

Genetic analysis reshapes our understanding of when humans first arrived in North America

For more than half a century, the prevailing story of how the first humans came to the Americas went like this: Some 13,000 years ago, small bands of Stone Age hunters walked across a land bridge between eastern Siberia and western Alaska, eventually making their way down an ice-free inland corridor into the heart of North America.

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Now our understanding of when people reached the Americas—and where they came from—is expanding dramatically. The emerging picture suggests that humans may have arrived in North America at least 20,000 years ago—some 5,000 years earlier than has been commonly believed. And new research raises the possibility of an intermediate settlement of hundreds or thousands of people who spread out over the wild lands stretching between North America and Asia.

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Much of this new theorizing is driven not by archaeologists wielding shovels but by evolutionary geneticists taking DNA samples from some of the oldest human remains in the Americas, and from even older ones in Asia.

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It's an exciting, if at times esoteric, debate, touching on basic questions we're all connected to, such as why people first came to the Americas and how they managed to survive.

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