

Chapter 6: Settlement of the Americas and the Pacific Islands Chapter Introduction

Book Title: World Civilizations

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Chapter Introduction

Then weave for us a garment of brightness that we may walk fittingly where birds sing, where the grass is green. Oh our mother the earth, oh our father the sky!

—Traditional Tewa Song

Colossal Olmec Head, c. 1200 B.E.C.

This Olmec head is eight feet tall and weighs twenty-four tons. It portrays a composite leader/deity figure wearing the headgear of a sacred ballplayer. The plump, drooping lips and flat nose are stylistic characteristics of Olmec sculpture. The huge granite block was carved without metal tools. This head might have been the base of a ruler's throne.



Stephen Gore/AAAC/Topham/The Image Works

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Chronology

c. 20,000 – 10,000 B.C.E.

Arrival of ancestral Native Americans

c. 13,000 – 3500 B.C.E.	Paleoindian period in the Americas
c. 13,500 – 8000 B.C.E.	Clovis and Folsom hunting cultures
c. 8000 – 1000 B.C.E.	Archaic gathering cultures
c. 6000 – 1800 B.C.E.	Agriculture begins, spreads
c. 1200 – 300 B.C.E.	Olmec civilization
c. 1000 – 1 B.C.E.	Chavín civilization
c. 1000 – 200 B.C.E.	Early Woodland civilization
c. 1000 B.C.E. – 1200	Settlement of the Polynesian Pacific Islands

Like Africa, the Western Hemisphere is oriented along a north-to-south axis, in contrast to the east-to-west axis of the Eastern Hemisphere. As a result, the Americas, although smaller in area, exhibit a tremendous range of cultures and physical environments, from the Inuit Eskimos of northern Canada to the sophisticated city builders of Central America, from the deserts of the American Southwest to the jungles of the Amazon basin. The first Native Americans arrived in the New World much later than humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) had reached elsewhere in the world. Reliable linguistic, genetic, and dental studies suggest that they came in three or four distinct waves, probably between 20,000 and 10,000 B.C.E. The [Amerindians \(Short for \(Native\) American Indians.\)](#) were likely the first migrants to come—probably from northeast Asia. They were the ancestors of the numerous Native American peoples found throughout the Western Hemisphere today—from southern Canada to Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America. Following them came a second group, from Central Asia, most of whose descendants today are located in western Canada, with the exception of the Navajo and Apache peoples, who migrated to the American Southwest between 1300 and 1500 C.E. Again, the last group to arrive came from northeast Asia. Their modern descendants are the Inuit Eskimo peoples of northern Canada and Alaska.

Just how these varied peoples came to the New World is fiercely debated. The most widely accepted theory is that they arrived near the end of the last Ice Age by means of a “land bridge” that, because of lower sea levels, connected northeast Asia and Alaska. Archaeologists have named this land bridge [Beringia \(\(beh-RIHN-jee-ah\) A land mass in the region of the Bering Strait over which ancestral Native Americans migrated to the western hemisphere, c. 30,000–10,000 B.C.E.\)](#) (beh-RIHN-jee-ah) because it covered what is now the Bering Strait (see [Map 6.1](#)). Although massive glaciers covered Canada at that time, these early immigrants made their way south on foot through an opening in the glacial sheets and by small boats along the Pacific coast into what is now North, Central, and

South America. Eventually, they populated the entire hemisphere. As they migrated south, the first New World colonizers had to adapt to many types of environments. Where conditions were favorable, some eventually settled down to become farmers. For many centuries before this, however (from about 18,000 to 8000 B.C.E.), they lived as late Paleolithic hunters and gatherers during what is usually called the Paleoindian period.

Map 6.1

Migrations of Ancestral Native Americans

In the Late Pleistocene era, glaciers covered most of Canada and the northern parts of the United States. With so much water taken up in ice, the ocean levels were lower and a land bridge, called *Beringia*, made it possible for ancestral Native Americans to migrate into the Western Hemisphere. Some made it through an ice corridor into regions south of the ice cap; perhaps others came by sea. This map also shows some of the hundreds of paleoindian camp sites being discovered.

Thinking About This Map

From what area did the ancestral Native Americans migrate? What geological features do these sites have in common?



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