove that the first people came to North America through Beringia. Another evidence is the similarity between northeastern Asians and native Americans. The northeastern Asian languages and the Native American languages share linguistic similarities.¹² Northeastern Asian and Native Americans also share similarities in their bodies including similar appearances, blood groupings, and dental traits.¹³ To support this, *Figure 3* shows the dental frequency variation of other regions in comparison to Native Americans'. It manifests that the modern-day northeastern Asians share the highest similarity, besides people from the Americas, with the Native Americans in terms of dental traits. This proves that the first pioneers of North America came from northeastern Asia, ultimately supporting the Bering Strait Theory.

¹¹ Hoffeker, 115-116.

¹² Sutton, 24.

¹³ Ibid.

origins considerations (Turner 1992b).

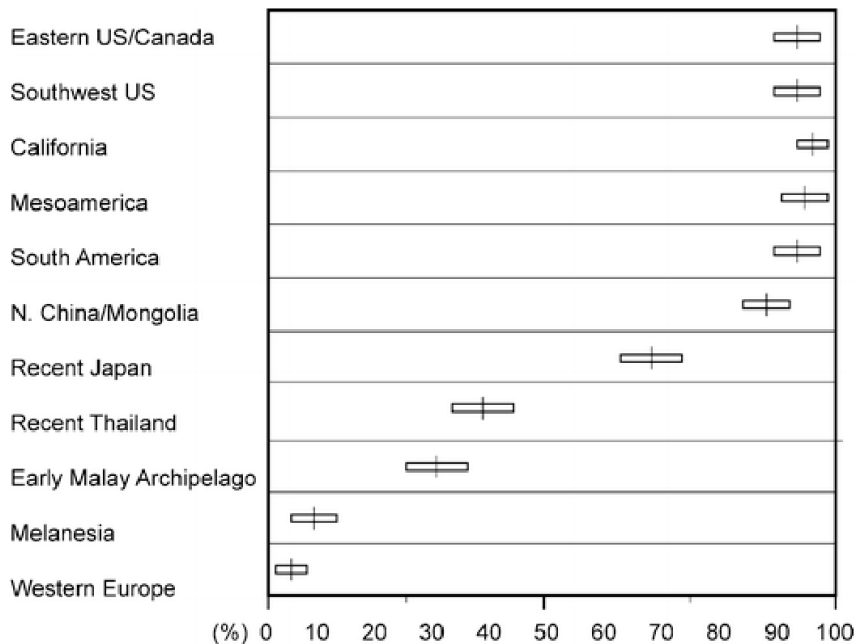


Fig. 4
Circum-Pacific and European frequencies of upper central incisor shoveling

Table 2

World dental frequency variation for the eight distinguishing Sinodont and Sundadont morphological traits ^a

| Trait tooth break point | Shovel UI1 2-7/0-7 | Double-shovel UI1 2-6/0-6 | 1-root UP1 1/1-3 | Enamel extension UM1 1-3/0-3 |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Arctic ^b | 78 | 75 | 95 | 46 |
| Eastern USA and Canada | 91 | 78 | 80 | 31 |
| SW USA | 91 | 65 | 89 | 51 |
| California | 98 | 90 | 84 | 42 |
| Mesoamerica | 94 | 93 | 89 | 39 |

Figure 3. The dentition of Native Americans¹⁴

¹⁴ Turner II, Christy. *The Dentition of American Indians: Evolutionary Results and Demographic Implications Following Colonization from Siberia*. Image. Accessed April 20, 2019. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Dentition-of-American-Indians%3A-Evolutionary-and-Turner-Scott/5f2123a482bb5e036fb31c747e84faf8cdd8b989/figure/3>

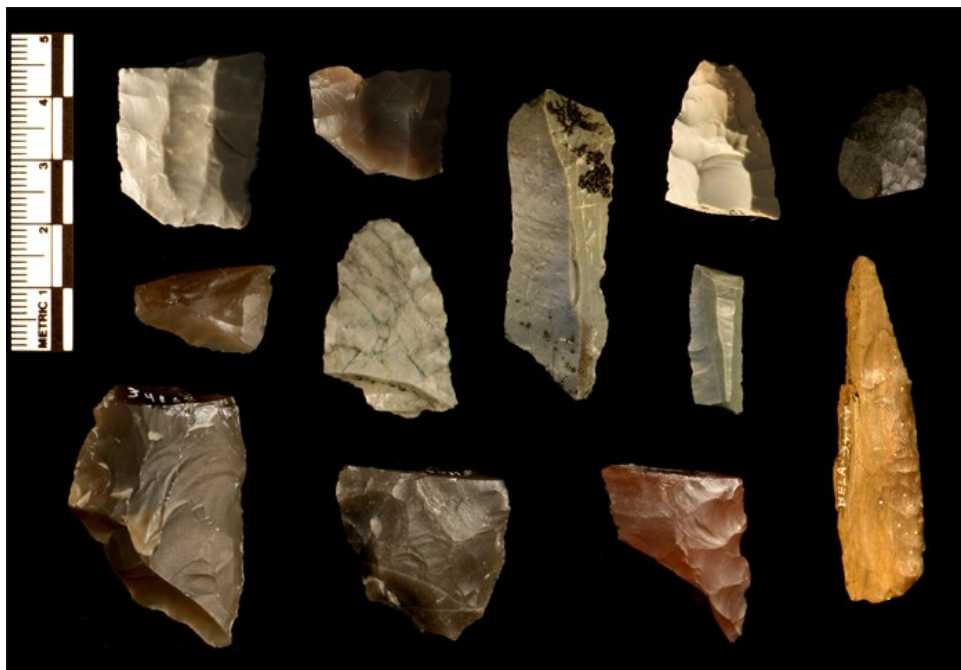


Figure 4. Findings of Bering Land Bridge¹⁵

One might wonder why the early settlers came to live in North America despite the fact that it is very unlikely that they knew where they were going and that they had to go through freezing-cold regions. Research shows that the pioneers were attracted by the plentiful food resources of Beringia. People at that time were nomadic hunter-gatherers, which means that they did not settle in one place. They frequently moved their homes when other places had more food supplies.¹⁶ When the settlers were moving to the east of Beringia, large mammals appeared and lived near or on the land bridge in Beringia for more than a thousand years.¹⁷ A lot of animal species also moved between two continents through Beringia, and the common species found in both sides of the land bridge proves it.¹⁸ When this happened, hunters followed them on foot to

¹⁵ National Park Service. *Findings - Bering Land Bridge*. Photograph. Accessed February 20, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/bela/learn/historyculture/findings.html>.

¹⁶ Barnard, Alan. *Hunter-Gatherers in History, Archaeology and Anthropology*. New York: Berg, 2004. Questia School eBook. 1.

¹⁷ Sutton, 27.

¹⁸ Meltzer, 34.

hunt down the animals for food. After this continued on for a few hundred or thousand years, the group of hunters ended up on the other side of the land bridge. It would have been impossible for them to know that they were in a different continent, and they would have not even cared because that is how they lived on for more than six hundred thousand years. The same thing would have also happened when the immigrants moved from east of Beringia to the inner continent.

Humans today still cross the area where the Beringia used to be when traveling from Asia to North America or vice versa; the difference is that they now fly over it. Beringia land bridge that was located in the modern-day Bering Strait was the main gateway to North America for the paleolithic humans, although it was open for a limited time. After humans already settled in high latitude areas, Beringia allowed humans to settle in a “new world” unexpectedly while following herds of animals. This theory, called *Bering Strait Theory*, is supported by artifacts found in the region and the similarities between the two regions that Beringia connected. However, historians are not completely sure about this, and there are still some mysteries remain about this topic due to the limitations of preserved artifacts; further investigations of the Bering Strait Theory would clear out the dark parts of the theory and help find out other secrets of early humanity.

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