

The Peopling of Western South America: Evidence from Andean and Pacific Corridors

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North-south-oriented ecological zones must have facilitated the extraordinarily rapid peopling of the western hemisphere. In the past two decades, early archaeological discoveries in South America have steadily accumulated along the Pacific coast and in the Andes, the planet's longest mountain system. While it is tempting to infer a pattern of initial settlement along the coast and subsequent movement into higher-elevation lands, chronological and behavioral evidence reveals a more complex story. Early sites suggest a quasi-synchronous use of diverse resources in multiple ecozones, with mobility or social networks spanning topographically complex landscapes. Before the end of the Pleistocene, early South Americans had mastered extreme environments, including hyper-arid deserts and high-altitude plateaus. At present, resolving the exact timing and routes of initial peopling of western South America remains elusive, though the integration of archaeology and paleogenetics is bringing us closer than ever to the answers.