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Clip from Episode 7: Origins of Complex Societies Transcript

Host: David Christian, historian, founder of Big History, and emeritus professor at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

Guest: Peter Bellwood, archaeologist and emeritus professor of archaeology in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University.

The Americas

David Christian: Peter, we're looking at mysteries. And for me, one of the more mysterious things is how humans got to the Americas. Are we getting closer to solving that mystery?

Peter Bellwood: Yes, very definitely. Partly through ancient DNA. I mean, the first Americans came from northeastern Asia, including Japan, and they probably went up the coastline across Bering Strait, and then down through Alaska and British Columbia, into the Americas. But, of course, the route to the Americas during the last ice age, between the peak of the ice, say around about 20,000 years ago, was blocked by ice that extended out over the sea down the western coast of Canada. And it wasn't until that ice began to retreat that humans could get past, because they could get access to the land. And probably also, of course, they had boats, we know that from the fact that they could reach offshore islands that were not land bridged. I know that there are suggestions that they perhaps got there before the last glaciation, that is before 25,000 years ago. The suggestions come from very small amounts of data that tend to have mostly been disproven by further analysis. My view is that if humans arrived in the Americas before the end of the ice age, before the ice retreated, then it's unlikely that they would have died out. Because there were so many naive animals that had not seen a human presence before, they would have been very easy to hunt. And in fact, we know from analyses of archaeological sites and skeletons that are younger than 16,000 years when the climate was becoming warmer, we know from those analyses that the population at 16,000 years ago was growing very quickly, because there was so much to hunt. The human population.

David Christian: The human population, yeah.

Peter Bellwood: And it took them less than a thousand years to get from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. So for me the settlement of the Americas came from northeastern Asia, around Bering Strait- that was dry land during the last glaciation- and then down through the western Americas, and beyond the ice into what is now the USA, and through the Isthmus of Panama, of course that was a major bottleneck for them, into South America.

David Christian: So, what's the earliest date that that you find plausible for humans?

Peter Bellwood: It's about 15,500 years at the moment.

David Christian: 15,000, Yeah.

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Peter Bellwood: Yeah, but it varies slightly, and it's from archeological dating.