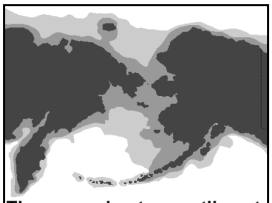
Name: _____

Date: _____

The First Americans

Over thousands of years, humans gradually migrated from Africa to other parts of the world, including Europe and Asia. Long before farming, writing, or even the wheel were invented, the first hunters arrived at a place we now call Beringia. Beringia was a strip of land that once connected Asia to Alaska in North America.


The approximate coastline at various parts of the Ice Ages

Evidence suggests that the first humans crossed this "land bridge" at least 20,000 years ago, and possibly even earlier. These early hunters used the land bridge to migrate into new regions during a time when the Earth's climate was much colder.

Today, the Bering Strait separates Asia and North America by more than fifty miles of ocean. During the Ice Age, however, these continents were connected by a massive strip of land stretching over 1,000 miles wide.

Beringia existed during the last Ice Age, a period when the Earth's climate was much colder than it is today. During an ice age, precipitation that fell on land froze into massive sheets of ice called glaciers. As glaciers grew, they trapped large amounts of ocean water, causing sea levels to drop by about three hundred feet.

Woolly mammoth

Today, scientists worry that human activity is making the Earth warmer, which is causing polar ice caps to melt. This melting could raise sea levels and flood coastal areas.

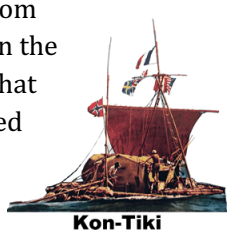
Although the climate of Beringia was extremely cold, it seems to have been warmer than nearby regions are today. Beringia remained free of ice because the area received very little snowfall. Instead, it was a grassland scattered with small trees, which provided food for large animals like bears, bison, and the now-extinct woolly mammoths and mastodons.

These animals attracted human hunters to Beringia. The first hunters likely crossed into North America in small groups, starting about 40,000 years ago.

As the climate warmed, glaciers began to melt. Rising sea levels gradually submerged the land bridge about 15,000 years ago—at least 9,000 years before civilizations emerged in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. Today, more than 50 miles of ocean separate Asia from North America.

Some scientists believe the first Americans could have arrived by sea, following the coastline of the Pacific Rim of northeastern Asia and Beringia to as far south as South America. They suggest the waters of most of the route contained forests of edible seaweeds called kelp. In addition to being nutritious, kelp supports fish and other sea life that could have sustained early explorers. It is difficult to prove the "kelp highway" theory correct because rising sea levels would have submerged any evidence left behind by the explorers. Still, it might help to explain ancient skeletal remains found primarily in South America that do not fit the profile of the people who passed through Beringia.

Another theory suggests that some migration to the Americas might have come from the Polynesian Islands in the Pacific, possibly by sailors who were blown off course. To explore this idea, adventurer Thor Heyerdahl built a raft in 1947 using materials and techniques believed to be available to ancient peoples. Heyerdahl and his crew of six sailed 3,770 miles on the *Kon-Tiki*, a raft named after an Inca god. Their 97-day journey took them from Peru to Puka Puka, a small island in the South Pacific. This demonstrated that ancient sailors could have navigated the vast Pacific Ocean.


Kon-Tiki

The Inuit, traditionally called Eskimos by outsiders, reached America from Asia long after the land bridge had disappeared. They crossed the icy waters of the Bering Strait in boats between 6000 and 2000 BCE. DNA evidence shows that the Inuit are genetically distinct from other indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Our understanding of the Bering Land Bridge and early human migration is always changing. New discoveries suggest that people may have used the land bridge earlier and during different times than scientists once believed. These findings remind us that history is like a puzzle, and each new piece helps us see a clearer picture of how humans adapted to their world and found new places to live.

Name: _____

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Fill in the Blanks

About ___,000 years ago, the first humans crossed a land bridge from A__ia to the A__e__i__as. They were likely h__n__e__s searching for large mammals, such as b__s__n and m__s__o__o__s. The l___d b__i__ge between Asia and the Americas d__i__a__p__a__e__d about ___,000 years ago as g__a__ie__s melted and sea l__v__ls rose by around _____ feet. This happened thousands of years before c__v__l__z__t__on emerged in M__s__p__t__m__a, Egypt, and C__i__a.

Another theory suggests that some people reached the Americas by following a "kelp h__g__w__y." Kelp is a nutritious s__a__e__d that could have fed explorers and provided food for fish and other marine animals. However, proving this theory is difficult because rising sea levels would have s__b__e__g__d any evidence beneath the o__e__n.

The Inuit crossed the B__r__ng S__r__it from Asia long after the d__i__a__p__a__e__e of the land bridge. This occurred thousands of years before the arrival of the E__r__p__a__s. Additionally, evidence suggests that m__r__n__e__s may have traveled to the Americas from the P__l__n__s__an Islands in the P__c__f__c. Thor H__y__r__a__l demonstrated that ancient ships could make the journey by sailing a recreated r__a__t. However, we still do not know exactly why or when Pacific sailors might have reached the Americas.

Answer in complete sentences

*1. Explain why there are no written records from Beringia.

*2. What caused the sea level to rise at the end of the Ice Age, and how did this impact the land bridge between Asia and the Americas?"

*3. What the "kelp highway theory and why is it difficult to prove?"

4. What does Thor Heyerdahl's expedition tell us about ancient sailors??

*This is a higher order-learning question. Any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.