

Ancient skeleton in Mexico sheds light on Kennewick Man

By The Seattle Times, adapted by Newsela staff

06.05.14

Grade Level **6**

Word Count **727**

- ✓ **Anchor 3: People, Events, & Ideas—Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.**
- ✓ **Anchor 5: Text Structure—Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of text relate to each other and the whole.**

SEATTLE— Jim Chatters tried to keep his head down. He didn't want another battle over a skeleton. The first one was bad enough.

Chatters was the first scientist to study Kennewick Man. The Kennewick Man is a skeleton dug up in eastern Washington almost 20 years ago.

The old bones caught Chatters in a bitter fight. He said that the mystery man didn't look anything like modern Native Americans. But this made Northwest Tribes very angry. They consider the remains to be those of an ancestor. They sued for the right to rebury who they call the Ancient One.

Now Chatters is back in the spotlight. The archaeologist has found another set of ancient bones. But this time, he has DNA evidence. It helps resolve an old puzzle about the first Americans. The findings also suggest that the tribes may have been right about Kennewick Man all along.

The new discovery comes from a beautiful underwater cave in Mexico. Divers there found one of the oldest, most complete human skeletons in the Americas.

A Skeleton Named Naia

Chatters wrote a paper about the skeleton with a team of experts. They said the human remains are those of a teenage girl. She apparently took a fatal fall into the limestone cave between 12,000 and 13,000 years ago. Slowly rising seas flooded the cave

The divers who found the skeleton named her "Naia." The name is Greek for water fairy.

The young woman's skeleton contained many of the things that led Chatters to question Kennewick Man's relationship to modern Native Americans. "They look a lot alike," he said.

Both skeletons have narrow brain cases, short faces and large foreheads. These are also found in people from the Pacific Rim, Australia and Africa.

Native Americans more closely resemble people from northeast Asia. That fits with genetic studies. Those studies documented their link to Siberians who are believed to have moved east into the land mass that once linked Asia and Alaska. From there, scientists think they expanded into the Americas beginning about 17,000 years ago.

America's oldest inhabitants are called Paleo-Americans. Their bones have a surprising appearance. To explain why, Chatters and other scientists made a guess that the Americas were colonized twice. First came people from Southeast Asia or even Europe, then migrants from Siberia.

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New DNA Evidence

But DNA extracted from Naia’s teeth changed his mind.

Genetic tests show a clear link between the girl in the cave and modern Native Americans.

The study is the first to make that link. It proves there is at least one Paleo-American — Naia — who is descended from the same ancestors as modern Native Americans, said anthropologist Brian Kemp.

That means the physical differences must be due to the earliest humans to arrive in the Americas changing the way they looked. They did this to adapt to their new environments.

“For nearly 20 years, since Kennewick Man turned up, I’ve been wondering why these early people looked so different from Native Americans,” Chatters said. “This is one step toward resolving that issue.”

The study supports the traditional view. Naia will help scientists argue that most of the people who colonized the Americas had their roots in northeast Asia, said anthropologist James Dixon.

“It’s a very sound piece of work, and it makes a lot of sense,” he said.

But that doesn’t rule out that there could have been colonists from other parts of the world, he added.

The Question Of Kennewick Man

DNA has only been extracted from four sets of human remains in the Western Hemisphere older than 10,000 years. Naia’s skeleton, which includes all the major bones and a full set of teeth, is the most complete.

Naia’s bones were lying on a small ledge in the underwater cave. The girl probably fell through a hole into the chamber. At that time it was above sea level, Chatters said. Her pelvis was broken. “I think she died almost instantly, if not instantly,” he said.

Naia’s tooth was shipped to Kemp’s lab at WSU to get the DNA. He didn’t think it was going to work because the it was in such bad shape — but he was wrong.

The new study didn’t deal directly with Kennewick Man. But the findings raise questions about the fate of the skeleton that remains locked away at the University of Washington’s Burke Museum.

Article of the Week (AOW):

- 1. Read**
- 2. Annotate (use cheat sheet)**
- 3. Write summary (use summary frame)**
- 4. Turn in AOW with annotations and summary on Friday**