

Truth

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What we archaeologists would like to know is what *actually, truly* happened in antiquity.

One widely-shared opinion about the Truth is that it is “inherently subjective.” What we’re really talking about here is the *perception* of Truth that is contingent upon such factors as an individual’s/group’s enculturation and education. This notion is reminiscent of senior archaeologist David Hurst Thomas’s (2000) post-modernist description of Truth as it applies to archaeology: “all truth is relative, and all perceptions are mediated by one’s cultural and sexual identity.”

There’s another perfectly valid understanding of Truth, namely, that in the real world, it’s *absolute*. In other words, Truth has existed and continues to exist regardless of whether human beings -- conditioned by their enculturation, education, and gender -- have a perception of it or not. Is it not true that things were happening during the pre-human Age of Dinosaurs before people even existed?

As another example, let’s assume that people were living in the Red River valley X thousands of years ago. Numerous events well and truly took place while those folks went about their daily routines. But as it turned out, descriptions of those happenings weren’t passed down as part of oral tradition, nor has any artifactual evidence of them ever been discovered by archaeologists.

But just because, due to circumstances, we don’t happen to have material indicators of long-ago events doesn’t mean that they never took place -- they well and truly *did* take place and were absolutely true-to-life X thousands of years ago. We today just don’t happen to have any access to knowledge about them, nor indeed any idea that they even occurred to begin with.

Truth and the First People

There are at least two extant narratives available that describe the first-ever arrival of people in North America: (1) the traditional-Indigenous¹, and (2) the archaeological-scientific. The Indigenous narrative is regarded as sacred by Ojibwa people and is not subject to scientific scrutiny or testing. It involves a spontaneous supernatural/spiritual event that has nothing whatsoever in common with scientific (archaeological) thought processes or the story-line arising therefrom.

Ojibwa Elder Edward Benton-Banai summarises the traditional teaching as follows: “Gitche Manitou took four parts of Mother Earth and blew into them using a Sacred Shell. From the union of the Four Sacred Elements and his breath, man was created. The Gitche Manitou then lowered man to the Earth.” Saulteaux Elder Danny Musqua elaborates by noting that his people “are

¹ In this essay, “Indigenous” and “Native” are used as synonyms.

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beings who came to Earth from the Stars to be men.” This story is believed to be indisputably correct by the traditionalists.

By contrast, archaeologists hypothesize that the first humans to inhabit North America in-migrated dry-shod via a land bridge from northeastern Asia sometime during the last Ice Age. Because this story is a scientific hypothesis, it cannot be considered the unvarnished Truth, nor can it be definitively proven with the kind of data (“proxy indicators”) available to us. It may actually hit the nail right on the head, but we cannot know that for sure. Although archaeological theorists may regard it as a reasonable approximation of what *may* have happened long ago given the available data, they can’t have the degree of confidence in the veracity of their story that the Native people have in theirs.

So What Is Truth?

The two stories I have alluded to above are strikingly different. One originated during dream or vision experiences, the other arose from scientific observation and hypothesizing. Assuming for the sake of discussion that one of them is true, it logically follows that the other one has to be false -- they both can’t be truthful descriptions of past reality. Since the Indigenous account is accepted as absolutely true by the Natives, the scientific story has to be, on logical grounds alone, untrue and untenable to them.

If, in due course, the scientific version is disproved through further research, it can/will be replaced in whole or in part by a new and better hypothesis – but its replacement will nonetheless be yet another hypothesis. If it is not disproven, but rather is actually *supported* by new data, it will remain “on the books” unless or until it is disproved by further testing.

And to the resolute, doubting sceptic, neither story may ever be considered true.

In any event, at some time or other before European contact, the Western Hemisphere became populated for the first time. And that’s a pretty good bet; Natives were already in residence on this side of the globe (obviously) when first witnessed and documented by the earliest literate Europeans to appear on the scene. But at some point, Indigenous people had to have arrived in, say, northern Manitoba where no one had lived before. To my mind, that’s the unavoidable Truth; and if my thinking as expressed in that last sentence is awry and deemed “just a hypothesis,” then I beg to suggest that it’s a pretty good one.

But the question remains: how, when, and under what circumstances did those first arrivals arrive? The answer(s) will forever fall within the realm of either untestable Indigenous tradition, or in the form of testable, but never ultimately provable, archaeological theory. For those who abide by a secular, scientific world view, seeking credible results is still very much a work in progress and indeed will so remain as long as there are relevant, test-worthy cultural heritage data to bring to bear on the subject.

And that’s the Truth.

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