

# Early People in the Central American Land Bridge

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People have been living in Central and South America for many, many years now. How did ancient people live in this area thousands of years ago? Archaeologists studying the area of the Central American land bridge have been working to answer this question.

What is the Central American land bridge? It is the land that is now the countries of Costa Rica and Panama. Like a modern bridge over a river, this land bridge was used by animals and people to travel back and forth. This Central American land bridge connects the northern land that is now Nicaragua, Mexico, and so on to the southern land that is now Colombia, Brazil, and other South American countries.

People who were already living in North America traveled down and across this land bridge. Scientists think they traveled there around 11,000 BC. They probably were following large animals that they hunted and ate. These people would have traveled on foot, following the herds of animals. They had no permanent houses. They would pack up their things and bring them along as they hunted. Their homes were like tents and were very easy to take down and put up. Archaeologists can tell these people traveled via the land bridge because they have found similar arrowheads and tools in both the land bridge and in areas further north and south.

These tools are the main record of people's movement and settlement. Ancient people at this time made their tools, by hand, out of stone. Later, they used obsidian, which is a dark glass formed in volcanoes. They made small hand axes, arrowheads and spearheads by knapping. Knapping is when you hit one stone with another to break off little pieces. Slowly, you can shape the stone however you want. When certain stones (like obsidian or flint) break, they leave very sharp edges, which can be used to cut.

Archaeologists don't find evidence of these tools very often. When so much time passes, natural things like rain, dirt and trees destroy and bury them. Scientists also think the oceans were lower back then. This means there once was more land that is now underwater. Probably there is more evidence of people living in the area under the sea off the coasts of Costa Rica and Panama.

It is hard to tell when people stopped traveling along the land bridge and began living there. One clue is when people began farming. On the land bridge, this was around 9,000 and 7,000 BC. In Panama, scientists have found evidence that people were growing bottle gourds, squash, and a few other things around that time. These would be in small gardens, not big farms. People weren't eating just the plants they grew at this time. They would gather fruits and nuts from the forest, hunt deer, fish for crabs and fish, and eat from their gardens.

Archaeologists now think that some forests were actually farms too, which makes it harder to determine when hunting and gathering stopped. Places we once thought were wild were perhaps maintained by ancient people. This would be like an apple orchard. It looks like a forest, but has actually been planted and taken care of by humans—you wouldn't know it was a farm for apples unless you looked more closely. The same thing probably happened on the Central American land bridge and elsewhere.

Slowly, people built more permanent houses on the land bridge. The first small village archaeologists have found is in Costa Rica, in a place called Tronadora Vieja. There are round pole and thatch houses, which are simple huts made out of long tree branches covered in leaves and grasses. These houses date to 3,800 BC and were destroyed when a nearby volcano exploded and buried them in ash. Scientists also found the earliest maize kernels on the land bridge, as well as metates. Metates are small stone tables used to grind maize into powder. This

was used in cooking and baking, like flour. Nearby at Laguna Zoncho, archaeologists found a bigger village, with more houses and farms. People started living here after Tronadora Vieja, around 3,240 BC.

People were still hunting and gathering at this time, though. Why did some people settle down to farm and some people continue moving around? There are lots of ideas, but on the land bridge, archaeologists think it had to do with the amount of rain and water in the area. Places that had less water made it harder for the forests to remain full of fruits and animals. So in these dry areas, people started to farm more, build houses and stay put. So some groups kept hunting and gathering while others were starting to build and farm.

Archaeologists are still studying this part of the world. Hopefully in the years to come, we can find out more about how ancient people lived on the Central American land bridge.