

Ancient woman suggests diverse migration

July 23 2010, By MARK STEVENSON , Associated Press Writer

This undated photo taken at the France-based Atelier Daynes in Paris, released on Friday, July 23, 2010, by Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History, shows a scientific reconstruction of an ancient woman known as La Mujer de las Palmas, based on the skeletal remains of a female who lived between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago in Tulum, Mexico. Experts reconstructed what the woman may have looked like based on the remains found in 2002 in a sinkhole cave near the Caribbean resort of Tulum, Mexico. Anthropologist Alejandro Terrazas says the reconstruction resembles people from southeastern Asia areas like Indonesia, even though experts had long believed the first people to migrate to the Americas where from northeast Asia. (AP Photo/ Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History)

A scientific reconstruction of one of the oldest sets of human remains found in the Americas appears to support theories that the first people who came to the hemisphere migrated from a broader area than once

thought, researchers say.

Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History on Thursday released photos of the reconstructed image of a woman who probably lived on Mexico's Caribbean coast 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. She peeks out of the picture as a short, spry-looking woman with slightly graying hair.

Anthropologists had long believed humans migrated to the Americas in a relatively short period from a limited area in northeast [Asia](#) across a temporary land corridor that opened across the Bering Strait during an ice age.

But government archaeologist Alejandro Terrazas says the picture has now become more complicated, because the reconstruction more resembles people from southeastern Asian areas like Indonesia.

"History isn't that simple," Terrazas said. "This indicates that the Americas were populated by several migratory movements, not just one or two waves from northern Asia across the Bering Strait."

Some outside experts caution that the evidence is not conclusive.

Ripan Malhi, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois, said that "using facial reconstructions to assign ancestry to an individual is not as strong as using [ancient DNA](#) to assess the ancestry of the individual, because the environment can influence the traits of the face."

"All of the current [genetic evidence](#) points to Northeast Asia as the main source for Native Americans," Malhi said.

However, there have been few opportunities to use DNA or other

methods to identify the origins of the first inhabitants because only a handful of skeletons from 10,000 years ago have survived.

The female is known as "La Mujer de las Palmas," or "The Woman of the Palms," after the sinkhole cave near the Caribbean resort of Tulum where her remains were found by divers and recovered in 2002.

In this undated photo released on Friday, July 23, 2010, by Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History, a diver holds a skull belonging to a woman, known as La Mujer de las Palmas, who lived between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago, in Tulum, Mexico. Experts reconstructed what the woman may have looked like based on the remains found in a sinkhole cave near the Caribbean resort of Tulum, Mexico. Anthropologist Alejandro Terrazas says the reconstruction resembles people from southeastern Asia areas like Indonesia, even though experts had long believed the first people to migrate to the Americas were from northeast Asia. (AP Photo/ Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History)

Because rising water levels flooded the cave where she died or was laid to rest, her skeleton was about 90 percent intact. Archaeologists and physical anthropologists calculated she was between 44 and 50 years old

when she died, was about 5 feet (1.52 meters) tall and weighed about 128 pounds (58 kilograms).

Experts also measured skull features and calculated the muscle and other tissue layers that once covered her face, which served as a guide for experts in paleo-anthropological modeling at the Atelier Daynes in France to complete a model of the woman.

The model shows a stocky woman and clad in a simple knee-length woven tunic. She had a broad face, prominent cheeks, thin lips, and little trace of the epicanthic eye-folds that characterize many modern Asian populations.

"Her body structure, skin and eyes are similar to the population of Southeast Asia," the institute said in a statement.

Susan Gillespie, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Florida, noted that while the Bering land bridge theory still has a lot of support, "the situation is messier than the straightforward scenario ... of big-game hunters chasing woolly mammoths over the exposed 'Bering bridge' to Alaska."

"Recently there has been more serious inquiry into the various origins of migrants, modes of transportation, and dates of when they got here," Gillespie said in an e-mail message. "Dates for peopling of the Americas have been pushed way back, and with the finding of very early skeletal remains, the genetic/skeletal linkages to peoples of northeast Asia has become more cloudy."

But Gillespie cautioned against comparing a reconstructed face from 10,000 years ago to modern populations in places like Indonesia, which have also probably changed over 10 millennia.

"You have to find skeletons of the same time period in Asia, or use genetic reconstructions, to make a strong connection, and cannot rely on modern populations," she wrote. "Do we have any empirical data on what Southeast Asian women looked like ... 10,000 years ago?"

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