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There are some elements of the Clovis model that appear beyond challenge. It is impossible to dispute the existence of the Clovis cultural tool kit, and it must also be acknowledged that the Clovis culture is the first that has been found with a widespread dispersal across the North American continent. What can be, and indeed has been, alleged is that the Clovis culture never arrived in South America, that the Clovis civilization did not lead to the extinction of the megafauna in North America, that the American Indians are not descendants of the Clovis people, and that the people who produced the Clovis culture were not the First Americans. It is this final contention, that there were pre-Clovis cultures, that generated considerable acrimony among First American scientists. Two prominent pre-Clovis sites that initially challenged the Clovis-first model were Monte Verde in Chile and Meadowcroft Rockshelter in Pennsylvania.

Monte Verde, Chile

One of the enduring debates in the philosophy of science is the (im)possibility of demonstrating a conclusive proof for any particular scientific theory. Indeed, there is a significant body of thought based upon the work of Karl Popper that holds that for any theory to be considered scientific, it must potentially be able to be falsified; that is, there must be some conceivable test that, if successfully conducted, would disprove the theory. Although repeated instances of successful excavations of Clovis sites would reinforce the importance of the Clovis culture, it only takes one instance of a successful excavation of a pre-Clovis site to disprove the Clovis-first model. In this case, the necessary single instance of disproof was the excavation at Monte Verde, Chile, during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

The Clovis-first theory enjoyed the appearance of being confirmed by a broad and deep material record. However, in retrospect, the theory was composed of
an amalgamation of largely independent theories that can best be termed fellow travelers—the ultimate success of any particular subordinate theory was neither dependent on the success of the Clovis-first theory itself nor dependent on any other subordinate theory. The relationship can, perhaps, be described as a political accommodation. Some First American scientists were aware that the parts from which Clovis-first was assembled had a tenuous relationship. Meltzer noted that a successful challenge to the Clovis-first theory need only successfully demonstrate a pre-12,000 BP material record; it need not specifically disprove such associated theories as a Beringia crossing or a human-driven extinction of the megafauna. According to Meltzer, “the question of whether people were present at a given time must be kept separate from more complex questions about how they lived.” Nevertheless, the burden that Monte Verde now carries is that, while it has displaced Clovis as the earliest documented human occupation in the New World, there is no commonly accepted associated theory describing where those people came from, what path they took, and the extent to which their descendants survived in the New World. Within this theoretical vacuum, there is little reason to believe that Monte Verde will be immune from having attached to it an assortment of fellow traveler theories whose success will be tied to the success of Monte Verde.

The Monte Verde excavation site is a few hundred miles south of Santiago, Chile, near Puerto Montt and next to Chinchihaupi Creek. In what has become a typical scenario of a significant archaeological discovery, in 1975 some old bones were serendipitously discovered by a non-archaeologist. Archaeological excavations began in 1976 under the auspices of Tom D. Dillehay and Mario Pino of the Southern University of Chile in Valdivia. Dillehay is now at Vanderbilt University. Because the site had been covered by a water-saturated peat bog, the deterioration of normally perishable materials such as wood and textiles was greatly reduced because the water prevented the decay-inducing effects of oxygen. In the search for the first Americans, the implications of the Monte Verde excavation are profound. Not only is the human occupation at least one thousand years older than the Clovis culture, it is ten thousand miles from what was the potential colonization route in Beringia.

There are two levels of excavation at the site. The upper, or younger, level is designated MV-II with an estimated age of 14,500 BP. As discussed below, it is at this level that the material evidence refutes the Clovis-first model. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily invalidate all of the associated subtheories associated with Clovis-first. For example, First American scientists are not able to precisely determine the dates during which humans might potentially have crossed Beringia.
and penetrated the ice fields of North America, nor able to confirm or refute the megafauna extinction theory. Although the dates for MV-II are sufficiently earlier than Clovis to refute Clovis-first, the chronological difference is not so large as to require a coastal penetration scenario.

While acceptance of MV-II alone is sufficient to disprove Clovis-first and to require a rewriting of the First American scenario, the possible implications of Monte Verde are even greater. Beneath the level of MV-II, Dillehay has found material evidence of potential human-associated activity at a level, termed MV-I, initially dated at 33,000 BP and later revised to 18,500 BP. There has been no finally accepted report for MV-I. As leading First American scientists have termed it, the status of MV-I “remains unresolved.” If, however, the MV-I findings are validated, it will require a completely new script for human colonization of the Western Hemisphere. It will be a direct challenge to Beringia, megafauna overkill, and Siberia as subtheories for the First Americans. “The chances seem good that these materials indicate a significant early human occupation in the region.” Pending publication and acceptance with regard to the MV-I excavation, the focus of First American scientists understandably remained concentrated on the implications of MV-II. The principal human-occupied area excavated at MV-II has now been destroyed by a meandering stream, logging activities, and road construction.

Because of the historically intense—frenzied might be more appropriate—scrutiny of any challenge to the Clovis-first model, Dillehay did not publish his final report associated with MV-II until twenty years after he began the excavation. In First American science, the boundary between what constituted a material fact and its associated explanatory theory seemed to have disappeared, with the Clovis-first model giving every indication of having been honored with the status of fact, rather than explanatory theory, by many in the First American scientific community. The material artifacts associated with MV-II in no way challenged the validity of the material artifacts related to the Clovis-first theory. However, the material artifacts associated with MV-II absolutely challenged the Clovis-first theory itself.

The difficulties in an archaeological excavation lie in two areas. The first is a determination of a human presence, frequently in the absence of any human biological remains. Consequently, the evidence is typically composed of associated materials that reflect human activity. Documenting this activity is more difficult than might be imagined, since natural and animal-related activities are capable of fracturing stone and marking wood or bone in a nearly perfect replication of a human effort. Once a human-related activity has been determined,
the second challenge for First American scientists is to chronologically situate the human presence. The overwhelming majority of the Clovis sites had no direct evidence of human presence in the form of skeletal remains; consequently, the significance of the sites was based on evidence of human-related activity in the form of artifacts. However, at Monte Verde, Dillehay was in the enviable position of having direct evidence of a human presence in what was judged to be a clear human footprint that was preserved in the peat bog. Once a chronological determination was made—and supported by other evidence of human activity such as tent pegs, tools, and bits of woven basketry—Dillehay offered to First American scientists a sufficiency of evidence at MV-II to overturn the Clovis-first model.

There was not, however, an immediate and broad acknowledgment of the validity of Dillehay’s findings. First American science is a community endeavor, and MV-II not only challenged the reigning paradigm of Clovis-first, but also confronted the authority of the elite members of the First American scientific community who had for decades actively supported a Clovis-first theory. After two decades of publishing shorter topic-specific articles, in 1997 Dillehay produced the long-awaited second volume of his research titled Monte Verde, A Late Pleistocene Settlement in Chile: The Archaeological Context and Interpretation. Also in 1997, what Archaeology termed a “blue ribbon commission” of First American scientists conducted a site visit at Monte Verde. In October 1997 this group, which included strong proponents as well as long-standing skeptics of the Clovis-first model, jointly authored a report in American Antiquity. They concluded by consensus that “the MV-II occupation at the site is both archaeological and 12,500 [BP or 14,000 chronological] years old, as T. Dillehay has argued.”

Despite the legitimizing of MV-II by the consensus of the elite of First American science, the caustic exchanges that are frequently characteristic of the academic community continued. Junius Bird of the American Museum of Natural History, who Jace Weaver called the “dean” of Paleoindian archaeology “joined in dismissing the discovery and attacking Dillehay.” In an October 1999 article, Stuart Fiedel attacked Dillehay’s product as well as his professionalism. In a December 1999 response by Dillehay and nineteen scholarly co-authors titled “On Monte Verde: Fiedel’s Confusions and Misrepresentations,” Fiedel was accused of a “misunderstanding of and inexperience with” research design and analysis as well as “factual and interpretative errors and misrepresentations.” With the unstabilized power relationships involved in the search for the First Americans, and with no consensus theory to replace the discounted Clovis-first model as to the colonization of the New World, pettiness appeared
to rule. As Dillehay commented, “Instant-opinion-hurling has become some-
thing of a sport in the study of the first Americans—a sport that reveals our
arbitrary understanding of . . . the peopling of the Americas.”13

Balanced against the intramural squabbling among First American scientists,
however, is a commitment in some quarters to what is advertised as the object-
vivity of science. As Meltzer has pointed out, it only requires one site to disprove
Clovis-first. “Just as there is no compelling evidence to accept a pre-Clovis occu-
pation, there is no compelling evidence to deny one either.”14 This proscription
would not appear to capture how First American science has responded to chal-
lenges to Clovis-first. The difficulty, perhaps, is that while Clovis-first has been
overturned, Monte Verde has offered no alternative explanatory theory. In the
absence of a new explanatory paradigm, the attacks are frequently ad hominem—
since there is no message, attack the messenger. While any number of other loca-
tions could have been examined here, the Meadowcroft Rockshelter provides a
fertile example of the conflicts surrounding the challenges to Clovis-first.

Meadowcroft Rockshelter, Pennsylvania

On July 13, 1974, James Adovasio, then a professor of anthropology at the Uni-
versity of Pittsburgh, received a radiocarbon-dating report from the Smithso-
nian Institution documenting ages of 12,975 ± 650 BC and 13,170 ± 165 BC
from two different human-associated fire pits in Meadowcroft Rockshelter in
what is now western Pennsylvania.15 In a 1977 article early in the excavation
process, Adovasio and his coauthors announced that “seven classes of artifactual
remains” were discovered, including hundreds of items of “lithic, bone, wood,
shell, basketry, cordage, and ceramic materials.”16 According to Adovasio, Mead-
owcroft Rockshelter “stirred up not only scholars but also many of today’s Native
American peoples by casting doubt on the legitimacy of their claim to be the
descendants of the first Americans.”17

The Monte Verde and Meadowcroft Rockshelter excavations share many
common facets. First, excavations began in the 1970s at both locations as a
result of serendipitous discoveries by amateurs. Second, the excavations were
led by credentialed academics—Dillehay at Monte Verde and Adovasio at
Meadowcroft Rockshelter—who were, and still are, recognized members of
the archaeological community. Third, both excavations have been conducted in
a decades-long environment of intense skepticism by First American scien-
tists because of the challenges that each site presented to the Clovis-first the-
ory. Finally, either alone was capable of profoundly affecting what had been
well-confirmed theories with regard not only to the identity of the First Americans but also to the timing of their arrival.

Despite the congruence between these two projects, there has also been an area of substantive difference specifically related to the social context within which each excavation has been conducted. At Monte Verde, based on the material evidence that ultimately produced a successful challenge to the Clovis-first model, Dillehay’s efforts conformed to the general mores of the First American science community. During the period in which he conducted his excavation and prepared his findings, he typically refrained from the personal pettiness that the search for the First Americans has seemed to generate. After twenty-five years of research and publication, in 1997 he fully cooperated with the inspection of Monte Verde by the elite of the First American science community. In addition, when Stewart Fiedel attacked his final report, as described above, Dillehay responded not alone, but with a brief article supported by nineteen coauthors, including many preeminent First American scholars. By comparison, Adovasio has made clear his disdain for the manner in which the search for the First Americans has been dominated by a select few who, according to Adovasio, have not been evenhanded in evaluating evidence that challenged the reigning Clovis-first paradigm.

To date, Meadowcroft has not been granted Monte Verde’s status as having successfully challenged the Clovis-first model. A case might be made that this is at least partially due to Adovasio’s difficult relationship within his own scientific community. However, a substantive reason is that, unlike Dillehay, he has yet to publish a detailed report on the results of his excavation. In 2003 he published a book titled The First Americans: In Pursuit of Archaeology’s Greatest Mystery written for the popular press.18 Although it was a summary of his work at Meadowcroft Rockshelter and an entertaining survey of the First American search, he not only failed to provide an academically rigorous presentation, but he also continued his pejorative insinuations about the First American scientific community. It would be an interesting historical case study to determine the extent, if any, to which the social dynamics between Adovasio and the preeminent First American scholars played a significant role in either delaying the demise of the Clovis-first paradigm or in Meadowcroft Rockshelter not being initially acknowledged as a legitimate pre-Clovis site.

Regardless of his relationship with First American scientists, Adovasio has been effective in garnering support outside of the scientific community. Meadowcroft Rockshelter has been awarded recognition by both the state and federal governments as having significance as a First American excavation site.
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and National Park Service plaques greet visitors as they enter Meadowcroft Rockshelter as documenting the presence of humans in North America “nearly 16,000 years” and “at least 16,000 years” ago, respectively.19 These were statements by governmental organizations with recognized scholarly expertise—as well as political and funding power—declaring that not only must the Clovis-first model be incorrect, but also that Meadowcroft Rockshelter is to be accepted as having a special status in the search for the First Americans because of its extreme antiquity. Although the significance of simple historical markers and the motivations behind their being erected might be questioned, governmental power plays an influential role in how the search for the First Americans is conducted. Today, the Heinz History Center, which funds the project, states on its website that the Rockshelter “features 19,000-year-old evidence of the region’s earliest inhabitants.”20

Adovasio has also succeeded in making the excavation site itself easily accessible to the public at large, and also in preserving his archaeological methodology for inspection by both the public as well as First American scientists. The Rockshelter has been attractively covered against the elements, and the locations of the items of material evidence removed for analysis have been meticulously tagged. The modern American commoditization of First American heritage is captured at Meadowcroft Rockshelter where, for a fee, daily tours are available to the public accompanied by a knowledgeable, but amateur, guide.