The Cambridge World Prehistory

Volume 2: East Asia and the Americas

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The Geographic Setting

Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela together cover all of northwestern South America – a region broadly comprising over 2,300,000 km². The whole territory is located in the torrid tropical zone, most of it north of the equator. The ample morphological and ecological diversity determines the existence of many different natural regions, the main ones being:

1. The Pacific coast, a dry, hilly stretch of lowland in south and central Ecuador and, farther north, a mountainous humid tropical forest along Colombia up to the Panama Isthmus.
2. The Andes, a complex region formed by several *cordilleras* cut by longitudinal and transverse river valleys that form climatic micro-niches. The Andes, running roughly south-north, divide in Colombia into three different *cordilleras*, one of which extends into Venezuela, forming the Sierra de Merida.
3. The Caribbean coast, starting from the west, a dense tropical forest that gradually turns into savannah up to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada maritime massif, and then a long stretch of dry plains forming several peninsulas and encircling the Maracaibo Lake. Farther east into Venezuela there is the Central Cordillera that gradually dies out to give way to the large delta of the Orinoco River.
4. The Llanos, a large system of lowland savannahs intersected by large rivers running into the Orinoco Basin.
5. The Amazon and Guyana tropical forests, occupying eastern Ecuador, southeast Colombia and south Venezuela.

Within each of these main regions there are several different zones: canyons, plateaus, deltas, marshlands, deserts and valleys, each with its specific type of vegetation and fauna. Altitudes range from sea level to over 6200 m above sea level (asl). Five different altitudinal zones can be differentiated:

1. The warm belt, between sea level and 1000 m asl
2. The temperate belt, between 1000 and 2000 m asl
3. The cold belt, between 2000 and 3000 m asl
4. The *paramos*, at over 3000 m asl
5. Glaciers and snowfields, starting at 4800 m asl

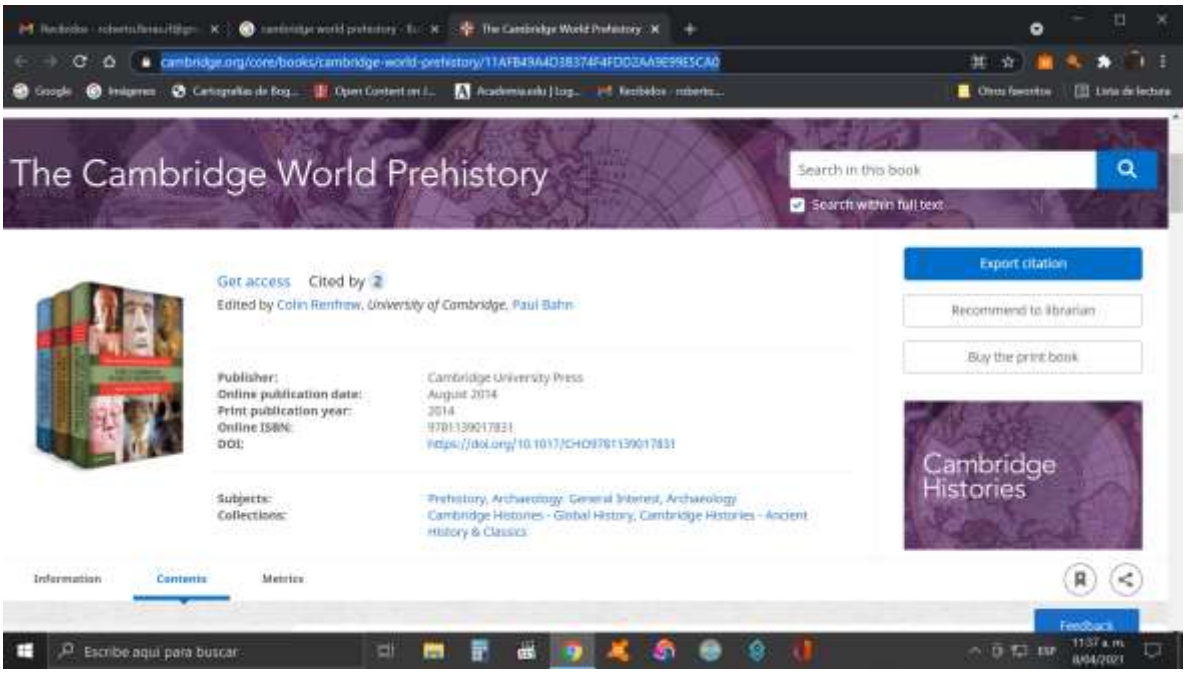
Early peoples found an enormous variety of climates, vegetation and animals. Within short walking distances it was also possible to gain access to different micro-niches and, thus, to alternative animal and plant food resources.

Early Hunters and Gatherers (17,000 to 1000 BCE)

During the past two decades there has been an increasing interest in the possible routes for the peopling of America; many interesting ideas and data concerning alternative land routes and transoceanic migrations have been proposed. However, the Beringia route is the most accepted hypothesis, and it serves as a conceptual framework for the studies of early settlers in South America. If hunters and gatherers arrived in South America, coming from North and Central America via the Panama Isthmus, then the first land they found was our region. This, in turn, should determine that the earliest dates for human habitation in South America should be found in Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela. So far, this plausible idea has not been proved by archaeological evidence, a fact that introduces a certain confusion.

Climatic changes had a huge impact on the life of early settlers; even though there is no general agreement as to the date of arrival of humans in South America, researchers generally stress the fact that their initial history was marked by the variable climate of the Late Pleistocene. During the period between 20,000 and 8500 BCE there was an alternation of extremely cold and relatively warm periods. For the cold periods, temperature averages might have descended as far as 6 to 8° C below present-day levels (Correal & Van der Hammen 1977).

This caused huge shifts in the vegetation belts; glaciers and snowfields would have started at about 3000 m asl and the other belts below them (*paramos*, cold and temperate zones) also moved down. Tropical forests in the lowlands disappeared to give way to open grasslands and savannahs. Changes were not limited to temperature; rainfall and general humidity also varied. As a general rule cold periods were drier, and thus desert and semidesert zones expanded greatly (Correal & Van der Hammen 1977). Vegetation zones, as we know them today, did not exist in the same places and altitudes, nor did animal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