

First Peoples in a New World: Colonizing Ice Age America

David J. Meltzer

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Reviewed by GARY HAYNES

Department of Anthropology (MS 096), University of Nevada-Reno, Reno, NV 89557, USA; gahaynes@unr.edu

A LOT OF INS, A LOT OF OUTS, A LOT OF WHAT-HAVE-YOUS¹

Nowadays three main theories are on the market to explain how the New World was first colonized in prehistory. The most skeptical group of archeologists (its membership list possibly the size of a postage stamp) thinks that 14,000 calendar years ago is the threshold of America's archeological visibility. The first people entered Alaska from Northeast Asia, and, before long, very low-density and highly mobile exploratory foragers had rapidly dispersed through the completely unpopulated lower 48 states, where they eventually established longer-term settlement loci. The Clovis archeological culture of this dispersal is characterized by fluted projectile points and lithic tools seemingly designed more for hunting than for gathering. Archeologists in this faction do not think authentic sites earlier than Clovis have been found in the lower 48 states.

A second and much larger group of archeologists thinks the first human colonizers left behind ample evidence of their presence in the Americas measurably earlier. To them, Clovis is one of many diverse cultures, mostly broad-spectrum foragers with wide diet breadths that existed side by side in the New World long after the first trickle-in waves of immigrants had peopled the land.

A third faction believes the first people arrived decidedly longer back in time—before the Last Glacial Maximum of 21,000 years ago. To them, Clovis is a minor descendent culture much too young to tell us anything about the peopling process. Louis Leakey tried to publicize a possible great-great-great grandparent of Clovis, perhaps 200,000 years old, found at the Calico site in southern California.

David J. Meltzer's book, *First Peoples in a New World*, has sprung from the enduring contest between utterly different knowledge claims within American archeology. In the view of some archeologists, the arguing is no longer a debate, and the issue is settled. Clovis is NOT first, end of story. Meltzer acknowledges there is continuing disagreement, but he is also well known as a salesman of his own opinions about the existence of pre-Clovis human populations. He uses these opinions effectively to argue against others' theories and stories, especially the Clovis-first position and the possibility that Clovis-era hunting of megafauna contributed to the extinction of about 35 mammalian genera.

Meltzer begins by saying the book was written "for the general reader and not for my archaeological colleagues,"

and it is not "bogged down in archaeological minutiae" (p. xiv). Still, the book's 10 chapters are a complete education, packed with technicalities and exposition comprehensively itemizing the issues. Readers do not exactly get archeology-lite, and this hefty book is also saturated with every other imaginable kind of evidence. The coverage in the chapters extends from paleoenvironmental models of climatic and biotic change, through the genetics and craniometric data about the few known early human skeletons (none pre-dating Clovis, incidentally), to archeological claims and putative facts, right down to trends in the continent's post-Pleistocene settling-in eras and the historical tragedies of European colonization.

The sections on genetics are useful summaries of crucial non-archeological evidence often published in an impenetrable lexicon, and they are offered in two chapters that also summarize linguistic and human-skeletal research. In these various types of non-archeological studies, there is an enormous range of estimates of the time elapsed since Native American ancestors separated from their Asian mother populations—stretching from over 50,000 years to only about 13,000 years.

Meltzer makes it plain why he thinks human beings were in the Americas well before Clovis archeological culture appeared, and why he thinks Clovis had nothing to do with the end-Pleistocene extinctions. Ironically enough, the major conversion event that has led many (probably most) archeologists to accept the pre-Clovis opinion about North America's first people was the publication of a 1997 paper that Meltzer co-wrote with a small group of colleagues declaring that a site located far from North America, namely Monte Verde in Chile, pre-dates Clovis and should be accepted as proof of the earlier existence of people in the Americas. To use the same wording that Meltzer applies to another archeological argument (based on writings by Martin Rudwick, a historian of science), the controversy was resolved because a "core elite [who were] recognized as experts" published the ultimate decree (p. 89). Meltzer adroitly tells us about the creation of this important publication, which has had a monumental effect on the way archeologists view North America's peopling process.

As with the Monte Verde conversion event, a similar about-face took place in North American archeology in the late 1920s when stone tools bedded with the bones of an extinct form of bison at the Folsom site in New Mexico proved that humans and now-extinct large mammals truly co-existed. This discovery established the fact that people

had entered the Americas before the end of the Pleistocene, a possibility that up to that time had been hotly disputed. Meltzer himself went back to Folsom seventy years later to excavate and analyze in more detail, which he briefly describes in a text box.

After the Folsom epiphany, more and more unassailable discoveries rolled in over the decades to clinch the case for an early human presence in North America. Notably, after the more recent Monte Verde proclamation, only a meager assortment of possible paradigm-busting (pre-Clovis) cases have appeared, many of them far less supportable than others. Meltzer runs through the leading contenders that may indicate a pre-Clovis population—such as the 17,000 year old materials from Meadowcroft (Pennsylvania), never adequately published in spite of dozens of summary reports and conference presentations, or the 14,000 year old putatively human coprolites from Paisley Caves (Oregon), which in fact may not be human, according to critiques from geneticists and microstratigraphers, which is a body of circulating doubts not mentioned in the book. Meltzer does concede all such finds are not “fully accepted by the archaeological community in North America” (p.131). Even so, Meltzer argues that it is logically unnecessary to find any more sites than Monte Verde, the one he believes in so solidly. It would not matter to him if this site, a rather bizarre one indeed,² is never replicated.

Meltzer’s opinions may be the consensus in American archeology. Meltzer is an eminent spokesperson for the establishment, the go-to commentariat when archeological stories appear in the media. To read his breezy accounts, such as a helicopter outing in Alaska and a run-in with angry archaeologist and former boxer Scotty MacNeish, he has had his finger on the pulse of first-Americans studies for a long time. He seems to have been present at many of the milestone events helping (or alleging) to shed light on North America’s first people, and if he was not present he knew enough about the participants to describe what they were thinking. He also well knows his history of the historical development of first-Americans studies, going back to its 19th century roots (and beyond). He is fluent and uncomplicated, able to keep the reader turning pages, although I quibble with the tonal overindulgences—such as the offhand or flip dismissal of alternative ideas he disagrees with, the mannered ad-copy cuteness (“megafauna, we call them” p. 3; “we Pleistocene types are a feisty lot,” p. 29), or tabloid phrasing like “a brazen bit of rope-a-dope reasoning” (p. 260) to describe part of Paul Martin’s Overkill theory. As early as p. xi there’s a headspinning paragraph mixing metaphors which begins with a set of house-building terms for the construction of the book but goes on to “road-test” the results while putting them “through the wringer” to see if they “pass muster”—whew! He also is not into the whole brevity thing, to quote Jeff Lebowksi.³ He fills page after page with details about people, hypotheses, and archeological finds, generally nuts and bolts but sometimes decorative trifles. He does not review Clovis culture until Chapter 8, after 238 pages of background, character profiles, surmises, guesses, personal dramas, and

literature reviews.

In archeology, one tells stories about the past—or, to be a little more precise, stories about the meaning of things left from the past. The inclinations to tell such stories are often first learned by students absorbing ideas from teachers and mentors that reflect personal ideologies in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. As careers advance, the stories do not change easily. They become well defined standpoints. No amount of new information can make them change. The story-tellers paint themselves into metaphorical corners when they ignore or dismiss counterarguments or selectively devour only those facts most compatible with their prejudged stories.

This very criticism is aimed at Meltzer by Tim Flannery (2009) in a recent review of this book for the journal *Science*, and I have to agree it is an outstanding weakness of the book, especially in its treatment of the unique and unexplained end-Pleistocene extinctions of dozens of North America’s largest terrestrial mammals. The theory of human Overkill is earnestly discredited in the book, yet Meltzer does not put forward a usefully operationalized alternative model of climate-change, which is especially needed because similar severe climatic reversals had taken place numerous times in the past without causing extinctions.

In a spirit of full disclosure, I point out that Meltzer’s extended excursus of the end-Pleistocene extinction event mentions me and my opposing ideas prominently and negatively, and even indignantly. Not long ago I published my own book about the peopling of North America, which makes me a competitor in the first-Americans marketplace. But I also note that after disagreeing with me, and having his way with me rhetorically—such as hyperbolizing that I proclaim, snarl, accuse, or complain when I merely state my opinions in print—in the end Meltzer admits that my book is a useful and detailed summary of an important phase in the settlement of the continent (p. 347). I submit an equivalent approval of Meltzer’s book. Although much of it should be challenged, and much has been misreckoned, it is still a useful compendium of ideas, theories, and historical developments in the never-ending horn-locking by archeologists who interpret the first human dispersals into North America. The book is not the last word, of course. In the deliberations over the first peopling of the Americas, there still are a lot of ins, a lot of outs, a lot of what-have-yous.⁴

REFERENCE

Flannery, T. 2009. Arguments over early arrivals. [Review of D. J. Meltzer’s *First Peoples in a New World: Colonizing Ice Age America*]. *Science* 324: 1518.

ENDNOTES

- 1 From the film *The Big Lebowski* (1998).
- 2 The site has no debitage at all, plus confused record-keeping, unusual features that may be overinterpreted, and many wooden and bone “artifacts” that appear to be water-rolled. However, it does have a handful of unquestionable artifacts and the 12,500 year old radiocar-

- bon date has been widely accepted.
- 3 A character in a film written by Ethan and Joel Coen, *The Big Lebowski* (1998).
- 4 See endnote 1.