

Why don't indigenous Americans look like their pioneer ancestors?

The first face of the first Americans belongs to an unlucky teenage girl who fell to her death in a Yucatán cave some 12,000 to 13,000 years ago. Her bad luck is science's good fortune. The story of her discovery begins in 2007, when a team of Mexican divers led by Alberto Nava made a startling find: an immense submerged cavern they named Hoyo Negro, the "black hole." At the bottom of the abyss their lights revealed a bed of prehistoric bones, including at least one nearly complete human skeleton.

Nava reported the discovery to Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History, which brought together an international team of archaeologists and other researchers to investigate the cave and its contents. The skeleton—affectionately dubbed Naia, after the water nymphs of Greek mythology—turned out to be one of the oldest ever found in the Americas, and the earliest one intact enough to provide a foundation for a facial reconstruction. Geneticists were even able to extract a sample of DNA.

Together these remnants may help explain an enduring mystery about the peopling of the Americas: If Native Americans are descendants of Asian trailblazers who migrated into the Americas toward the end of the last ice age, why don't they look like their ancient ancestors?

By all appearances, the earliest Americans were a rough bunch. If you look at the skeletal remains of Paleo-Americans, more than half the men have injuries caused by violence, and four out of ten have skull fractures. The wounds don't appear to have been the result of hunting mishaps, and they don't bear telltale signs of warfare, like blows suffered while fleeing an attacker. Instead it appears that these men fought among themselves—often and violently.

The women don't have these kinds of injuries, but they're much smaller than the men, with signs of malnourishment and domestic abuse.

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