



## Windover Bog Bodies Resetting Human Habitation Timeline In America

*Jim Willis*

When anthropologists think about bog bodies, their thoughts usually turn to Ireland. Waterlogged sections of land rich in dead plant material that has, over the centuries, converted to peat, provides not only a good source of fuel that has fired the homes and kitchens of Ireland for millennia, but, because of the unique environmental conditions they provide, have also served as an excellent preservative for bodies and artifacts that, either accidentally or not, are sometimes found buried in their embrace. Irish Celts considered bogs spiritually significant, offering gifts to their gods, and possibly human sacrifices as well. These human remains are called bog bodies, and offer a wealth of well-preserved information about the customs of past cultures. Some of them date back as far as 10,000 years.

*Gallagh Man, Ireland (c. 470–120 BC) (Public Domain)*



### Preserved In The Bog

What makes bog bodies unique is that, unlike usual skeletal remains in which the skin and internal organs rot away, leaving only bones, bog bodies demonstrate exactly the reverse process. The high acidic content of bogs tends to dissolve calcium phosphate in bones, while low temperatures and low oxygen content preserves skin, because flesh-destroying bacteria cannot operate in those conditions. Some experts compare the process to pickling fruits and vegetables in order to preserve them. Surviving skin tends to shrivel up, becoming much darker in color, eventually taking on the coloration of the bog itself. But once the skin is exposed to oxygen, it tends to deteriorate quickly, prompting anthropologists to work very fast when it comes to preserving evidence.



*Tollund Man, Denmark, (Fourth c. BC)  
(Public Domain)*

### **Bog Bodies In Europe**

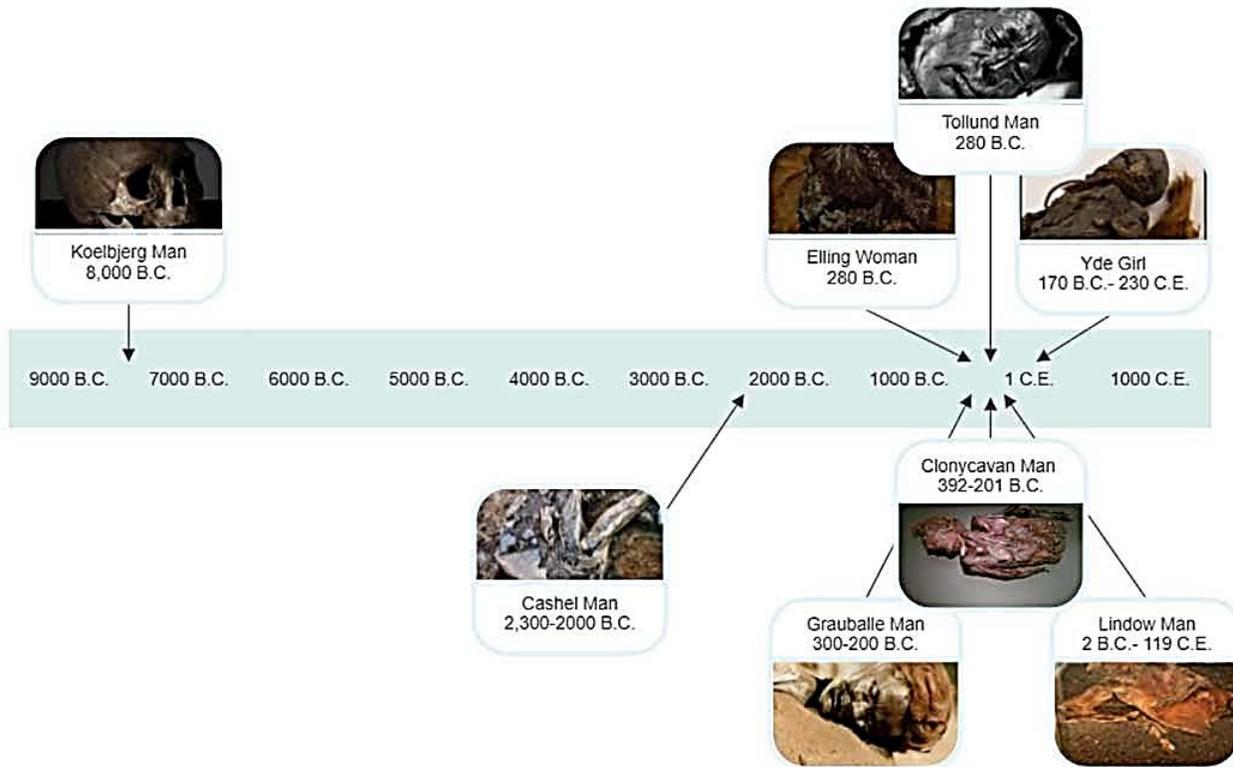
The oldest bog bodies found so far are not from Ireland and its famous Cashel Man, discovered in 2011, but from Denmark, home of the oldest bog body ever discovered. It dates back to 8000 BC. There, a small area of land produced a large number of bodies, which, because of the

nature of their injuries, may have been those of victims of a large-scale battle, fought at the same time in history when people who were beginning to follow an agrarian lifestyle sought to impose their way of life onto a reluctant older group of herders. It immediately brings to mind the biblical story of an agrarian Cain, who murdered his herder brother Abel.

The vast majority of bog body discoveries, coming from Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, come from this time period, and bear the same kinds of wounds. Did they die in battle? Were they offered as human sacrifices? Or were they simple brutally murdered? No one knows for sure, but the evidence suggests that they experienced a very violent end.

### **Windover Bog Bodies Discovered**

Meanwhile, however, across the Atlantic Ocean, on the east coast of the Florida peninsula, another group of bog bodies were recently discovered that tell quite a different story. It is a much more peaceful, perhaps even mystical, and certainly spiritual story. In 1982, a Florida backhoe operator was hired to fill up a pond in a new housing development called Windover Estates, in order to build an access road. May whatever gods who watch over anthropologists forever smile down upon Steve Vanderjagt, for while doing his work he saw what he first thought were rocks tumbling around in the bucket of his backhoe. Rocks are unusual in that part of Florida. Sand is more the norm. Steve got down off his backhoe and discovered not rocks, but human skulls. Little did he realize that that simple act of curiosity would turn the whole field of archaeology and human origins on its head.



*Timeline shows the estimated death dates of famous bog bodies. (Rag138/ CC BY-SA 4.0)*

At first, he did not know, of course, that he had discovered an 8,100-year-old cemetery. For all he knew, he might be dealing with a recent crime scene or hunting accident. But the skulls proved to be the tip of an archaeological iceberg. To make a long, but fascinating, story short, three years of meticulous work, led by anthropologists from Florida State University, proved beyond doubt that this was the oldest, most well-preserved and most shockingly informative Paleo-Indian site

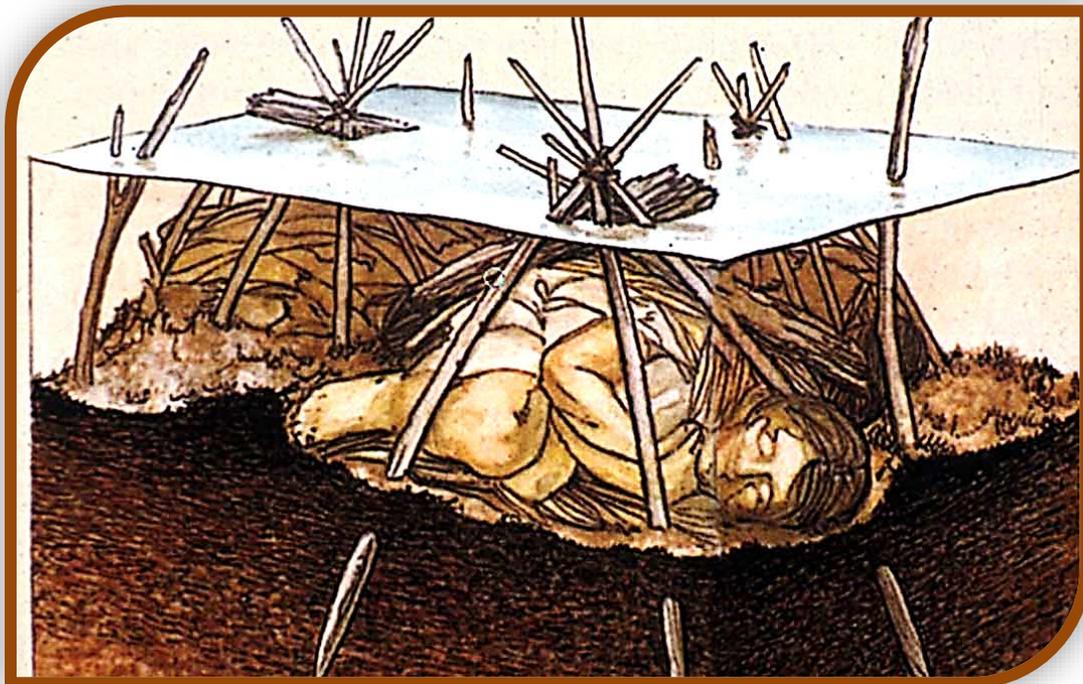


in North America. More ancient bodies were uncovered here than the total of all the bodies so far discovered in the Americas.

*Peat bog at Windover Archaeological site which preserved the burials of native Americans 7,000 to 8,000 years ago. (ROY KLOTZ MD / CC BY-SA 3.0)*

Skeletal remains of 169 individuals were eventually uncovered. When 90 of these were examined in detail, intact, preserved brains were found. Such a wealth of DNA material was unheard of and the people who lived here had buried their dead in this pond for more than 1,000 years. This was an entire population that had existed intact for generation after generation, preserving this site in their oral history as sacred ground. The bodies were buried in ritualistic fashion, on an east-west coordinate, in fetal position, with their heads to the west and faces turned to the north. In many cases they were buried with tools and artifacts that they would need in the next world. A young girl was buried with her turtle-bone doll, perhaps a favorite toy. A young boy, who suffered from *spina bifida*, a horrible disease that must have rendered him immobile, had lived for up to three years before he was buried. Somebody had to love him very much to care for him over that long a period of time.

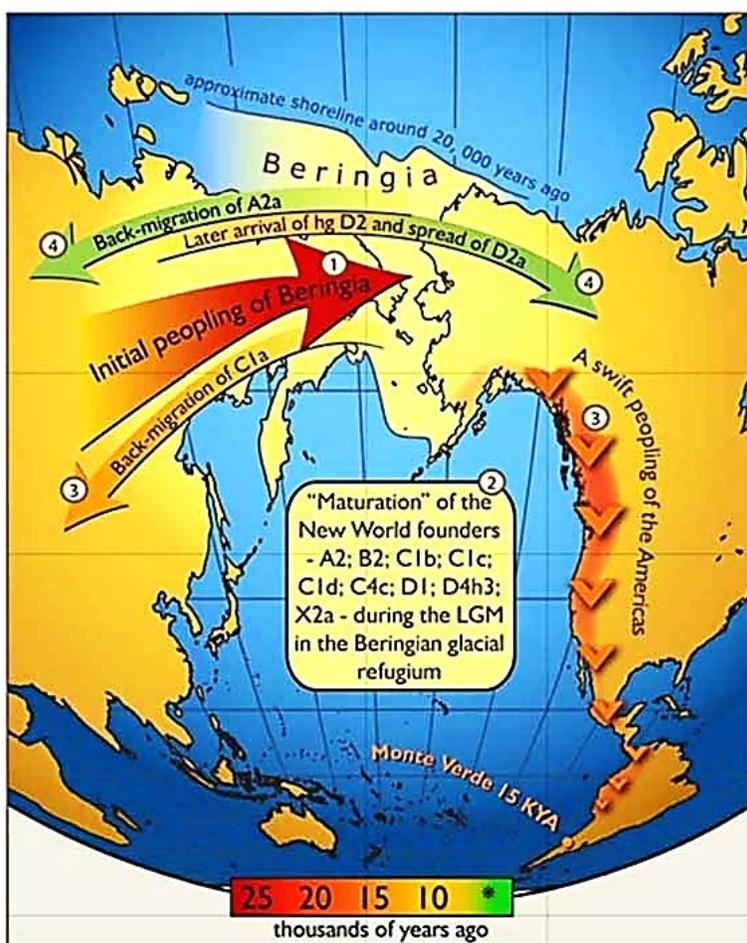
All the bodies were buried in the same way. They were carefully settled in the pond with a blanket placed over them, which was staked down to hold the body in place. This in itself was significant, for woven cloth implies a weaving technology which included looms. These were ritualistic burials with implements, showing a highly developed sense of the spiritual conceptions of love, afterlife, community, and compassion. And it was going on in Florida 4,000 years before anyone ever thought of building a pyramid to house the dead in Egypt!



*An illustration depicting the burial of Windover bog bodies ( [myfloridahistory.org](http://myfloridahistory.org) )*

## Crossing Beringia

Who were these people? Where did they come from? What were they thinking when they lovingly buried their dead? Forty years ago, history and anthropology textbooks thought they had the answer down pat. They informed students that the most modern, up-to-date geological studies proved that glaciers covered the northern poles and had pushed down as far as what is now the central part of the United States, effectively sealing off what is now called North America from any human contact at all. The human race had, by this time, spread out from its genesis in Africa, a theory that had only relatively recently replaced the idea of human beginnings in the Fertile Crescent's Garden of Eden, and inhabited land from Africa in the south, to Asia in the East, and Europe in the north. With the glaciers locking up so much water, sea levels were much lower than they are now.



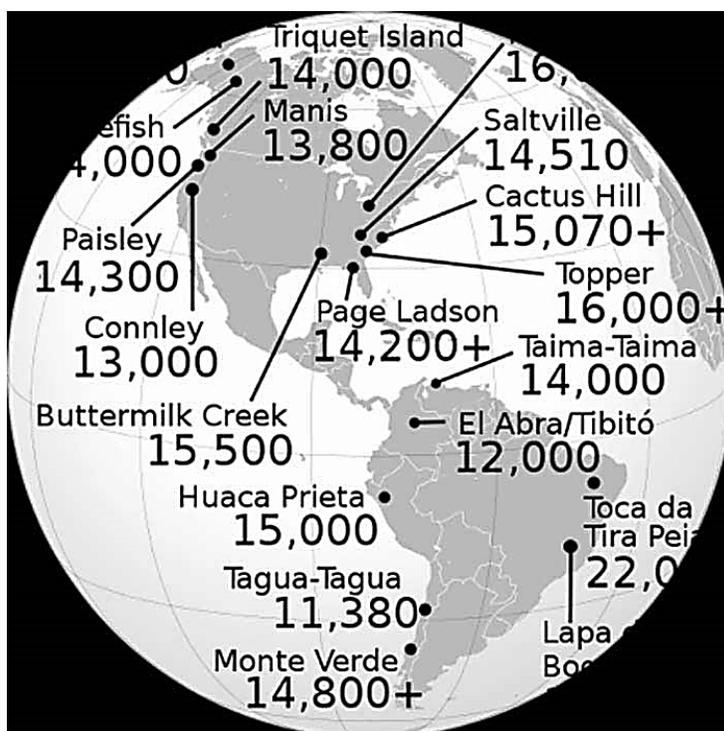
Map of gene flow in and out of Beringia (CC BY-SA 2.5)

There was a land bridge, now called Beringia, a thousand miles wide, connecting Siberia to Alaska. When the ice started to melt, a brief corridor opened up for a time, allowing humans to follow migrating herds of mammoths and other now-extinct species right into the heart of the virgin North American continent. The hunting was so good that human predation, coupled with a series of climate fluctuations and resultant habitat changes, caused the extinction of many of these great species. Anthropologist

knew back then that humans were efficient hunters because they found a sample of their primary weapon near Clovis, New Mexico, at the same site as an ancient mammoth kill. The weapon consisted of a highly efficient fluted spear point named after the location of the find in Clovis, New Mexico – the famous Clovis Point. Using carbon dating, the mammoth bones were found to be about 8,000 years old. That coincided with the time of the most recent ice-free corridor between Asia and the Americas, and was only a short time before mammoths went extinct.

Since this was then the earliest clear indication of human activity in America, it was assumed that these were the first people to enter the continent. It was an elegant, simple theory that tied together a certified archaeological discovery with a confirmed ice-free corridor, and a positive extinction of ancient animal species. ‘Clovis First’ became the archaeological gospel and woe to the student who tried to publish anything different! Disputing Clovis First was a sure-fire way to get laughed out of the next symposium. 12,000 to 16,000 years ago, give or take a century or two, was when the first humans immigrated to America, and that’s the end of that! Case closed!

Map of the Americas showing pre-Clovis sites, from the journal *Science*. (Pratyeka / CC BY-SA 4.0)



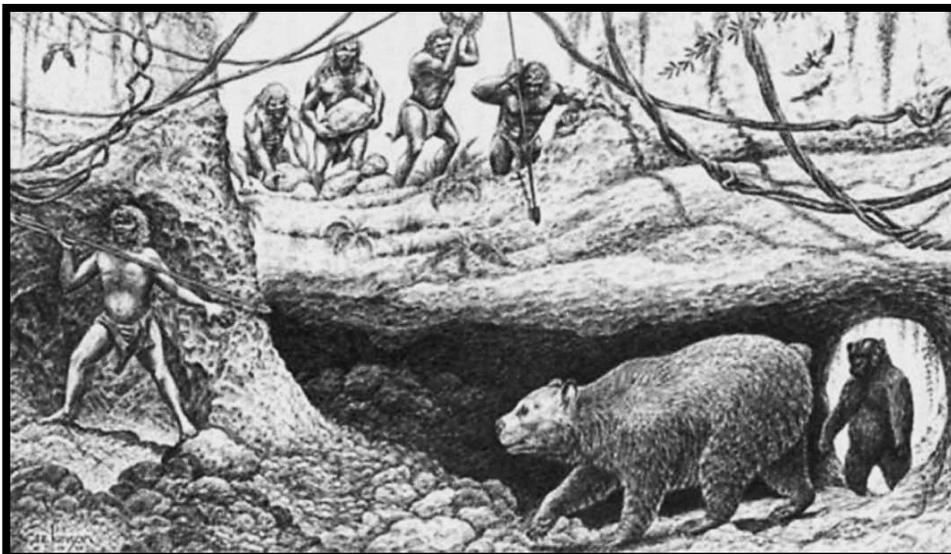
Fundamentalism, whether religious, political, scientific or anthropological, is fraught with difficulties. A few sites, notably in Chile and Pennsylvania, and later, South Carolina, refused to conform to fundamentalist guidelines. Archaeologists at all these sites seemed pretty confident that they were dealing with material much older than a mere 12,000 to 16,000 years.

They were ridiculed and laughed at, but they persevered. Doubts began to rise.

### Windover DNA Disputing Clovis First

Despite the evidence of antiquity, archaeologists could not answer a few important questions. First and foremost, if people were in Florida so soon after the glaciers melted, how did they get here? The Ice Age is a given. There is plenty of geological evidence to back that up, and the dates are fairly well set, quite literally, in stone. So how did Asian immigrants, assuming the archaeological dates are correct, wind up in a Chilean cave, a Pennsylvanian overhang, and a Savannah Riverbank? Because it did not seem possible that they could have gotten here, it was assumed that they did not get here. It was the archaeologist’s old dilemma: *“That artifact cannot be here because it is not supposed to be here!”*

But when the DNA discovered at Windover was analyzed, behold the impossible! A gene teased out of the skull specimens seemed to indicate an origin different from Asia. It appears that the ancestors of these Florida inhabitants might have come not from Siberia, but from somewhere else. And they lived here very soon after, and possibly even before, the ice melted up north.



Artist's conception of Pleistocene Vero man and cave bear *Arctodus*. In *Fossil Mammals of Florida* by Stanley J. Olsen, Florida Geological Survey Special Publication No. 6, 1959 ( Wikimedia Commons )

Since then, there has been

a lot of field work filed that seems to indicate that many of these early Americans died off, either because of disease or natural catastrophe. Eventually, however, some survivors, in their travels, must have met up with Siberian immigrant neighbors from the north and west. In time, they populated the continent, there to await the coming of the Columbus, or the Vikings before him, or the Celts before them, or the Iberians before them ... and on and on.

One thing is sure. Ritual burials imply spirituality and religion. The Windover bog people did not go to the trouble of carefully wrapping up their dead and equipping them with tools needed in the next life, unless they had a concept akin to an afterlife. So much for the anthropological picture of 'primitive hunter gatherers'. So much for 'cavemen'.

### The Solutrean Hypothesis

Where did these people come from? One answer may come from a theory published in 2012, by Dennis Stanford and Bruce Bradley. In their book, titled *Across Atlantic Ice: The Origin of America's Clovis Culture*, they carefully put forth what is now called the Solutrean Hypothesis. Archaeologists, being the scientists that they are, depend on precise language. So here is the Solutrean Hypothesis in words chosen by Stanford and Bradley: *"Who were the first Americans? The Solutrean hypothesis, in simple outline form, is that during the Last Glacial Maximum, sometime between 25,000 and 13,000 years ago, members of the Solutrean Culture in the south-west coastal regions of Europe were led by subsistence behavior appropriate to their time and place to exploit the ice-edge environment of the polar front across the North Atlantic and colonize North America to become - after several millennia - what we know as the Clovis peoples, who eventually spread far and wide across the Americas. This does not necessarily mean that the Clovis people were the ancestors - or the only ancestors - of contemporary Native Americans, and it does not mean that Paleolithic north-east Asians did not also colonize the Americas. It does mean, in concert with other strands of evidence, that Clovis is part of the rich, complex, and wonderful story of the ebb and flow of people whose descendants are what we call Native Americans"*.

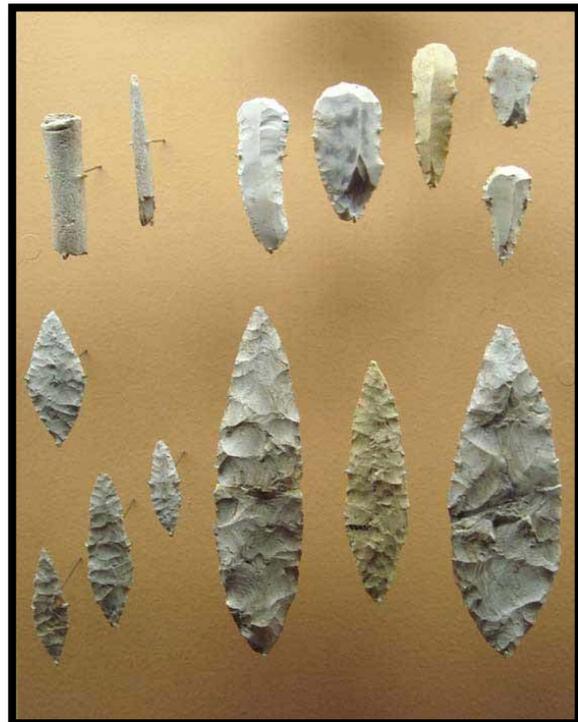


*Clovis points from the Rummells-Maske Site, 13CD15, Cedar County, Iowa. (Bill Whittaker/ CC BY-SA 3.0)*

Simply put, in their view, representatives of the Solutrean culture migrated west across the Atlantic from France and northern Spain. In doing so, they became possibly the first European people to ever set foot on the continent. They settled there for thousands of years, spreading out across the land, and down into Florida, eventually evolving their finally-honed stone craft into what is now known as the Rolls Royce of stone technology, the beautifully fluted Clovis Point. Those who later crossed on foot across the Beringia land bridge eventually reaped the benefits of Solutrean bifacial stone technology, producing a serviceable point called the Folsom point. It was smaller and easier to make than Clovis, but was sufficient because the mega fauna, mastodons and mammoths among them, were now extinct. The prey they sought was much smaller. As these Folsom people gradually spread back across the landscape, they eventually became the ancestors of many Native American Indian tribes.

This is really a fairly conservative theory. The dates do not push the arrival of the first Americans nearly as far back as a more recent discovery in California that indicates the possibility of American history going back more than 100,000 years. And if the Solutrean Hypothesis is true, whenever archaeologists pick up a typical bifacial Indian arrowhead, they are holding in their hands the legacy of the Solutrean people of western Europe.

*Solutrean tools, 22,000–17,000 BP, Crot du Charnier, Solutré-Pouilly, Saône-et-Loire, France (CC BY-SA 3.0)*



## Windover Bog People Against the Odds

David Meltzer of Southern Methodist University, an authority on the peopling of the Americas, has accumulated a bit of a reputation for demanding more evidence for early dates while refusing to accept that evidence as being insufficient once it is presented. That was the stance he took on the *History Channel's* TV movie, *Journey to 10,000 BC*, which was first aired in 2008. About the California discovery he wrote: "*You can't push human antiquity in the New World back 100,000 years based on evidence as inherently ambiguous as broken bones and nondescript stones — not when they are coming from a highway salvage excavation done 25 years ago, and you have none of the detailed taphonomic evidence demanded of such a grandiose claim.*"

So, once again, one is frustrated when the prevailing argument against early human presence in the Americas is that there is no evidence for it. But then, when evidence is put forth, it is discounted and called illegitimate because it does not fit the accepted theory. Seen against this archaeological backdrop, the Windover bog people offer, at the very least, evidence of a people, hitherto unknown, who lived in Florida, on the opposite end of a vast country, separated by thousands of miles from the Siberian land bridge. Yet they had attained a level of sophistication unheard of in a very short time after their ancestors had supposedly crossed over from Asia on foot.

So where did the Windover people come from? When had they first lived here? How had they learned to live in the sophisticated manner they had developed? As is usually the case, many theories have been.

*Top Image: The Bocksten Man is the remains of a Medieval male body found in a bog in Varberg Municipality, Sweden (CC BY-SA 2.0)*

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