

Early Inhabitants of the Americas

The beginning of civilization in America occurred during the last Ice Age, when the nomadic Paleo-Indians migrated across Beringia.



Bering Land Bridge

It is believed that a small Paleo-Indian population of at most a few thousand survived the Last Glacial Maximum in Beringia - isolated from its ancestor populations in Asia for at least 5,000 years, before expanding to populate the Americas sometime after 16,500 years ago.

KEY POINTS

- Beringia is the ancient Ice Age subcontinent that united the Eastern and Western hemispheres between Siberia and Alaska.
- The pattern of migration, its timing, and the place of origin in Asia of the peoples who migrated to America remains unclear.
- Paleo-Indian adaptation across North America was likely characterized by small, highly mobile bands consisting of approximately 20 to 50 members of an extended family.
- Due to the vastness and variety of the climates, ecology, vegetation, fauna, and landforms, ancient peoples migrated and coalesced separately into numerous separate peoples of distinct linguistic and cultural groups.

TERMS

- **nomadic**
Leading a wandering life with no fixed abode; peripatetic, itinerant
- **Beringia**
The Bering land bridge was a land bridge roughly 1,000 miles (1,600 km) wide (north to south) at its greatest extent, which joined present-day Alaska and eastern Siberia at various times during the Pleistocene ice ages.

America was inhabited by humans long before the first European set foot on the continent. The beginning of civilization in America occurred during the last Ice Age when the nomadic, ancestral peoples of the Americas - the "Paleo-Indians" - migrated into the current-day continental United States and Canada. Their exact origins, as well as the route and timing of their migrations, are the subject of much scholarly discussion.

The Land Bridge and Migrations

The Last Glacial Maximum (LGM) of the Wurm/Wisconsin glacial period occurred between approximately 20,000 and 18,000 years ago. Extremely cold weather resulted in the formation of vast ice sheets across the Earth's northernmost and southernmost latitudes. As the ice sheets formed, sea levels dropped worldwide. When the Bering and Chukchi Seas had dropped some 400 feet lower than their present level, land beneath the Bering Strait was exposed. This ancient Ice Age subcontinent that united the Eastern and Western hemispheres is referred to as Beringia - a treeless, grassy tundra over 1,000 miles wide Figure 1.

The question of how, when, and why humans first entered the Americas has been a subject of heated debate for centuries. Several models for the Paleo-Indian [settlement](#) of America have been proposed by various academic communities. While there is general agreement that America was first settled from Asia over the course of millennia by people who migrated across Beringia, their pattern of migration, timing, and place of origin in Asia remains unclear. The chronology of migration models is currently divided into two general approaches. In the first, known as the short chronology theory, the first movement beyond Alaska into the New World occurs no earlier than 14,000 – 17,000 years ago, followed by successive waves of immigrants.

The First American Civilizations

After the migration or migrations, it was several thousand years before the first complex civilizations arose. One of the earliest identifiable cultures was the Clovis culture, with sites dating from some 13,000 years ago. The Clovis culture ranged over much of North America and also appeared in South America. It is not clear whether the Clovis people were one unified tribe or whether there were many tribes related by common technology and belief. As early Paleo-Indians spread throughout the Americas, they diversified into many hundreds of culturally distinct tribes. Paleo-Indian adaptation across North America was likely characterized by small, highly mobile bands consisting of approximately 20 to 50 members of an extended family. These groups moved from place to place as preferred resources were depleted and new supplies were sought.

As time went on, many of these first settlers settled down into agricultural societies, complete with domesticated animals. The North American climate finally stabilized by 8000 BCE. Climatic conditions were very similar to today's, which led to widespread migration, cultivation, and subsequently, a dramatic rise in population all over the Americas. At times, tribes would gain regional importance and dominate large areas of America. Empires rose across the Americas that rivaled the greatest ones in Europe. For their time, some of these empires were highly advanced.

Due to the vastness and variety of the climates, ecology, vegetation, fauna, and landforms, ancient peoples migrated and coalesced separately into numerous separate peoples of distinct linguistic and cultural groups. Comparative linguistics -- the study of languages of different tribes -- shows fascinating diversity, with similarities between tribes hundreds of miles apart, yet startling differences with neighboring groups.