

## Beringia: Humans were here



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Beringia is thought by a handful of renegade scientists to be a prehistoric homeland for aboriginal people who later spread across the Americas and the key to one of archeology's greatest Holy Grails - figuring out how humans first got to this continent. This July, Jacques Cinq-Mars, a renowned archeologist living in Longueuil, is heading to Beringia - a vast territory that once spanned the Yukon, Alaska and Siberia - in hopes of resolving a controversy he unleashed nearly 20 years ago when he chanced upon a curious-looking cave in the Yukon's Keele Mountain Range, perched on a ridge high above the Bluefish River. Here, at a site known as the Bluefish Caves, Cinq-Mars's team discovered something that would turn archeology on

its ear and has fuelled debate ever since - a chipped mammoth bone that appeared to have been fashioned into a small harpoon point.

Radiocarbon dating showed the bone to be 28,000 years old. The find stunned archeologists who had long presumed the first people to enter the Americas did so 13,000 years ago via a land bridge from Siberia after the end of the last Ice Age. Until that point, routes from Alaska down into the Americas were blocked off by glaciers up to four kilometres thick, which would have cut off any possibility of migration for thousands of years. But scientists have unearthed a growing number of ancient human sites across the continent that date back much more than 13,000 years. How did those people get here? No one knows for sure. Cinq-Mars, a retired former curator at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, believes the answers lie in the lost land of Beringia. Named after 18th-century Danish explorer Vitus Bering, this territory emerged from under the sea when advancing glaciers locked up seawater and caused ocean levels to fall 120 metres. The 1,000-kilometre-wide land bridge that joined the two continents was so arid it remained a glacier-free oasis of grassland steppes that teemed with life at the height of the Ice Age. People here lived alongside giant and outlandish animals - beavers the size of today's bears, fearsome carnivorous bears that would have dwarfed today's grizzlies, sloths as big as oxen, mastodons, lions and woolly rhinos and camels. Cinq-Mars, who has been exploring Beringia since his student days in 1966, believes the region was not only away-po.....

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(contd)...int for people migrating into the Americas, but also a homeland for aboriginal people for millennia as they sought refuge during the Ice Age.

If he is right, his finds at the Bluefish Caves and even older mammoth bone flakes found by another Canadian team at nearby Beringian sites mean people were already trundling around in the Americas long before the Ice Age. (Radiocarbon dating puts the age of the mammoth bone flakes found by the Archeological Survey of Canada team at 40,000 years old.) Nearly 20 years after the initial mammoth bone find was publicized in the early 1990s, however, much of the archeological establishment remains skeptical about Cinq-Mars's discoveries in Beringia. His finds clash with a long-held view known as the "Clovis First" theory, which is based on 13,000-year-old spear points found near Clovis, New Mexico, in the 1930s.

The Clovis theory, which dominated archeological thinking until recent years, holds that people first spilled into the Americas across the Siberian land bridge only after retreating glaciers opened passages through Canada to the south.

Archeologists who question Clovis First have been branded as renegades, said Raymond Le Blanc, an archeologist at the University of Alberta. "It's almost like admitting you saw a UFO," he said.

Le Blanc was a grad student on Cinq-Mars's team at the Bluefish Caves in the mid-1970s, when the exploration there started. (It took another 15 years to analyze the material uncovered and publish the results.) Far from being a ticket to fame and fortune, bucking the Clovis First doctrine has meant "you become part of the fringe. It's not great for your career. It becomes a little more difficult to get (research) money," he said.

Indeed, since the potentially stunning finds in Beringia, Cinq-Mars said he has struggled to cobble together research funds to continue the exploration and analyze what's been found.

"My biggest problem is getting access to funding. This is a scientific gold mine we've been sitting on for years, but many people just didn't give a hoot. There has been and still is very strong resistance. Clovis First has been the credo of archeology for decades," he said.

The waters have been muddied by scientific acrimony about the Bluefish Cave mammoth bone evidence. Some of Cinq-Mars's detractors say the bone could have been chipped at a later point long after the mammoth died or through natural processes like erosion or falling rocks.

"I'm very, very skeptical about cave data," said Bob Gall, a veteran archeologist with the U.S. National Park Service in Fairbanks, Alaska.

"They're occupied by animals and people, and material rolls down slopes. You have rock falls and material that's really difficult to sort out." Even if the mammoth bone was indeed modified by a person, Gall said it's still not clear when that would have happened. "From the time that elephant died, up until the present, it could have been modified by man," he said.

Subsequent research showed the bone was indeed likely to have been chipped by humans shortly after the mammoth died, but the questions have lingered, with many scientists saying more confirming data is needed.

That, in turn, has led to an archeological Catch-22: Little funding is available to pursue the Beringia research. "There are more things from that site we could date, but there has been a lack of money," Le Blanc said.

Complicating the search for confirming evidence is the fact that the best human sites to explore in the region are now probably at the bottom of the Bering Strait, said Ruth Gotthardt, an archeologist with the Yukon government. "The evidence is not co-operating," she said.

But now, the region is seeing renewed scientific interest as evidence emerges to suggest Cinq-Mars may have been on the right track after all.

Since the mid-1970s, more than two dozen other possible sites predating Clovis have been unearthed across North and South America. Perhaps the most famous is a 14,500-year-old settlement at Monte Verde, Chile, including a human footprint, tools and living quarters for 20 to 30 people.

Initially dismissed by archeologists, the Monte Verde site has become widely accepted as legitimate in recent years.

In 2004, the Clovis theory suffered another indirect blow when scientists in Siberia - in what used to be the western edge of Beringia - found a 30,000-year-old human site with tools fashioned from mammoth and rhino tusks.

The discovery showed humans had adapted to the extreme cold of the Far North thousands of years earlier than previously thought. It has also rejuvenated interest in Beringia, Le Blanc said. "If people got to the Arctic, I don't see why they couldn't have penetrated farther east." Meanwhile, Cinq-Mars has been amassing evidence from European researchers that shows chipped mammoth bones were used there as spear points more than 200,000 years ago - more evidence that the bone chips in Beringia were a widespread ancient technology.

And in July, Cinq-Mars plans to return to the region that ignited the controversy 30 years ago with hopes of finding more clues. He has received funds from the Yukon's Gwitchin First Nation in order to explore several sites, including the Bluefish Caves.

"There are layers there that have yet to be looked at which are likely to be older (than the original Bluefish find)," he said.

Cinq-Mars also has another mission for this trip - helping the Gwitchin village of Old Crow create a cultural centre to showcase the region's rich history.

In August, Le Blanc will also be poking around at another site called Gwizi Cave, about 60 kilometres to the north of Cinq-Mars's expedition. Le Blanc believes it, too, could yield more ancient remains.

Finding undisputed evidence of a pre-Ice Age human presence there, both men said, would force scientists to rewrite the history of the Americas.

"Beringia is the only site that explains the pre-Clovis finds," Le Blanc said. "The area has profound importance."

### **Following a trail of archeological clues over the millennia:**

#### **40,000 to 28,000 years ago:**

Age of chipped mammoth bones found at the Yukon's Bluefish Caves and nearby sites in the 1970s and '80s by archeologist Jacques Cinq-Mars and his team.

#### **30,000 years ago:**

Siberian mammoth hunters were found to have penetrated far into the Arctic by this period.

#### **23,000 years ago:**

The Ice Age entombs the northern hemisphere in glaciers, cutting off routes from Siberia to the south.

#### **15,000 to 17,000 years ago:**

Archeologists say people were living at Cactus Hill, Virginia, where stone tools and charcoal from a fire pit have been dated to this period.

#### **14,500 years ago:**

Humans were living in Monte Verde in southern Chile, where human tools, a dwelling structure and a person's footprint have been dated to this period.

#### **14,000 years ago:**

Archeologists believe this is when receding glaciers probably first opened an ice-free corridor through Canada between Alaska and the rest of the Americas. The conundrum: How did people get to Cactus Hill and Monte Verde before this?

#### **13,000 years ago:**

People were living near Clovis, New Mexico, where tools from this era were found in the 1930s. This find gave rise to the widely held Clovis First theory that people spread through the Americas only after the Ice Age.

#### **11,000 years ago:**

As the Ice Age ends, melting glaciers raise sea levels 120 metres, submerging the land bridge between Alaska and Siberia.

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