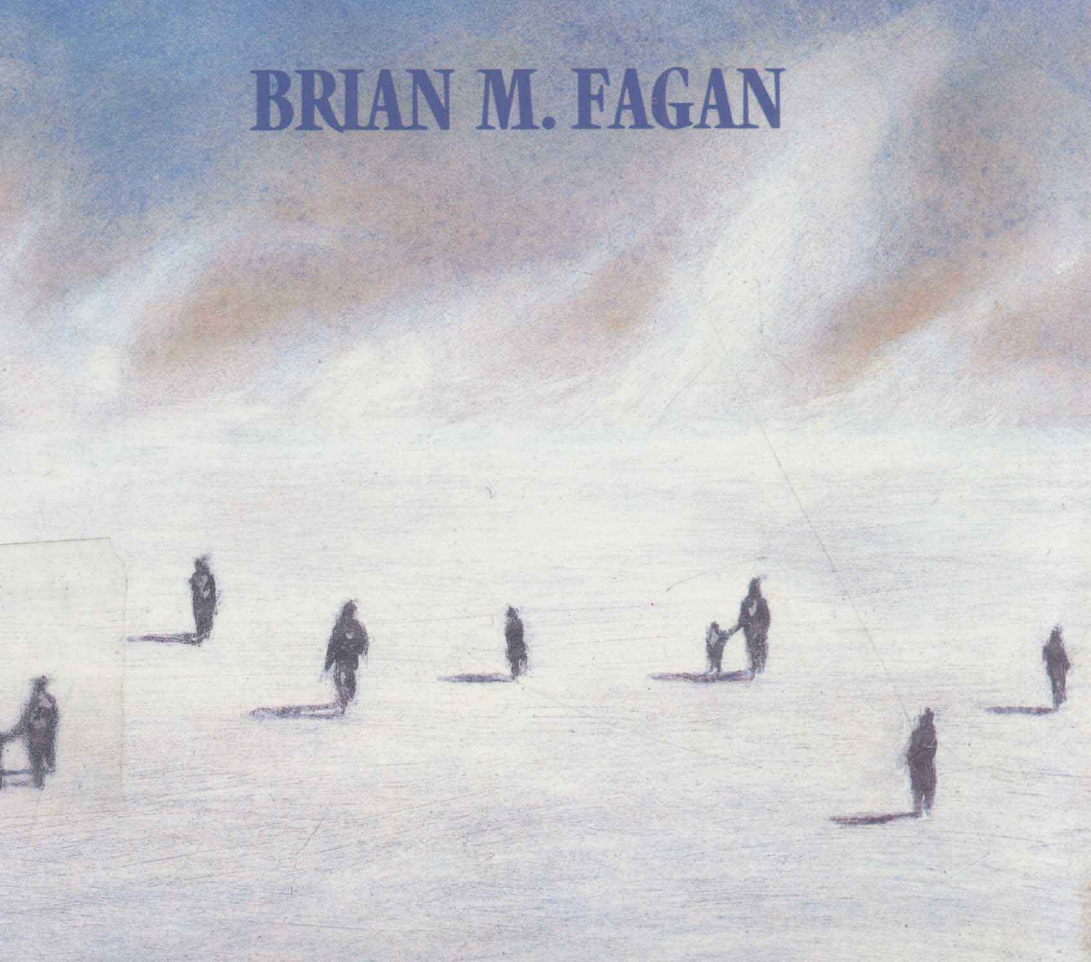


# THE GREAT JOURNEY

THE PEOPLING OF  
ANCIENT AMERICA

**BRIAN M. FAGAN**



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ANCIENT AMERICA

BRIAN M. FAGAN

*with 126 illustrations*



THAMES AND HUDSON

*To John Desmond Clark and Marie Wormington  
with affection and gratitude*

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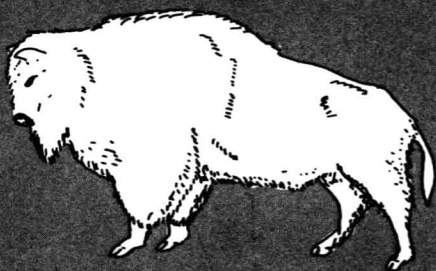
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## INTRODUCTION

# An Archaeological Drama

This book tells the story of the search for the first Americans. The tale is a complicated, sometimes dramatic one, a quest for early artifacts and human fossils, for indisputable proof of the antiquity of humankind in the Americas. It resembles a detective story, but with scientific heroes and villains instead of murderers, sinister butlers, and gifted sleuths. Above all, it is a chronicle of changing ideas about the very beginnings of American history, theories that began as soon as the first conquistadors set foot in the New World.

Even after five centuries of sporadic, and sometimes frenzied, inquiry, the subject is fraught with unresolved enigmas and widely differing theoretical viewpoints. Anyone studying the first Americans sets sail in hazardous academic seas, beset on every side by passionate emotions and contradictory scientific information. So our journey takes us through a maze of controversy. It begins, however, with a quest common to all humanity: the search for our past.

### The Quest for the Human Past

All human beings are interested in their origins. They try to account for their existence through complex legends and rituals. European Neanderthals more than 100,000 years ago may have been the first people to ponder the supernatural and the afterlife. Their successors, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, evolved much more complex myths to explain and organize the natural world, myths found in every corner of the globe in the form of chants, poems, songs, and recitations.

One of Western civilization's more marked characteristics is a desire to put myths to the test, to explore not just our immediate surroundings but the world beyond the next horizon. This curiosity led Alexander the Great to the Indus, the Greeks to speculate about the barbarians of the far north, the Romans to explore the Sahara Desert. The Venetian merchant Marco Polo ventured to China in about 1271. Not only fabulous profits, but a deep-seated curiosity, drove him and his father along the Silk Route to the east. When the Age of Discovery dawned in the fifteenth century, Prince Henry the Navigator and

## 8 An Archaeological Drama

his successors sent expedition after expedition down the west coast of Africa and beyond, in search of new markets, in the service of God, and in response to a quiet, almost irrational, urge to explore new places, perhaps the mythical Golden Land, Paradise on Earth. The Age of Discovery did not reveal Paradise, but it led to the most startling find of all, that of the Americas.

It is difficult for us, living as we do in a familiar world of jet aircraft and instant communication, to imagine what it would be like to encounter a wholly new continent, not only with unfamiliar plants and animals, but also with a startling variety of human inhabitants. Today, our frontiers lie in the unpeopled wilderness of space, but 500 years ago the frontier was on earth – a land inhabited by people so exotic that those who discovered them were tempted to wonder whether they were human at all. These were the American Indians, a people of such cultural diversity that there were at least 2,000 different societies among them.

Centuries passed before Europeans adjusted to the very existence of the American Indians and ventured beyond the bounds of raw exploitation, casual curiosity, and romantic illusion. But from the very earliest days of European settlement, sheer curiosity impelled cleric and scholar alike to puzzle over the



*From the very first days of contact, Europeans were intrigued by the native Americans and their customs. Cortés brought back a group of Indians from Mexico and they were displayed at the Spanish court, among them a man in a brilliant feathered cape (left), a juggler (center), and a warrior holding a parrot and what may be an Aztec battle insignia (right).*

origins of the native Americans. The early Spanish friars listened to Indians talking of their symbolic world. "It is told that when all was in darkness, when yet no sun had shone and no dawn had broken – it is said – the gods gathered themselves together and took counsel among themselves . . ." began one Aztec legend. Their philosophies of life and attitudes to their own history were very different from those of Christian people. The Aztec traditions did not go far to satisfy European scholarly curiosity. Who were these exotic people? Where had they come from, and how long ago had they settled in their vast homelands? The Spanish theologians and historians of the day looked beyond the tribal lore of the Indians themselves into a timeless historical vacuum, as featureless and unknown as space.

Five centuries ago scholars turned to the only known historical sources that might yield clues about the Indians – the scriptures, and the classical writings of ancient Greece and Rome. It was hardly surprising that the first theories about Indians spoke of Phoenicians, Tartars, and other exotic peoples mentioned in the Old Testament. These speculations persisted for more than three centuries. It was not until the nineteenth century that archaeological discoveries in North America and Mexico were to replace theological supposition with hard, scientific facts. And for generations, until the 1840s, the priceless historical information collected by sixteenth-century Catholic friars among the Aztecs, Incas, and other Indian peoples languished in ecclesiastical archives, suppressed by a bureaucracy obsessed with vanquishing idolatry and heresy.

### **Lost Civilizations and Brave Adventurers**

While early scholars pored over their documents, the myth-makers stepped into the breach – and have never fully been dislodged. Like the ancient Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, the first Americans attracted every variety of mystic, crackpot, and religious cultist. Such wild theorizing would not be surprising in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when so little was known of American Indian society. However, as so often happens, many people have now changed these theories into articles of faith, into pseudo-scientific dogma that brooks no opposition. The Phoenicians, who never ventured this far from the Mediterranean, and the lost continent of Atlantis are alive and well in twentieth-century America!

Why do such lunatic ravings persist? Perhaps it is the subject matter, the mystery of the unexplained peopling of an entire continent. Many cultists have philosophical axes to grind, often based on racist assumptions that American Indians were incapable of much more than the simplest of tasks. This fringe literature is rich in obscure Biblical quotations and stirring tales. There are vicious wars between competing hosts, epic voyages across Atlantic and Pacific, as well as survivors of sunken continents peopling the New World.

## 10 *An Archaeological Drama*

To read the crank literature on the first Americans is to enter a fantasy world of strange, often obsessed, writers with a complex jargon of catchwords and “scientific” data to support their ideas. Some of them even form new religious cults, with themselves in the role of the ultimate prophet, or the Supreme Deity himself . . .

Few would deny that these topics are entertaining byways. But archaeologists believe that the scientific search for the first Americans is much more engrossing.

### **Caution and Controversy**

Scientists, by the very nature of their work, are concerned with ideas, just as pseudo-scientists are, but with a difference. Their ideas are hypotheses, propositions based on scientifically collected data, then tested and modified by more data. Such hypotheses can thus change, sometimes slightly, sometimes dramatically, every time the scientist ventures into the field or examines another colleague’s work. However, beyond agreeing that science is quite different from pseudo-science, there is little unanimity among American archaeologists about the origins or dating of the first Americans.

A small group of archaeologists is devoting their careers to the search. Many are cautious scholars. Others are gripped by profound convictions that cause them to espouse extravagant viewpoints in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. A gathering of scholars studying the first Americans is never dull, for controversy invariably erupts, sometimes veiled in carefully studied politeness and firm dogma, sometimes dissolving into academic shouting matches. Very often the arguments are more remarkable for their vehemence than their scientific substance.

This passion is hardly surprising, for the peopling of the Americas was an event – or series of events – unique in world history. How did humans, essentially tropical animals, free themselves from their primeval African environments and journey from Asia into a vast, seemingly unpopulated landmass? This momentous journey ranks among the greatest adventures in human experience, far more exciting to analyze than the lost tribes or sunken continents of the lunatic fringe.

The earliest claims made by scientists date first settlement to 100,000 or 200,000 years ago, perhaps even earlier. This school of thought was once led by the late Louis Leakey, world famous for his early fossil discoveries at Olduvai Gorge in East Africa. In his later years, Leakey believed that very early human fossils and artifacts would be found in the Americas. “Americans don’t know what these things look like,” he told me many years ago. “Anyone from Africa is qualified to look over there. We know what early tools look like.” I was a young African archaeologist at the time. He urged me to search in North America for chopping tools and artifacts like those from Olduvai

Gorge. At Calico Hills in southern California, Leakey later believed he had found his proof, stone tools up to 200,000 years old.

Leakey's claims for Calico Hills would imply that the toolmakers there were a pre-modern species – since modern humans did not appear until 40,000 years ago – probably *Homo erectus* or early *Homo sapiens*, people with much more limited intellectual capabilities than ourselves.

But if not 200,000–100,000 years ago, could people have settled in America between 100,000 and 40,000? This was the time of the Neanderthals in the Old World. Neanderthals have been popularized in Jean Auel's bestselling novels, such as *Clan of the Cave Bear* and *The Mammoth Hunters*. They were skilled hunters and food gatherers, as we shall see, who adapted to a very wide range of tropical, temperate, and cold environments. On the face of it, there is no theoretical reason why they could not have settled in the New World. Some scholars believe that they did.

The last great Ice Age glaciation climaxed after 35,000 years ago, reaching its icy peak between 25,000 and 15,000 years ago. Many isolated stone artifacts and rockshelter finds are claimed to document first settlement during the cold millennia after 25,000 years ago, perhaps even somewhere between 35,000 and 25,000. By this time, Neanderthals had died out. Scientists of this persuasion thus believe that the first settlement coincided with the emergence of fully modern humans – *Homo sapiens sapiens* – in the Old World, and with a rapid colonization of hitherto unoccupied lands, including both Australia and the Americas. Hunters and gatherers would therefore have lived in the New World during the last millennia of the Ice Age. Recent claims for 32,000-year-old settlement in a rockshelter in northeast Brazil have been greeted with great enthusiasm by archaeologists who argue for a relatively early date for the first Americans.

The most conservative viewpoint argues that no humans lived in the Americas before the end of the Ice Age. Tiny numbers of big-game hunters moved south of the great North American ice sheets as the glaciers retreated after 14,000 years ago. The newcomers followed large Ice Age animals into more temperate latitudes. They expanded rapidly over vast tracts of virgin hunting territory, their immediate descendants the famous Clovis people, whose distinctive stone spearpoints have been found over much of North and Central America.

This hypothesis implies that cultural or environmental barriers prevented people from entering the temperate heart of the New World until the climate warmed up in post-glacial times. Ice sheets, severity of climate, rugged terrain, perhaps inadequate arctic clothing or tools, even the lack of suitable watercraft, may have inhibited earlier settlement.

This book is both a narrative and a detective story, the marshaling of archaeological and other scientific evidence against at least four contrasting viewpoints. The story is a challenging one to piece together, largely because



the evidence for the first Americans is still incomplete, a script of archaeological shreds and patches.

The word “script” is appropriate, for archaeology has been compared to an unperformed play – a set of separate scenarios that await the actors to link them into a coherent whole. Our journey into America’s past is like such a play, a sequence of interconnected scenes that themselves also stand on their own. It is not so much from the detail, but from the *overall* picture of world prehistory that emerges, that we find the clues that support, or undermine, the archaeologists’ competing hypotheses. So the narrative is written in the form of a drama with several acts, the sum of the whole providing a cumulative hypothesis as our solution of the mystery.

The first act begins not in the Americas, but deep in the Old World, where hunting and gathering societies flourished hundreds of thousands of years before human beings set foot in the New World. An understanding of what happened in Old World prehistory is vital, for one of the main contentions is that inhabitants of the Americas must have come from elsewhere. Their cultural and biological roots, it is argued, grew thousands of miles away from the North American heartland, from Mexican lowland forests, or Andean deserts. They lay in the Old World. So the events of the first act have a critical bearing on later scenes set in the Americas themselves.

Once in the New World ever-changing climatic conditions, rising and falling sea levels, massive ice sheets, and the habits of game animals, large and small, all feature prominently in the story, both in what is now Alaska and the Yukon Territory and in more southern latitudes. The narrative reaches its climax with the appearance of the Clovis people about 11,500 years ago, the moment at which a continuous record of human achievement in the New World begins. The last act recreates their opportunistic, highly mobile existence, living off not only now-extinct mammoth and other big game, but all manner of smaller animals and plant foods as well.

The drama may have resolved the main enigma of first settlement, but it has revealed further puzzling and fascinating mysteries. Why did the great big-game animals of America die out at the end of the Ice Age? Were human hunters the culprits or was it a natural catastrophe? How did the Folsom people of the Great Plains – successors to Clovis – adapt to life without the mammoth as prey? And were there successive waves of immigrants from Asia, or did the societies Renaissance Europeans discovered all evolve from those very first Ice Age bands? Our final three chapters explore these enigmas and the great diversity that was the native American achievement.

But our story begins in the fifteenth century, when scholars had little more than the scriptures and classical literature as sources on world history. Nearly four centuries were to pass before archaeology became a science and the archaeologists of the 1850s to 1880s posed the basic questions that still concern us today.