

that the only human occupants of one-third of the earth's surface had changed little for thousands of years began to seem implausible. To be sure, some researchers have vigorously attacked the new findings as wild exaggerations. ("We have simply replaced the old myth [of untouched wilderness] with a new one," scoffed geographer Thomas Vale, "the myth of the humanized landscape.") But after several decades of discovery and debate, a new picture of the Americas and their original inhabitants is emerging.

Advertisements still celebrate nomadic, ecologically pure Indians on horseback chasing bison in the Great Plains of North America, but at the time of Columbus the great majority of Native Americans could be found south of the Rio Grande. They were not nomadic, but built up and lived in some of the world's biggest and most opulent cities. Far from being dependent on big-game hunting, most Indians lived on farms. Others subsisted on fish and shellfish. As for the horses, they were from Europe; except for llamas in the Andes, the Western Hemisphere had no beasts of burden. In other words, the Americas were immeasurably busier, more diverse, and more populous than researchers had previously imagined.

And older, too.

T H E O T H E R N E O L I T H I C R E V O L U T I O N S

For much of the last century archaeologists believed that Indians came to the Americas through the Bering Strait about thirteen thousand years ago at the tail end of the last Ice Age. Because the sheets of polar ice locked up huge amounts of water, sea levels around the world fell about three hundred feet. The shallow Bering Strait became a wide land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. In theory, paleo-Indians, as they are called, simply walked across the fifty-five miles that now separate the continents. C. Vance Haynes, an archaeologist at the University of Arizona, put the crowning touches on the scheme in 1964, when he noted evidence that at just the right time—that is, about thirteen thousand years ago—two great glacial sheets in northwest Canada parted, leaving a comparatively warm, ice-free corridor between them. Down this channel paleo-Indians could have passed from Alaska to the more habitable regions in the south without having to hike over the ice pack. At the time, the ice pack

extended two thousand miles south of the Bering Strait and was almost devoid of life. Without Haynes's ice-free corridor, it is hard to imagine how humans could have made it to the south. The combination of land bridge and ice-free corridor occurred only once in the last twenty thousand years, and lasted for just a few hundred years. And it happened just before the emergence of what was then the earliest known culture in the Americas, the Clovis culture, so named for the town in New Mexico where its remains were first definitely observed. Haynes's exposition made the theory seem so ironclad that it fairly flew into the textbooks. I learned it when I attended high school. So did my son, thirty years later.

In 1997 the theory abruptly came unglued. Some of its most ardent partisans, Haynes among them, publicly conceded that an archaeological dig in southern Chile had turned up compelling evidence of human habitation more than twelve thousand years ago. And because these people lived seven thousand miles south of the Bering Strait, a distance that presumably would have taken a long time to traverse, they almost certainly arrived before the ice-free corridor opened up. (In any case, new research had cast doubt on the existence of that corridor.) Given the near impossibility of surpassing the glaciers without the corridor, some archaeologists suggested that the first Americans must have arrived twenty thousand years ago, when the ice pack was smaller. Or even earlier than that—the Chilean site had suggestive evidence of artifacts more than thirty thousand years old. Or perhaps the first Indians traveled by boat, and didn't need the land bridge. Or maybe they arrived via Australia, passing the South Pole. "We're in a state of turmoil," the consulting archaeologist Stuart Fiedel told me. "Everything we knew is now supposed to be wrong," he added, exaggerating a little for effect.

No consensus has emerged, but a growing number of researchers believe that the New World was occupied by a single small group that crossed the Bering Strait, got stuck on the Alaska side, and trickled to the rest of the Americas in several separate groups, very possibly in boats along the Pacific coast. Researchers differ on the details; some scientists have theorized that the Americas may have been hit with as many as five waves of settlement before Columbus, with the earliest occurring as much as fifty thousand years ago. In many versions, though, today's Indians are seen as relative latecomers.

Indian activists dislike this line of reasoning. "I can't tell you how