

Databases and Meetings

2008 Paleoamerican Origins Workshop: A Brief Report

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Science advances when evidence and interpretations are verified or rejected according to the epistemology of the particular discipline engaged in the research. In the case of archaeology, the rules of evidence are largely subjective, each body of evidence is unique, and interpretations tend to be influenced to a significant degree by the idiosyncrasies of the investigator(s). These very real circumstances foster disagreements that are not easily resolved, and there is no formal mechanism for arbitrating the disagreements beyond peer review of funding proposals and publications, neither of which is flawless. This can lead to divisiveness and polarization in regard to many controversial interpretations.

Nowhere within the discipline of archaeology have these unfortunate characteristics of our science been more apparent than in the debate over the archaeological evidence for the peopling of the Americas. Scholarly disagreement, debate, and promulgation of competing interpretations are beneficial to the discipline, but divisiveness and polarization are not.

For the purpose of furthering reasonable, professional, constructive, and civil dialogue toward improving our research methods, standards, and results, the Center for the Study of the First Americans, Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, Southeastern Paleoamerican Survey, and Smithsonian Institution organized the Paleoamerican Origins Workshop. Scholars bearing a wide spectrum of views on the question of the peopling of the Americas gathered at

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the University of Texas at Austin, February 14–16, 2008. The format was semi-formal and consisted of presentations followed by considerable discussion.

Twenty-eight speakers detailed site-specific evidence as well as discussed broad substantive issues and regional syntheses. Of particular value were the more than eleven hours of discussion, more than two hours of perusing and discussing specimens from several key sites, and time for discussion at three conference meals. A common thread in the papers, discussions, and conversations was the issue of what constitutes solid archaeological grounds for interpretation.

A strong sense of enthusiasm and excitement permeated the workshop, which clearly reflects this subfield at this moment. There was hearty but collegial exchange of ideas among participants holding a wide spectrum of views, and we feel that large steps were taken toward improving professional exchange and lessening the tendency toward a polemic.

A number of sites dating in the 1,000 to 2,000 years before Clovis were thoroughly discussed, concerns were addressed, and possible misconceptions were clarified. To most participants, the aggregate evidence from these sites was robust and undeniable, leading to the conclusion that the Americas were certainly occupied during the interval of 15,500 to 13,500 CALYBP. Although each participant's list of the discussed North American sites with acceptable evidence would vary, some mix of Shaefer, Hebior, Mud Lake, Manis, Paisley Cave, Page-Ladson, Gault, and Buttermilk Creek sites would be included by many of those attending, even though investigations continue at some and final reports are not available for others. To a minority of participants, site-specific issues still prevented unconditional acceptance of this case for a late "pre-Clovis" period of human prehistory.

Evidence is emerging for an even earlier human entry into the Americas, prior to 15,500 CALYBP. Presentations and discussions concerning Miles Point and similar localities on the Delmarva Peninsula, Cactus Hill, La Sena, Lovewell, Burnham, Topper, Monte Verde I, and others suggesting the possibility of a human presence in the Americas before the Last Glacial Maximum is increasingly intriguing and may develop rapidly in the near future.

The case for a late entry of humans into the Americas ("Clovis First") did not achieve consensus in this workshop.

Several conceptual and methodological topics addressed by the workshop may hold more significant and lasting importance than the consideration of specific sites. These include the following:

1. Geoarchaeology plays a critical role in the study of early sites in terms of stratigraphy and geochronology, site formation, and site prediction and prospection models.
2. Prehistorians interested in the early archaeological record of the Americas must work to inform cultural resource managers at the local, state, and federal levels; state historic preservation officers; and archaeological consultants about the issues of early site visibility, contexts, and significance. These do not fit the usual bureaucratic criteria for site survey, assessment, and importance.
3. The long-standing criteria of reliable dating, good stratigraphic context,

unequivocal human artifacts, or human remains still hold and must be met fully for all early sites.

4. Any model of the peopling of the Americas must consider the genetic data as well as the physical anthropological evidence. These must be reconciled with the archaeological evidence.
5. The peopling of the Americas involves the entire hemisphere, and models must consider the extensive South American and emerging Central American evidence for early sites.
6. Substantive, collegial debate among professionals with differing opinions is essential to improving the quality of our evidence, interpretations, and models.

Finally, an important outcome of this workshop is redoubled effort by its sponsors to organize and host a more comprehensive conference on the early archaeological record of the Western Hemisphere with a much larger number of participants and open to the general public. The conference will cover a greater array of topics, formal exhibits, and flintknapping sessions, and a date will be set soon.