

ARCHAEOLOGY

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Early Dates, Real Tools?

by Eric A. Powell

November 17, 2004

An archaeologist claims artifacts at South Carolina's Topper Site are at least 50,000 years old.



Albert Goodyear, excavator of South Carolina's Topper Site, examines possible artifacts from deep, pre-Clovis layers at the site. (Daryl P. Miller (USC)) [\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#)

Could humans really have been in North America 50,000 years ago? A dramatic claim today from University of South Carolina archaeologist Albert Goodyear has made that the question of the hour, as he announced extremely early radiocarbon dates from Topper, a Paleoindian site on the banks of South Carolina's Savannah River.

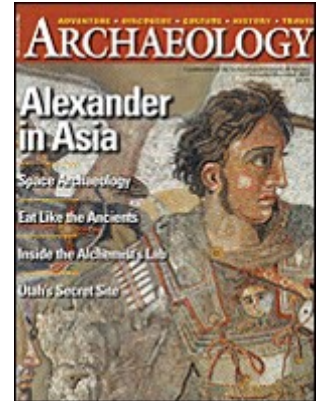
In 1998, Goodyear put the Topper site on the map with his discovery of artifacts that seemed to predate the early Clovis culture that flourished in North America beginning some 13,000 years ago, long the conventional date for the first human colonization of the New World. Topper joined the growing ranks of other, sometimes controversial, sites that seemed to show some evidence of pre-Clovis peoples, including Monte Verde in Chile, Virginia's Saltville and Cactus Hill sites, and Meadowcroft in Pennsylvania.

Those first pre-Clovis dates from Topper showed a human presence at the site around 16,000 years ago. Since 1998, Goodyear has continued to dig at the site, going some 13 feet deeper than layers containing evidence for Clovis peoples.

Last May, University of Wisconsin geoarchaeologist Tom Stafford collected three samples of carbonized plant remains from a deep layer at the site where, according to Goodyear, stone tools and flakes of human manufacture have also been found. Two of those samples were dated to around 50,000 years ago (the third dated to the present day, and was discarded). At least three other dates at the site taken previously also put the soils in the lower layers at older than 50,000 years ago. Occupation of North America by this date would dramatically alter not just notions of how and when the New World was colonized, but how humans spread throughout the world after they first left Africa between 60,000 and 80,000 years ago.

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Samples from this layer of charcoal at Topper have been dated to 50,000 years or earlier. (Daryl P. Miller (USC)) [\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#)

Archaeologists unaffiliated with the Topper project contacted by ARCHAEOLOGY today were cautious in their assessment of the announcement. David Anderson, an archaeologist and Clovis expert at the University of Tennessee, was one of several who said they were awaiting formal publication of the results before critically examining the new radiocarbon dates.

"Extraordinary claims require extraordinary standards of evidence," said Anderson. "A human presence upwards of 40,000 years old in the New World has been proposed by many previous investigators, but none of these early sites have survived careful professional examination." Other sites, such as Brazil's Pedra Furada, or California's Calico Hills, have been championed in the past as evidence of human occupation of the New World before 50,000 years ago, but have not withstood subsequent scrutiny.

"The early dates from Topper will require verification through careful and comprehensive analysis," says Anderson. "They'll also need to be evaluated through professional reporting in scientific journals." Specialists will be waiting for publication of the Topper data to take a close look at the stone tools and flakes found by Goodyear to determine whether they are indeed of human manufacture, or the result of natural processes. At least one archaeologist who has seen the objects, Michael Collins of the University of Texas, has already made his mind up. "I don't believe those are artifacts," he says. "They're geofacts--not man-made." The context of the finds and the geology at the site will also likely come in for close scrutiny.

Next October, a major conference on Clovis in the Southeast will be held at the University of South Carolina. On the schedule is a site visit to Topper. It's sure to be a hot ticket.

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