New artifacts suggest first people arrived in Northwest earlier than thought

By Michelle Klampe
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Stone tools and other artifacts unearthed from an archeological dig at the Cooper's Ferry site in western Idaho suggest that people lived in the area 16,000 years ago, more than a thousand years earlier than scientists previously thought.

The artifacts would be considered among the earliest evidence of people in North America.

The findings, published late last year in Science magazine, add weight to the hypothesis that initial human migration to the Americas followed a Pacific coastal route rather than through the opening of an inland ice-free corridor, said Loren Davis, a professor of anthropology at Oregon State University and the study's lead author.

"The Cooper's Ferry site is located along the Salmon River, which is a tributary of the larger Columbia River basin," Davis said. "Early peoples moving south along the Pacific coast would have encountered the Columbia River as the first place below the glaciers where they could easily walk and paddle in to North America."

Essentially, the Columbia was the first offramp on the Pacific coast migration route, he added.

The timing and position of the Cooper's Ferry site is consistent with and most easily explained as the result of an early Pacific coastal migration.

Cooper's Ferry, located at the confluence of Rock Creek and the lower Salmon River, is known by the Nez Perce Tribe as an ancient village site named Nipéhe. Today, the site is managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

An aerial photo of Cooper's Ferry on the Salmon River, above, and lead researcher Loren Davis, left. At right is the dig site.

Davis first began studying Cooper's Ferry as an archaeologist for the BLM in the 1990s.

After joining the Oregon State faculty, he partnered with BLM to establish a summer archaeological field school there, bringing undergraduate and graduate students from Oregon State and elsewhere for eight weeks each summer from 2009 to 2018 to help with the research.

The dig site includes two areas.

The published findings are about artifacts from area A. In the lower part of the area, researchers uncovered several hundred artifacts, including stone tools, charcoal, fire-cracked rock, and bone fragments likely from medium- to large-bodied animals, Davis said.

They also found evidence of a fire hearth, a food-processing station and other pits created as part of domestic activities.

Over the last two summers, the team of students and researchers reached the lower layers of the site, which contained the oldest artifacts, Davis said. He worked with a team of researchers at Oxford University, who were able to successfully radiocarbon date a number of the animal bone fragments.

The results showed many artifacts from the lowest layers are associated with dates in the range of 15,000 to 16,000 years old.

Davis's team also found tooth fragments from an extinct form of horse known to have lived in North America at the end of the last glacial period. The tooth fragments, along with the radiocarbon dating, show that Cooper's Ferry is the oldest radiocarbon-dated site in North America that includes artifacts associated with the bones of extinct animals, Davis said.

The oldest artifacts uncovered at Cooper's Ferry are similar in form to older artifacts found in northeastern Asia, and particularly, Japan, Davis said. He is now collaborating with Japanese researchers to do further comparisons of artifacts from Japan, Russia and Cooper's Ferry. He is also awaiting carbon-dating information from artifacts from a second dig location at the Cooper's Ferry site.

"We have 10 years' worth of excavated artifacts and samples to analyze," Davis said. "We anticipate we'll make other exciting discoveries."