Looking forward, looking back

Researchers’ understanding of South America’s earliest inhabitants would benefit from the discovery of more human remains, researchers say, but such finds have been hard to come by—which itself raises questions, Dilharay says, of what happened to the bodies of ancient people. “One major thing is to understand the mortuary practices [of ancient people in the Americas] a little better,” he says.

With or without remains, more archaeological sites in parts of Central America and the northwest coast of South America are needed to reveal how people migrated onto and within the continent, and how many waves of migration there were, Boëda notes. The oldest widely accepted archaeological sites in Central America date to around 11,500 BP, and the oldest human remains in the area to about 6,000 BP. The region’s acidic soil inhibits preservation of human remains, and some archaeologists suspect that rising sea levels at the end of the Last Glacial Maximum may have swallowed some of the earliest signs of human activity.

Thanks to newer technologies and approaches, archaeologists can now extract more information from sites once they’re identified. These methods include genome analysis and stable isotope analysis, which allows researchers to determine whether an individual’s early diet was made up of plants and animals from the local area or from further afield. This in turn can reveal whether a person was from the area where their remains were found or had migrated there. With these new methods, says Rademaker, “each [new] site is going to tell us something incredibly useful.”

WHERE EARLY SOUTH AMERICAN MIGRANTS CAME FROM

The studies published in late 2018, one led by David Reich of Harvard University (results depicted in cool colors) and another led by David Reich and Dennis Stanford of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, suggested that some Solutreans could have migrated to North America and those made by Europe’s Solutrean people between 22,000 and 17,000 BP. Its main proponents, Bruce Bradley of the University of Exeter and the late Dennis Stanford of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, suggested that some Solutreans could have migrated to North America via boats that hugged an ice bridge between the two continents (World Archaeol., 36:459–78, 2004). Other researchers have pointed out what they see as multiple problems with the hypothesis, including the 7,000-year gap between Solutrean tools in Europe and the first Clovis sites in North America, and a lack of genetic evidence that any early Americans had European ancestry.

The Beringian standstill hypothesis continues to undergo revisions as new studies emerge. In 2018, for example, Potter and his colleagues reported a genetic analysis of 11,500-year-old remains of a baby girl found buried in Alaska at a site called Upward Sun. The infant belonged to a pre-Clovis population, that Potter and his team concluded was most closely related to the Clovis culture of North America, which entered the continent sometime in Central America. The Beringian standstill hypothesis continues to undergo revisions as new studies emerge. In 2018, for example, Potter and his colleagues reported a genetic analysis of 11,500-year-old remains of a baby girl found buried in Alaska at a site called Upward Sun. The infant belonged to a pre-Clovis population, that Potter and his team concluded was most closely related to the Clovis culture of North America, which entered the continent sometime in Central America.

According to the Beringian standstill hypothesis, glaciers long prevented movement further into the Americas, so the founding population remained in the region for thousands of years. When the ice melted enough to permit passage, the Beringians moved fast.

Researchers have long debated the hypothesis that indigenous Americans came from East Asia at a time when sea levels would have been low enough to form an inhabitable region known as Beringia that spanned what’s now eastern Siberia and western Alaska. According to the Beringian standstill hypothesis, glaciers long prevented movement further into the Americas, so the founding population remained in the region for thousands of years. When the ice melted enough to permit passage, the Beringians moved fast. The Beringian standstill hypothesis continues to undergo revisions as new studies emerge. In 2018, for example, Potter and his colleagues reported a genetic analysis of 11,500-year-old remains of a baby girl found buried in Alaska at a site called Upward Sun. The infant belonged to a pre-Clovis population, that Potter and his team concluded was most closely related to the Clovis culture of North America, which entered the continent sometime in Central America.

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