



Who were the early Americans?

It is natural for us to be curious about the people who once lived where we now make our homes. Where did they come from? How did they live? What finally happened to them? To answer these questions scientists have been studying for decades what remains of the people who were the first to live in the Americas.

Beginning around 1930 many scientists believed that the original inhabitants of North America and South America first came to these lands about twenty thousand years ago over a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. Scientists knew that early humans existed in Siberia during this period. The Bering Land Bridge, named after the body of water that now separates Siberia and Alaska, had been formed during the last Ice Age. When large amounts of ice formed, the sea level dropped, creating dry land between Asia and North America. These early humans were probably pursuing wild animals for food, clothing, and shelter.



The Clovis Connection

The single biggest source of evidence for the populating of the Americas was uniquely crafted spear points first found near Clovis, New Mexico, in the 1930s. Since then, similar points have been found in many parts of North America. Scientists dated the Clovis spear points as coming from a period beginning about 13,500 years ago. This was during the period in which early humans were entering the Americas over the Bering Land Bridge. Scientists concluded that the makers of these Clovis spear points had been the northern Asians from Siberia and their descendants, and that they were the first humans to enter North America and South America.

The Clovis people were hunters who thrived as long as there were large animals to hunt. As the large animals died out, early humans began to settle down, take up farming, and live in communities. Gradually, they learned to adapt to changing climates, which affected the water supply and the growing season. They were able to grow enough food to set aside some for future shortages. Surpluses meant that a group could now begin to trade with others for the things that they needed. Paintings and drawings like those found on pottery used to store food meant that some people now had more leisure time.

Leather straps were used to attach Clovis
spear points to wooden sticks.



The Olmec: Earliest Empire in Mesoamerica

One of these descendants was the Olmec people. They began more than 3,000 years ago as farmers along the Gulf Coast of Mexico, just west of the Yucatan **Peninsula**. The Olmec created **aqueducts** to transport drinking water. As a settled farming group, the Olmec advanced enough as a culture to support artists who created giant sculptures. These huge stone works were probably transported by water from their place of origin to the Olmec capital at La Venta, more than fifty miles away. The Olmec also designed buildings that represented Olmec religious beliefs. We do not know how the Olmec finally met their end. Was it due to an enemy or to disease? Whatever the cause, it seems clear that the Olmec greatly influenced their Maya descendants.

Olmec figurines, such as this one of a baby, may have been offerings to the Olmec gods.

