

THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA AND EXPLORATION OF A NEW WORLD

Bering Strait Migrations

Using a land bridge between modern-day Siberia and Alaska, the first human beings arrived in North America and gradually moved east and south into South America, populating these two continents.

Date: c. 18,000-c. 11,000 BCE

Locale: Beringia (now the Bering Strait, between Siberia and Alaska)

SUMMARY OF EVENT

About two million years ago, for reasons not entirely understood, earth's temperature began to fall. In the north, more snow fell in winter than melted in summer, and great sheets of ice formed on the landmasses. These glaciers went through a series of advances and retreats—sliding forward under the influence of gravity and melting back under warmer climatic conditions.

At the same time, a group of primates (monkeys, apes, and their relatives) was evolving in Africa. This group had already developed the ability to walk on their hind limbs rather than on four feet, thus freeing the forelimbs for functions other than locomotion. Climatic change had initiated a drying trend in Africa, replacing rain forests with grasslands and savannas. Several species of the two-legged primate group had successfully invaded the grassland envi-

ronment and spread throughout Africa. Well into the Ice Age, late-developing species migrated north into Europe and Asia, using tools, animal skins, and fire to cope with the cold. Some members of one species, today called *Homo sapiens* (literally, wise human), eventually moved into frigid Siberian environments.

Eastern Siberia and western Alaska were not covered by glaciers, even at the height of glacial advance. Although the climate in these unglaciated regions was cold, a number of large mammal species (mammoth, mastodons, giant bison, and others) had invaded the northern environment ahead of the humans. The newcomers probably used many food sources, but they became especially skilled at hunting the large animals.

Tremendous amounts of water were required to build the continental glaciers. That water came primarily from the most abundant source of water on the planet, the oceans. As a result, each advance and retreat of the glaciers was accompanied by dramatic changes in sea level—the sea rose as glaciers melted and fell with each glacial advance. Today, only about 50 miles (80 kilometers) of water separate Siberia from Alaska across the Bering Strait. The Bering Strait is less than 200 feet (60 meters) deep, and the adjacent parts of the Chukchi and Bering seas are not much deeper. Because of this, a strip of Bering Strait and adjacent sea floor 1,000 miles (1,600 kilo-

meters) wide became dry land whenever extensive glaciation occurred. Along with adjacent parts of Siberia and Alaska, this region is called Beringia. When the glaciers were in full retreat, the Bering Strait reformed, splitting Beringia and placing a barrier between the two continents.

The sea level rose and fell throughout glacial times, and the connection between Alaska and Siberia was established and broken repeatedly. Various land organisms crossed the bridge when it was available, but exchange between the continents was blocked when it was inundated. Mammoths, mast-

odons, camels, horses, and many other species of animals and plants crossed throughout the Ice Age, but humans probably did not reach northeastern Siberia until the most recent glacial advance.

In North America, the last glacier (the Wisconsin) advanced until approximately sixty thousand years ago, at which time it began a retreat called the mid-Wisconsin interglacial. Fewer than thirty thousand years ago, it began its final advance (the late Wisconsin glaciation) followed by its most recent retreat, which began eighteen thousand years ago. It was during or after the mid-Wisconsin interglacial



Map showing the ice-free corridor along the Continental Divide. Image by Roblespepe, via Wikimedia Commons.

that humans from Siberia made their way across Beringia into North America.

This migration was not a directed, purposeful movement to a new continent. It is unlikely that the first Americans had any sense of their role in history or the nature of continents. The migration probably was the simple result of growing populations expanding into new regions, perhaps drawn by the presence of herds of the large mammals they were so adept at hunting.

The populations continued to expand throughout Alaska and adjacent Canada but were restricted from much of Canada by two major glacial masses. The Laurentide ice sheet covered most of Canada and much of the northern United States, from the East Coast to the Rocky Mountains. The second mass of ice resulted from the coalescence of a number of mountain glaciers into a single glacial complex, the Cordilleran glacier located between the Rockies and the coastal mountain ranges.

During glacial advance, the two ice masses probably met and blocked the migrants' route south. However, when the glaciers melted, a corridor opened between them. The migrants moved south through Mexico and Central America, and on to the tip of South America. As the most recent glacial retreat continued, the first Americans expanded their range into all parts of Canada as well.

THE FIRST AMERICANS

Anthropologists and archaeologists call these first Americans (or their immediate descendants) Paleo-Indians. Many details of relationship and pathways of descent are not known, but the Paleo-Indian culture gave rise to another widespread culture, called the Archaic, around 7000 BCE. Approximately two thousand years ago, the Archaic culture began to give way to the mound-building culture of eastern North America (the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian), the agricultural groups of the southwestern deserts (the Hohokam,

Mogollon, and Anasazi), and other cultures. Some time before 1500 CE, these prehistoric cultures gave rise to the Native American tribes that were later displaced by European settlement. Some archaeologists argue that a similar sequence of cultural replacement took place in Mexico and Central and South America, culminating in the Inca, Aztec, and Mayan civilizations decimated by the Spanish conquistadores in the 1500s.

One of the most vituperative arguments in the history of science centers on the question of when the first Americans arrived. A few students of the question argue for dates earlier than the mid-Wisconsin interglacial, and some argue for entry times more than thirty thousand years ago (during the mid-Wisconsin interglacial) or around 18,000 BCE, during the last glacial maximum, but many favor from 15,000 to 11,000 BCE.

The basis for the most popular position is the widespread occurrence of a particular type of spear point found at archaeological sites all over North America, sites determined to be between 11,500 and 10,500 years old. These sites constitute the first recognized North American Paleo-Indian culture, now called the Clovis culture because it was established on the basis of finds in Blackwater Draw near Clovis, New Mexico. Because the culture was so widespread, archaeologists assume that Native Americans must have been on the continent some time before the Clovis dates. Discoveries at sites such as Meadowcroft Rockshelter in southwestern Pennsylvania and Cactus Hill and Saltville in Virginia support the idea that other cultures preceded the Clovis culture. At these sites, archaeologists found artifacts that are very different from and are significantly older than those found at Clovis. Although many archaeologists believe that the first immigrants spread from Beringia to Tierra del Fuego and throughout both continents, the discovery of sites that appear to predate the Clovis culture in South America have caused others to believe that South America may

Ferdinand II
 Queen Isabella
 Martín Alonso Pinzón

SUMMARY OF EVENT

Fernando Columbus, Christopher second son, relates the exorbitant terms by which the Spanish monarchs agreed to grant Columbus 10 percent of all the gold or other goods acquired in the lands he might discover; he and his heirs were to hold the titles of Admiral of the Ocean Sea and viceroy of such lands. He was provided with two ships of the caravel type, the *Niña* and the *Pinta*, procured by Martín Alonso Pinzón of the port city of Palos; the round-bellied neotype *Santa Maria* was chartered from its owner by Columbus. For his efforts in raising money and crews numbering ninety men in all, mostly from Palos, and for his skill in commanding the *Pinta*, Pinzón would later claim a share in the credit and glory of Columbus's discoveries. The two smaller vessels were about fifty feet long, and the *Santa Maria* was about eighty-two feet long. They were equipped for any contingency with weapons, a translator of Hebrew and Arabic to deal with the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan if he was found, and goods to sell for gold.

The first voyage of Columbus left Palos on August 3, 1492. After a stopover at Spain's Canary Islands, the tiny fleet began its ocean trek on September 6. Constantly favorable trade winds caused the sailors to despair at ever gaining a wind to aid their return home. The southwesterly flights of birds persuaded Columbus to accept Pinzón's advice to change his course to the southwest. A *Niña* lookout was the first to sight land. Columbus named the land San Salvador, landed, and, thinking he had reached an outlying island of Japan, claimed it for Spain. In reality, he had reached the Americas, and was the first European of his time to do so.

Japan, and Cathay itself, he thought, must be only ten days distant. The search brought him to what



Posthumous portrait of a man said to be Columbus, by Sebastiano del Piombo, 1519. Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

would later become Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which together he named Hispaniola (little Spain). The native Arawaks were simple hunter-fishers who wore almost no clothes. Columbus was charmed by their courtesy. The Cubans were equally friendly. Arawak references to the *caniba* people (cannibals) and Cuban allusions to gold in the interior at Cubanacam further conjured images of Marco Polo's khan in Columbus's mind. Establishing the Hispaniola settlement of Navidad, the first in the New World, to organize gold-mining operations, Columbus departed for Spain before a favorable west wind, carrying six Arawak captives and news of the discovery of tobacco.

Having lost Pinzón with the *Pinta*, which departed on November 21, and lost the *Santa Maria* on a reef on Christmas Day, 1492, Columbus had only the *Niña* for his return. He suspected Pinzón of trying to

precede him to the khan, or to the sources of the gold, or back to Spain to claim the honor for his own discoveries. Therefore, their meeting at sea on January 6, 1493, precipitated a quarrel between the two captains. It was not until January 16 that the transatlantic return voyage commenced. Storms blew the *Niña* first into the Portuguese Azores on February 18 and then into Lisbon on March 9, causing King John II to charge Spain with illegal explorations of the African coast and to claim Columbus's discoveries for Portugal. This litigation was later settled in Spain's favor by the pope. Columbus's arrival in Palos on March 14 and subsequent reception by Ferdinand and Isabella at Barcelona at the end of April, accompanied by American Indians in full ceremonial dress, was the admiral's greatest moment.

The royal announcement of a second voyage was met with numerous volunteers. A fleet of seventeen ships and fifteen hundred men departed Cádiz on September 25, 1493. On board were animals, seeds, plants, and tools for the establishment of a colony. Among Columbus's discoveries were Dominica Island (spied on Sunday), the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. He found Navidad, however, destroyed by the indigenous and its settlers slain. Farther east on the north coast of what is now the Dominican Republic, he built the first European city in the New World, which he named Isabella. Leaving his brother Diego in charge there, he himself led the exploration of Cibao, the inland mountainous region of Hispaniola. There he founded the fortress settlement of Santo Tomás. He had still not seen the



A depiction of Columbus claiming possession of the land in caravels (the Niña and the Pinta). Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

CONQUERING THE NEW WORLD: FRANCE

Giovanni Verrazano Discovers New York Harbor

On April 17, 1524, Giovanni Verrazano (also spelled Giovanni Verrazzano) first entered the bay that would one day become the harbor for New York City.

Date: 1524

Locale: New York

Verrazano was born in Val di Greve near Florence, Italy, sometime in the early 1480s, most likely 1485. He learned navigation and became a mariner and pirate, serving mostly in French ships raiding Spanish commerce. François I, King of France, hired Verrazano to explore the Atlantic coastline of what is now the United States for possible routes to China. The region north of Spanish-controlled Florida and south of the fishing grounds off Newfoundland was largely a mystery to Europeans in those days, and hopes of finding a passage to the Pacific ran high. Some Italian bankers and French merchants also contributed to the expedition.

Verrazano set out on January 17, 1524, with four ships. Two of them were shipwrecked and the third returned home early, laden with spoils from successful raids on the Spanish. The fourth, the flagship *La Dauphine*, reached the Outer Banks of North Carolina at Cape Fear in early March. Looking across the Banks, a string of barrier islands and shoals, Verrazano could see a large, calm body of water,

which he thought might be the Pacific. In fact it was Pamlico Sound, but Verrazano was encouraged to continue his search for a westward passage. He traveled northward along the coastline, drawing maps and making occasional contacts with the American Indian tribes as he went. On April 17 he entered New York harbor, anchoring in the Narrows which separate modern-day Brooklyn from Staten Island (and are now spanned by the Verrazano Narrows Bridge,



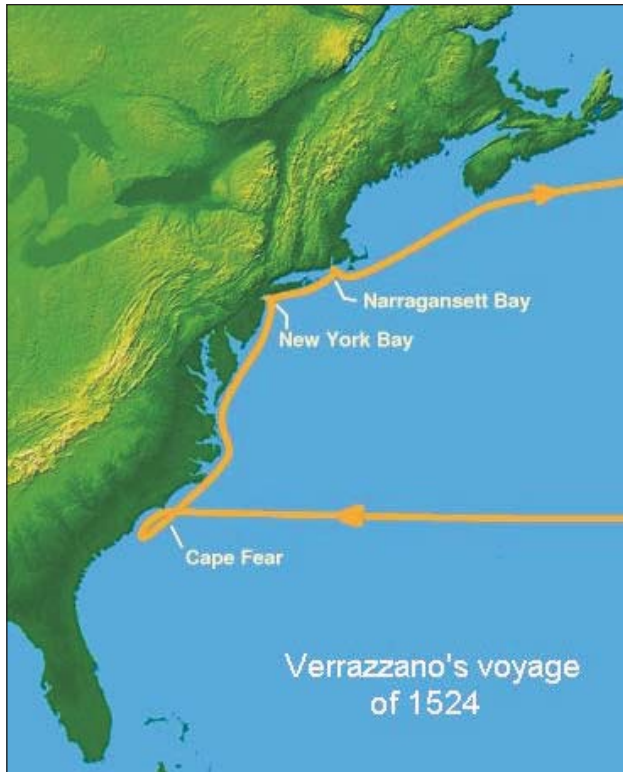
Engraving of Giovanni da Verrazano. Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]



Girolamo de Verrazano's 1529 map of his brother Giovanni's 1524 voyage along the East Coast of America. Image via Wikimedia Commons.



[Public domain.]



Verrazano's voyage in 1524. Image by Urdangaray, via Wikimedia Commons.

named in his honor). This great harbor seemed the likeliest location for the passage he was seeking, but he did not venture far into it, having only the one ship and much more Atlantic coastline to chart.

After continuing on to Newfoundland, Verrazano returned to Europe in July 1524 and made a cautiously optimistic report to the French king. His next voyage, to South America in 1527 or 1528, was his last: he was killed by hostile islanders (perhaps by cannibals) when he waded ashore in the Lesser Antilles.

SIGNIFICANCE

The chief significance of Verrazano's 1524 voyage is that he, along with a number of others who explored the eastern coast of North America, provided cartographers in Europe with a trove of information and the lands on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. He thus was part of a wave of European ex-

plorers, including such figures as Ferdinand Magellan, Ponce de Leon, John Cabot, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, and others who opened the New World for later European settlement.

—Salem Press

Further Reading

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Cartier and Roberval Search for a Northwest Passage

Cartier and Roberval led one of the earliest attempts to find a northwest passage to the lucrative Asian trade. Their voyages opened North American exploration and mapped out the principal sites of the future New France, with settlement being the new objective.

Date: April 20, 1534-July, 1543

Locale: Gulf of St. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence River (now in Canada)

KEY FIGURES

Jacques Cartier

Donnacona

Francis I

Jean-François de La Rocque, sieur de Roberval

SUMMARY OF EVENT

From 1492 to about 1534, the exploration of the New World was almost the exclusive domain of Ital-