

Description

Kennewick Man, also known as the "Ancient One," is an 8,500-year-old skeleton discovered in 1996 along the Columbia River in Washington State. His discovery immediately launched a 20-year legal battle between scientists seeking to study him and Native American tribes seeking his return for reburial. Initial physical assessments described morphological traits as "Caucasoid" or Polynesian-like, leading some researchers to argue that he fell outside the scope of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) — placing an ancient individual at the center of a complex legal and cultural dispute.

In 2015, genomic analysis settled the dispute definitively. The DNA confirmed that Kennewick Man is more closely related to contemporary Native Americans than to any other population in the world, with a particularly strong genetic affinity to the Colville Tribe, one of the groups that had sought his reburial all along. The study also demonstrated a broader scientific point: cranio-morphological traits are often unreliable indicators of ancestry, particularly over thousands of years of genetic drift and environmental adaptation.



Kennewick Man ("Ancient One") skull — one of the oldest well-preserved human skeletons in North America.

His genetic markers — paternal haplogroup Q-M3 and mitochondrial lineage X2a — are established indigenous American markers. Following the biological findings, the federal government officially recognized Kennewick Man as Native American under NAGPRA. In 2017, his remains were returned to a coalition of 5 tribes for private reburial. His case stands as a landmark in the relationship between genomic research, legal identity, and Indigenous rights — demonstrating that skeletal morphology alone is insufficient for determining population ancestry, and that genetic analysis can resolve questions that centuries of physical examination could not.

Modern population	Distance
Athabaskan North B	5.910
Athabaskan North C	6.087
Pima (Mexico)	6.957
Chipewyan	7.739
Athabaskan North A	7.840
Mixtec (Mexico)	8.578
Zapotec (Mexico)	8.828
Nahua (Mexico)	9.182
Huichol (Mexico)	9.671
Maya (Mexico)	10.006

Source

Date: 789–546 BCE

Y-DNA: Q-BZ50014

mtDNA: X2a

Location: USA

Research: The ancestry and affiliations of Kennewick Man

Sample(s): kennewick.SG