

Articles of Interest

Radical Theory of First Americans Places Stone Age Europeans in Delmarva 20,000 Years Ago by Brian Vastag. Washington, D.C.: *The Washington Post*, February 29, 2012.

New Evidence Suggests Stone Age Hunters from Europe Discovered America. London: *The Independent*, February 28, 2012.

Iberia, Not Siberia? by David Malakoff. *American Archaeology*, 16(2), 2012, 38–44.

Critics Assail Notion That Europeans Settled Americas by Michael Balter. *Science*, 335(6074), 2012, 1289–1290.

In 1999, archaeologist Dennis Stanford, of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, resurrected and elaborated the idea that the ancestors of North America's Late Pleistocene Clovis people were Solutreans of the European Upper Paleolithic. Almost all professionals rejected this notion, which was based on notable similarities between the lithic artifacts of the two manifestations. Now, with Exeter University (UK) archaeologist Bruce Bradley, Stanford has put out a major book displaying the hypothesis and arguing for it (Stanford & Bradley 2012, to be reviewed in a later issue), and a certain number of their colleagues are taking this striking suggestion seriously. Most recently, Stanford points especially to lithics recovered from six mid-Atlantic sites, three of which are in the Eastern Shore area of the Delmarva Peninsula to the east of Chesapeake Bay. The implements look very like European ones dating to between 19,000 and 26,000 years ago.

Previously, the earliest American tools showing such similarities had been no more than 15,000 years old, much later in time than the Solutrean ones they resembled, and most specialists felt that this time gap was unbridgeable. However, data diminishing the time-gap problem have been accumulating. In 1970, a Virginia trawler hauled up a 22,000-year-old mastodon bone and a nearly 20-centimeter-(8-inch-)long stone blade from the bottom of the Atlantic 60 miles offshore—a locale that would have been dry land during the last Ice Age. The date of the bone was nearly twice as great as the age of the Clovis archaeological culture, which was then almost

universally believed to be a manifestation of the first humans to have entered the New World, via the then-dry Bering Strait region. More recently, sediments in Maryland dated to as much as 25,000 years ago have yielded projectile points resembling Solutrean ones from Europe of similar age. And a European-style stone knife found in Virginia in 1971 has proven to be made from a chert originating in France.

Stanford and Bradley's proposal—known as the “Iberia, not Siberia” hypothesis—is that during the last glacial maximum (LGM), Solutreans made their way for some 1,500 miles along the food-rich edge of the North Atlantic sea ice from Europe to North America, perhaps in skin boats, feeding on seals, fishes, and sea birds. During the time period indicated, Northeast Siberia was devoid of humans, precluding a Beringian route of entry to the hemisphere. The main ancestors of today's American Indians would have entered millennia later, from northeastern Asia.

From its initial presentation, Stanford and Bradley's hypothesis has drawn harsh criticism in a field historically full of unpleasant contentiousness. For instance, the archaeologist Ted Goebel alleges that the idea was “dead on arrival long before” the book appeared (Balter:1289). In addition to the time gap mentioned above, this attitude is based largely on the fact that genetics clearly shows an overwhelmingly northeastern Asian origin of today's Native Americans as well as for fossil humans in America back to as much as 14,000 years ago. But there are no certain Clovis or clearly pre-Clovis skeletons to test, and critics seem not to consider the possibility that the carriers of Solutrean culture were genetically swamped by later, Asian, arrivals, and contributed little to the genetic makeup of later American Indians or Eskimos. And opponents prefer to explain the North American Indian minority presence of the European mitochondrial-DNA haplogroup X as somehow having been carried by land across Eurasia and Beringia and having later disappeared in Siberia rather than its having been carried across the Atlantic Ocean.

European archaeologists further point out that there is no evidence of a Solutrean maritime lifeway—although any such evidence would have been largely covered by post-Pleistocene rising sea levels. The implication of



some climate models that, during the LGM, sea ice was not continuous across the North Atlantic during most of the year seems to me implausible in light of more-recent historic distribution of sea ice. Too, inadvertent westward drift of a group of humans on a detached ice floe is an alternative to intentional migration along the ice margin.

My personal sense at this point is that the Stanford–Bradley hypothesis is quite plausible but meets strong resistance not only for not-entirely-thought-out evidentiary reasons but even more because it differs so dramatically from existing paradigms.

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Reference

Stanford, D. J., & Bradley, B. A. (2012). *Across Atlantic Ice: The Origins of America's Clovis Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.