



Ancient Encounters: Kennewick Man and the First Americans

James C. Chatters

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In 1996, two young men found a skeleton along the Columbia River near Kennewick, Washington. "Kennewick Man," as he became known, was brought to forensic anthropologist Jim Chatters, who was astonished when tests revealed the skeleton to be nearly 9,500 years old, one of the oldest intact skeletons ever found in North America -- and one that bore little resemblance to modern Native Americans. So who was Kennewick Man, and where did he come from?

Chatters set off to find out, but his work on the skeleton was soon halted when local Native American groups claimed the skeleton as an ancestor under federal law, and demanded the right to reburial of the remains. Agreeing with their claim, the U.S. government seized Kennewick Man and put him into federal storage, where he remains to this day. So began a harsh, politically charged conflict, with scientists, Native Americans, and government agencies fighting to decide the destiny of Kennewick Man.

While this battle raged, Chatters began a quest to understand the lives and origins of Kennewick Man and his contemporaries, a quest that took him across three continents and far back in time to learn the identity of these true First Americans. Ultimately, it led him to a sense of what it really means to be human.

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