

A Conspiracy of Silence: Are We Older Than We Think We Are?

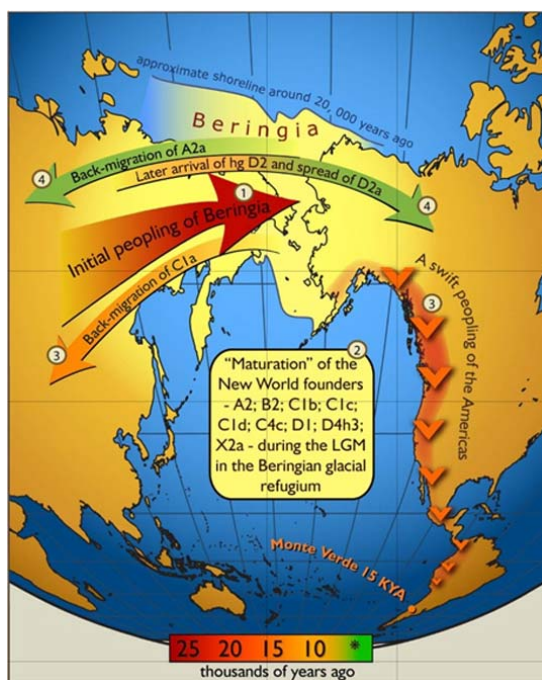
Jim Willis

Generally speaking, when archaeologists find something it's because they are deliberately looking for it. There are exceptions, of course, when someone in the field metaphorically trips over something unexpected in the dark, accidentally discovering a Göbekli Tepe or a Denisovan bone. Then the tendency is to label such a find an anomaly—a one-time accident that doesn't fit within accepted parameters.

When something new turns up that threatens to completely upset the proverbial tried-and-true apple cart, the following argument often ensues: "Where's the evidence? I don't want to see one example. I want many examples!" "Then give me some grant money to go out and find more!" "That would be a waste of money without more evidence!"

The Clovis First Theory

One of the best illustrations for this state of affairs is found in the quest to determine when the first Americans arrived on the continent. Until very recently, 'Clovis First' was the accepted dogma. In many classrooms, it is still defended with almost religious zeal.



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

Forty years ago, the textbooks seemed to have it down pat. They informed us that the most modern, up-to-date geological studies proved that for the bulk of the time modern humans existed, glaciers covered the northern poles and had crawled down as far as what is now the central part of the United States, effectively sealing off what we now call America from any human contact at all. The human race had, by this time, spread out on foot from its genesis in Africa (a theory that had only relatively recently and reluctantly replaced our 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. A thousand-mile-wide land bridge called 'Beringia' connected Siberia to Alaska.



Recreation of a scene in late Pleistocene northern Spain, by Mauricio Antón ([CC BY-SA 2.5](#))

When the ice started to melt, a corridor opened up, allowing humans to follow migrating herds of mammoths and other now-extinct species right into the heart of the virgin 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. We knew that humans back then were efficient hunters because a sample of their primary weapon was found near Clovis, New Mexico, in 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 - 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 the mammoths went extinct. Because this was the earliest clear indication of human activity in America, it was assumed that these were the first people to enter the continent.



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

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. What's not to love about a theory like that? 'Clovis First' became the archaeological gospel and woe to the heretic who tried to publish anything different. Disputing 'Clovis First' was a sure-fire way to get laughed out of the next symposium, to say nothing of the fact that grant money was almost impossible to find if its intended purpose was to look for something outside accepted parameters. Eight to 10,000 years ago, give or take a century or two, was when the first humans immigrated to America, and that was the end of that! Aside from an occasional liberal that attempted to push the date back to 16,000 or so years before present, based on what were then considered to be questionable finds, there was really no other argument allowed. Those who disagreed tended to get excommunicated. The case was, for all intents and purposes, closed. If someone tripped over earlier evidence, it was labeled an anomaly and stored away in a basement somewhere for further study.

Topper Site Challenges Clovis

But Fundamentalism, whether religious, political, scientific, or anthropological, is fraught with difficulties. A few sites, notably in Chile and Pennsylvania, refused to conform to fundamentalist guidelines. Archaeologists at both sites seemed pretty confident that they were dealing with material much older than a mere 8,000 to 10,000 years. They were ridiculed and laughed at, but they persevered. It got to the point where Al Goodyear, before he retired from the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina, told his students that, having reached a substantial Clovis layer, while excavating at the Topper Site above the Savannah River in Allendale, South Carolina, if they decided to dig deeper and discovered any earlier evidence, they might be risking their future careers. It took courage, but they continued. Their discoveries led them to conclude that people were burning fires there as long as 50,000 years ago.



Topper Site, Top 5 Facts. [YouTube](#)

"Topper is a lot older than 15,000 years," Goodyear concluded. "When and where did our people begin, and when and where did they disperse? I have no doubt that this will be a hotly debated topic for some time, as paradigm shifts often take a while to gain acceptance, but the evidence appears to be solid."

The evidence, now inspected, analyzed and argued over for two decades, remains as solid as ever. Since Topper isn't the only ancient site in question, doubts began to arise as soon as laboratory reports trickled in and filtered out to the public. Despite the new evidence of antiquity, conservative archaeologists rightly asked a few important questions. First and foremost, if people were in America before the glaciers melted, how did they get there? The ice age is a given. There's plenty of geology to back that up and the dates are fairly well set in stone. So how could people possibly wind up in a Chilean cave, a Pennsylvanian overhang, a South Carolina river, an Oklahoma prairie, or a Florida river before the ice melted to let them through? Did they have boats? If so, where's the evidence for them?

Anomalies, Questions and Enigmas

Those who stood by the new evidence countered with questions of their own. Why are the great majority of Clovis sites found in the Eastern United States, if the Clovis people entered from the north-west? Why does Clovis technology resemble 20,000-year-old European Solutrean technology more than anything Siberia has to offer? Then came the counter argument. Why does DNA evidence indicate a Siberian connection rather than a European one? The questions were left hanging in the air. Because it didn't seem possible that people *could* have gotten here any earlier, it was assumed by many that they *didn't* get here. The anomalies fell victim to the archaeologist's old truism: "That artifact can't be here because it's not supposed to be here!"



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

Such claims of great antiquity are not new. Anthropologists have known about most of them for a long time. But because they didn't fit accepted parameters, they were often ridiculed and placed within the symbolic archives of what I have called, in my book *Ancient Gods*, the 'Conspiracy of Silence.' These archives are vast, indeed. They contain hundreds of enigmas. But by an understood, although not necessary acknowledged, culture of suppression, their corridors have, in the past, been explored by relatively few people.

The accepted field method has remained the same for hundreds of years: Find an artifact, determine its age by comparing it to similar artifacts, plug it into the existing chart, and continue on. But given new and approved scientific technologies of dating, what happens when you uncover something that doesn't fit the existing chart? What if you find an anomaly—something that seems to refute the existing formula - something that, indeed, might call into question the very structure of traditional knowledge?

More and more, with each passing day, reports of field archaeology from all over the world indicate that new dating, new paradigms, and new approaches point toward there being more than one story that will make sense of *all* the existing facts. Accepting these new findings is difficult. It upsets the accepted timeline of history's plodding story. It discredits former beloved teachers and requires the re-writing of textbooks. It poses more questions than it answers. Who wants to teach a high school or college course consisting of questions? Academia, it is popularly thought, is a place for answers, not questions! It's uncomfortable to stand in front of a room full of students and say: "We just don't know!"

So, it's far easier to become an academic Fundamentalist - to simply take refuge in traditional doctrine and the accepted 'text', sweep inconvenient facts under the rug, declare them to be 'interesting anomalies', and hope no one notices. This is often the method by which ingrained, institutional thinking tends to operate in every field of study, be it archaeological, religious, scientific, or even political.

Young Archaeologists Find: We Are Older!



Burning Tree Mastodon excavation site. (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Finally, however, it appears that there are cracks developing in the artifice of the 'Conspiracy of Silence'. A new breed of archaeologists has begun to delve into places formerly forbidden to them. Artifacts filed away years ago are now being re-inspected and found to be much older than previously thought.

Mastodon bones, for instance, first discovered in California more than 35 years ago, were carefully stored away and forgotten. Then, when inspected with fresh eyes, they revealed the intriguing possibility that humans had broken these bones to get at the marrow they contained more than 130,000 years ago!



Origin dates are being pushed back in time as well. Our species is traditionally believed to have arisen in Africa some 200,000 years ago. But recently, in the **Jebel Irhoud** cave located some 60 miles (96.56 kilometers) west of Marrakesh, fossilized homo sapiens bones, along with stone tools, were found that date back to possibly 350,000 years ago. That almost doubles previous estimates.

These discoveries, along with many others, are beginning to break open the creaky halls of orthodoxy. Young scientists have found a way to by-pass traditional techniques of containment. Aided by numerous on-line magazines, pod casts, TV shows and social media outlets, it is now possible to obtain financing formerly regulated by only recognized and certified committees, boards and institutions. That leads to even more radical assumptions.

Homo Sapiens 160,000 years old from Jebel Irhoud cave near Marrakesh. (Smithsonian Natural History Museum/ [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))

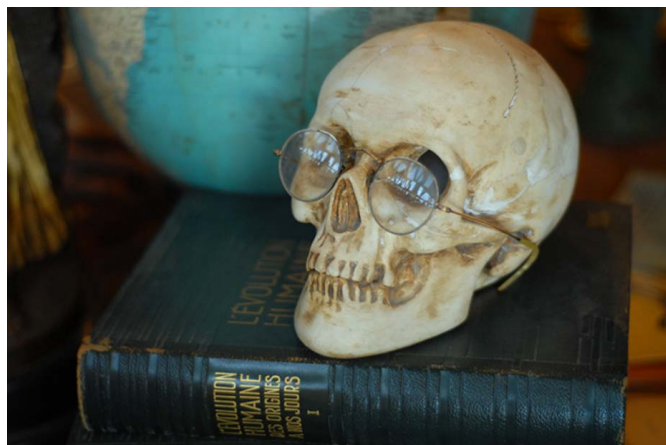
Psychological Support for the ‘Conspiracy Theory’

In November of 2015, Volume 61 of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* condensed the results of six experiments that might well serve as a commentary that explains the ‘Conspiracy of Silence’. The studies investigated how people behaved when they were told they were ‘experts’ on a particular subject, whether or not they actually were. The results of the experiments showed that perceived experts tended to be more closed minded and less open to arguments than members of the control groups. It didn't make any difference whether they were really experts or not. As long as they thought they were, they acted as though they knew the answers. They exhibited what the study labeled the ‘Earned Dogmatism Effect’. What that means, according to the study, is that the more a person knew, or thought he or she knew, about a particular subject, the more they were apt to ignore someone with a different opinion, whether or not that opinion was based on fact. It took a tremendous effort for the experts to reconsider their views.

The results of the study were thus summarized: Social norms entitle experts to be more close-minded or dogmatic. Self-perception of high expertise increased closed-mindedness. The final conclusion was this: “Although cultural values generally prescribe open-mindedness, open-minded cognition systematically varies across individuals and situations. According to the ‘Earned Dogmatism Hypothesis’, social norms dictate that experts are entitled to adopt a relatively dogmatic, closed-minded orientation. As a consequence, situations that engender self-perceptions of high expertise elicit a more closed-minded cognitive style.”

With no support and encouragement, with no fresh and open minds willing to probe and push, with no funds available for research, new and compelling facts wither on the vine and our cultural bias continues.

The practice of by-passing peer review by going straight to the public has its drawbacks, of course. The *History Channel* doesn't require the same peer-reviewed standards as professional publications. As a result, it's probable that some pretty fantastic theories reach a public that is ready and waiting to jump to unsubstantiated conclusions.



Human evolution at a junk fair ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

For this reason, it's important to understand the value of a slow but steady traditional approach to accepting new evidence. But in all things, balance is necessary. It isn't a good idea to throw off accepted methods of study and review. On the other hand, close-minded Fundamentalism, especially when it resorts to ridicule and public scorn, can be stultifying. At least the social media route, which has its obvious shortcomings, is opening up the musty corridors of the 'Conspiracy of Silence', allowing fresh breezes to blow where once primarily stagnant air was found.

We often hear the complaint: "If that finding is true, we'll have to re-write the textbooks!"

Well, if that's the case, so be it. A new day has dawned. It's amazing what we might find once we begin looking!

Top Image: *Early human history* (book illustration); Artist unknown; No date; *History – Indians* ([Public Domain](#))

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