

Evidence for an extraterrestrial impact 12,900 years ago that contributed to the megafaunal extinctions and the Younger Dryas cooling

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A carbon-rich black layer, dating to ≈ 12.9 ka, has been previously identified at ≈ 50 Clovis-age sites across North America and appears contemporaneous with the abrupt onset of Younger Dryas (YD) cooling. The *in situ* bones of extinct Pleistocene megafauna, along with Clovis tool assemblages, occur below this black layer but not within or above it. Causes for the extinctions, YD cooling, and termination of Clovis culture have long been controversial. In this paper, we provide evidence for an extraterrestrial (ET) impact event at ≈ 12.9 ka, which we hypothesize caused abrupt environmental changes that contributed to YD cooling, major ecological reorganization, broad-scale extinctions, and rapid human behavioral shifts at the end of the Clovis Period. Clovis-age sites in North America are overlain by a thin, discrete layer with varying peak abundances of (i) magnetic grains with iridium, (ii) magnetic microspherules, (iii) charcoal, (iv) soot, (v) carbon spherules, (vi) glass-like carbon containing nanodiamonds, and (vii) fullerenes with ET helium, all of which are evidence for an ET impact and associated biomass burning at ≈ 12.9 ka. This layer also extends throughout at least 15 Carolina Bays, which are unique, elliptical depressions, oriented to the northwest across the Atlantic Coastal Plain. We propose that one or more large, low-density ET objects exploded over northern North America, partially destabilizing the Laurentide Ice Sheet and triggering YD cooling. The shock wave, thermal pulse, and event-related environmental effects (e.g., extensive biomass burning and food limitations) contributed to end-Pleistocene megafaunal extinctions and adaptive shifts among PaleoAmericans in North America.

comet | iridium | micrometeorites | nanodiamonds | spherules

A carbon-rich black layer, dating to ≈ 12.9 ka (12,900 calendar years B.P.) (1), has been identified by C. V. Haynes, Jr. (2), at >50 sites across North America as black mats, carbonaceous silts, or dark organic clays [supporting information (SI) Fig. 5]. The age of the base of this black layer coincides with the abrupt onset of Younger Dryas (YD) cooling, after which there is no evidence for either *in situ* extinct megafaunal remains or Clovis artifacts. Increasing evidence suggests that the extinction of many mammalian and avian taxa occurred abruptly and perhaps catastrophically at the onset of the YD, and this extinction was pronounced in North America where at least 35 mammal genera disappeared (3), including mammoths, mastodons, ground sloths, horses, and camels, along with birds and smaller mammals. At Murray Springs, AZ, a well known Clovis site, mammoth bones and Clovis-age stone tools lie directly beneath the black layer where, as described by Haynes (4): “[T]he sudden extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna would

be dramatically revealed by explaining that all were gone an instant before the black mat was deposited.”

The cause of this extinction has long been debated and remains highly controversial due, in part, to the limitations of available data but also because the two major competing hypotheses, human overkill (5) and abrupt cooling (6), fall short of explaining many observations. For example, Grayson and Meltzer (7) summarized serious problems with the overkill hypothesis, such as the absence of kill sites for 33 genera of extinct mammals, including camels and sloths. In addition, although abrupt cooling episodes of magnitudes similar to the YD occurred often during the past 80 ka, none are known to be associated with major extinctions. The possibility of pandemic disease also has been suggested (8), but there is no evidence for that in the Pleistocene record. Thus, the end-Pleistocene extinction event is unique within the late Quaternary and is unlikely to have resulted only from climatic cooling and human overkill. The extinctions were too broad and ecologically deep to support those hypotheses.

Extraterrestrial (ET) catastrophes also have been proposed. For example, LaViolette (9) suggested that a large explosion in our galactic core led to the extinctions. Brakenridge (10) postulated that a supernova killed the megafauna and caused the worldwide deposition of the black layer. Clube and Napier (11) proposed multiple encounters with remnants of the mega comet progenitor of the Taurid meteor stream and Comet Encke. Although ET events have long been proposed as a trigger for mass extinctions, such as at the K/T (≈ 65 Ma) (12) and P/T (≈ 250 Ma) (13), there has been no compelling evidence linking impacts to the late Pleistocene megafaunal extinctions and YD cooling.

In the 1990s, W. Topping (14) discovered magnetic microspherules and other possible ET evidence in sediment at the Gainey

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Abbreviations: YD, Younger Dryas; YDB, YD boundary; ET, extraterrestrial.

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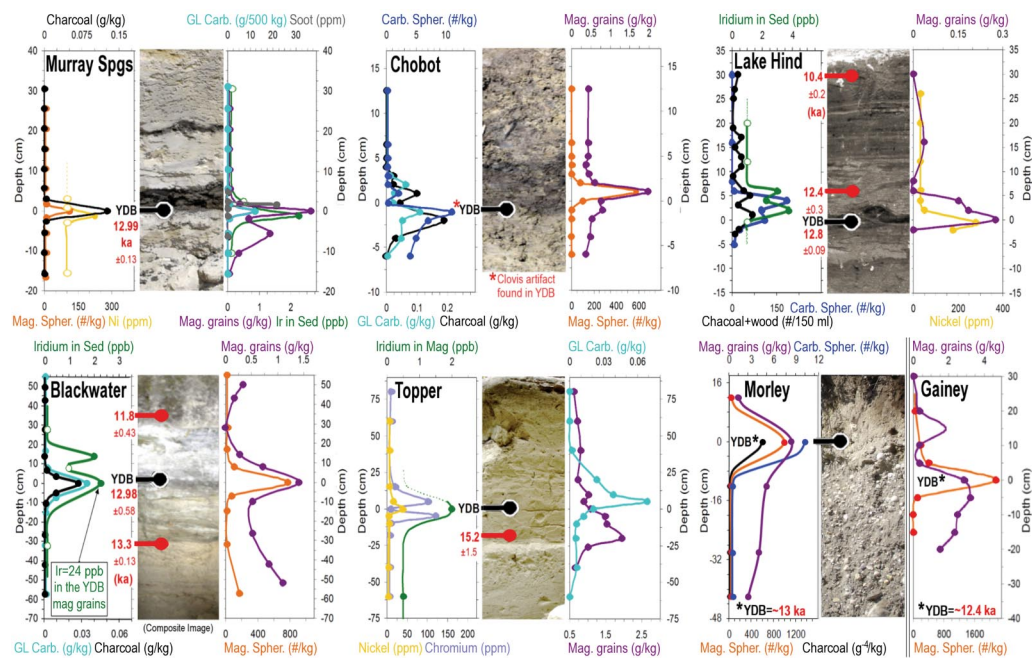


Fig. 1. Sediment profiles for seven sites. Concentrations are shown for magnetic grains, microspherules, charcoal, soot, glass-like carbon, carbon spherules, Ir, Cr, and Ni, which peak mostly in a narrow stratigraphic section spanning only a few hundred years. Ir open circles indicate values below detection, typically <0.5 – 1 ppb. Ir uncertainties are $\pm 10\%$ at 117 ppb and $\pm 90\%$ at 2 ppb. Cr and Ni are less than $\pm 20\%$. Keys are color-coded to match the respective curves, and graph points correspond to sampling locations on the photograph. The depth is in centimeters above or below the YDB. The Blackwater Draw image is a composite of three photos. There is no photo for Gainey. A profile for the Belgian site at Lommel is shown in [SI Fig. 8](#). The locations of all sites that were sampled are shown in [SI Fig. 9](#).

Iridium and nickel. YDB sediments, but not the magnetic fractions, are modestly enriched in Ni. For Ir, YDB magnetic grains from seven of 12 sites exhibited a range of 2 ($\pm 90\%$) to 117 ($\pm 10\%$) ppb, and of those seven sites, three also had detectable Ir in the YDB bulk sediment. The highest Ir value is $\approx 25\%$ that of typical chondrites (455 – 480 ppb) (24) and $>5,000\times$ crustal abundance (0.02 ppb) (25). In 17 measurements at these sites, no Ir was detected in magnetic grains above or below the YDB. For bulk sediment, YDB Ir abundances at five of 12 sites range from 0.5 ($\pm 90\%$) to 3.75 ($\pm 50\%$) ppb. However, the bulk sediment results are near the detection limits of neutron activation analysis, and further testing is required.

Upon retesting aliquots of high-Ir samples, five from nine sites were confirmed, but Ir abundances were below detection in four retests. Sample sizes were small, and variations are likely due to the “nugget effect.” In summary, no detectable Ir was found above or below the YDB and black mat at seven sites in 62 samples of both bulk sediments and magnetic grains. Elevated Ir concentrations were found only in the YDB and black mat at nine of 14 widely separated sites (see [Fig. 1](#), [Table 1](#), and [SI Table 3](#)).

Charcoal. Charcoal displays peaks in the YDB at eight of nine Clovis-age sites and is present in 15 of 15 Bays, reaching peaks in four Bays with paleosols. The charcoal was identified optically and by SEM based on its distinctive cellular structure and was found in concentrations ranging from 0.06 to 11.63 g/kg.

Soot and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). Observed at the K/T boundary (26) and distinguished by its aciniform morphology (see [SI Fig. 10](#)) (27), soot forms only in flames through direct condensation of carbon from the gas phase. Soot was identified by using SEM imaging and quantified by particle size analysis and weighing.

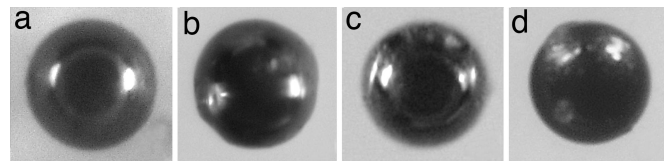


Fig. 2. High-titanomagnetite microspherules from Blackwater Draw, NM ($120\ \mu\text{m}$) (a); Chobot, AB, Canada ($150\ \mu\text{m}$) (b); Gainey, MI ($90\ \mu\text{m}$) (c), and Howard Bay, NC ($100\ \mu\text{m}$) (d).

Of eight sites examined, soot was observed only in the YDB at two sites, Murray Springs (21 ± 7 ppm) and Bay T13 ($1,969 \pm 167$ ppm), where preservation possibly resulted from anoxic burial conditions. In addition, the combustion of wood at very high temperatures produces diagnostic PAHs. High-temperature PAHs, which were found at the K/T boundary (28), are present in the YDB, but not above or below it at each of three sites analyzed (Daisy Cave, Murray Springs, and Blackwater Draw), suggesting that intense fires occurred at these locations.

Carbon spherules. Carbon spherules (0.15 – 2.5 mm) are black, highly vesicular, subspherical-to-spherical objects ([Fig. 3](#)). SEM analyses show them to have cracked and patterned surfaces, a thin rind, and honeycombed (spongy) interiors. SEM/energy dispersive spectrometer and microprobe analyses show that the spherules are dominantly carbon ($>75\%$), with no evidence of seed-like morphology or cellular plant structure, as in charcoal. They were found in 13 of 15 Bays and only in the YDB at six of nine Clovis-age sites in concentrations up to $\approx 1,500$ per kilogram. In addition, we recovered them from one of four modern forest fires (see [SI Text](#), “Research Sites”), confirming that they can be produced by intense heat in high-stand wildfires. At the P/T boundary, Miura⁴ discovered carbon spherules up to 90 wt% C and up to $20\ \mu\text{m}$ in size, which he attributes to a controversial cosmic impact ≈ 250 Ma. More recently, Rösler *et al.*⁵ reported finding carbon spherules from undated sediment across Europe, and these appear identical to spherules from the YDB layer. The authors report that they contain fullerenes and nanodiamonds, the latter of which are extraordinarily rare on Earth but are found in meteorites and at ET impact sites (29), leading those authors to propose an ET association for the carbon spherules.

Fullerenes and ET helium. Of four sites analyzed, fullerenes with ET helium, which are associated with meteorites and ET impacts (30), were present in YDB sediments at three Clovis-age sites (Blackwater, Murray Springs, and Daisy Cave). In Bay M33, they

⁴Miura, Y., 37th Annual Lunar and Planetary Science Conference, March 13–17, 2006, League City, TX, Vol. 2441, pp. 1–2 (abstr.).

⁵Rösler, W., Hoffmann, V., Raeymaekers, B., Yang, Z. Q., Schryvers, D., Tarcea, N. (2006) First International Conference on Impact Cratering in the Solar System, May 7–12, 2006, Noordwijk, The Netherlands, abstr. 295464.

consistent with the generally proposed composition of comets and inconsistent with the high-Ir content typical of most stony, nickel-iron, or chondritic meteorites.

Alternately, Ir peaks are found at major geologic boundary layers with no confirmed impacts, and at least some of those Ir concentrations may have resulted from volcanism. However, no major North American volcanic episode is known at 12.9 ka, and, according to Koeberl (39), such events produce Ir abundances of <0.5 ppb, much less than we find in the YDB. Therefore, the high concentrations of Ir do not appear to be of volcanic origin.

We also considered microbial concentration from Ir-rich adjacent sediment, such as occurred in experiments by Dyer *et al.* (40), who cultured microbes in Ir-rich igneous rocks and meteoritic material. However, at all sites analyzed, non-YDB sediment levels of Ir are very low (<0.1 ppb and possibly <0.02 ppb) and are insufficient to account for Ir levels up to 5,000× crustal abundance. Given the association of high Ir with a suite of other event-related markers, an ET connection is more plausible.

Ice Core Evidence. Large increases in Ir and Pt occurred during the Younger Dryas as recorded in the GRIP (Greenland) ice core by Gabrielli *et al.* (41), who attributed these increases to increased cosmic input. Although sample resolution in the ice core was too low to permit us to specifically link the onset of these increased fluxes with the timing of the YD event, the evidence is consistent with the YD event.

As evidence for biomass burning, Mayewski *et al.* (42, 43) reported large ammonium and nitrate spikes in the Greenland GISP2 ice core at the onset of the YD. These GISP2 data are consistent with strong geochemical evidence in the GRIP ice core for massive biomass burning at the YD onset, especially a major ammonium spike, in association with peaks in nitrate, nitrite, formate, oxalate, and acetate (44). Altogether, the YD onset was one of the most robust intervals of biomass burning inferred from the Greenland ice cores, although the source of this burning signal must have been far more remote than sources today, because much of the modern forested Arctic region was then covered by ice. The cause of this biomass burning is consistent with the YD event.

Radioactive Elements. Some megafaunal bones in the YDB are highly radioactive relative to other stratigraphic intervals, as occurred for some bones at the K/T boundary (see SI Figs. 13 and 14). In addition, high concentrations of U and Th were found in the YDB sediment at six of six Clovis-age sites analyzed and in four of four Bays with a paleosol, just as were found in the impact layers at Chesapeake Bay (38) and the K/T (see SI Fig. 15) (45). Because the heavy minerals, zircon, monazite, and garnet, along with Ti-rich minerals, such as titanite, ilmenite, and rutile, sometimes contain high concentrations of U and Th, we investigated whether lag deposits of those minerals might be the source of high radioactivity. We conclude that lag deposits may explain the high YDB radioactivity at some sites but not at others. Ilmenite, rutile, and titanite are possible carriers given that they comprise up to ≈2% of all sediments, but zircon, monazite, and garnet are unlikely, because they represent <0.1% each (see SI Figs. 16 and 17). The elevated levels of U and Th may result from multiple processes related to the impacts/airbursts, including formation of lag deposits, as well as the dispersal of ejecta from the impactor and/or the target area.

Nature of the Event. The evidence points to an ET event with continent-wide effects, especially biomass burning, but the size, density, and composition of the impactor are poorly understood. Even so, current data suggest that this impactor was very different from well studied iron, stony, or chondritic impactors (e.g., at the K/T boundary). The evidence is more consistent with an impactor that was carbon-rich, nickel-iron-poor, and therefore, most likely a comet. Although the current geologic and geochemical evidence is

insufficient to fully understand impact dynamics, we can offer speculation for future work.

Toon *et al.* (46) suggest that an impact capable of continent-wide damage requires energy of 10^7 megatons, equivalent to an impact by a >4-km-wide comet (figure 1 in ref. 46). Although an impactor that size typically leaves an obvious large crater, no such late Pleistocene crater has been identified. The lack of a crater may be due to prior fragmentation of a large impactor, thereby producing multiple airbursts or craters. Hypervelocity oblique impact experiments (P.H.S., unpublished data) indicate that a low-impedance surface layer, such as an ice sheet, can markedly reduce modification of the underlying substrate if the layer is equal to the projectile's diameter. These results suggest that if multiple 2-km objects struck the 2-km-thick Laurentide Ice Sheet at <30°, they may have left negligible traces after deglaciation. Thus, lasting evidence may have been limited to enigmatic depressions or disturbances in the Canadian Shield (e.g., under the Great Lakes or Hudson Bay), while producing marginal or no shock effects and dispersing fine debris composed of the impactor, ice-sheet detritus, and the underlying crust.

Toon *et al.* (46) also noted that if airbursts explode with energy of 10^7 megatons at optimum height, they will cause blast damage over an area the size of North America that is equivalent to a ground impact of 10^9 megatons (figure 5 in ref. 46). Such airbursts effectively couple the impactor's kinetic energy with the atmosphere or surface (47, 48), producing devastating blast waves well above hurricane force (70 m s^{-1}) (46). In 1908, at Tunguska, Siberia, a object <150 m in diameter, either a carbonaceous asteroid or a small, burned-out comet, produced a <15-megaton airburst with an intense fireball (10^7 °C) that scorched ≈200 km² of trees and leveled ≈2,000 km² of forest yet produced no crater or shock metamorphism (49). A debris shower from a heavily fragmented comet (11) would have produced an airburst barrage that was similar to, although exponentially larger than Tunguska, while causing continent-wide biomass burning and ice-sheet disruption, but again possibly, without typical cratering.

Environmental Effects. The YD event would have created a devastating, high-temperature shock wave with extreme overpressure, followed by underpressure, resulting in intense winds traveling across North America at hundreds of kilometers per hour, accompanied by powerful, impact-generated vortices (50–52). In addition, whether single or multiple objects collided with Earth, a hot fireball would have immersed the region near the impacts and would have been accentuated if the impact angles were oblique (46, 53). For comparison, Svetsov (48) calculated that a Tunguska-sized airburst would immerse the ground with a radiation flux severe enough to ignite 200 km² of forest within seconds. Thus, multiple, larger airbursts would have ignited many thousands of square kilometers. At greater distances, the reentry of high-speed, superheated ejecta would have induced extreme wildfires (53), which would have decimated forests and grasslands, destroying the food supplies of herbivores and producing charcoal, soot, toxic fumes, and ash. The number of ET airbursts or impacts necessary to induce the continent-wide environmental collapse at 12.9 ka is unknown.

Climate. A number of impact-related effects most likely contributed to the abrupt, major cooling at the onset of the YD and its maintenance for >1,000 years. Cooling mechanisms operating on shorter time scales may have included (i) ozone depletion, causing shifts in atmospheric systems in response to cooling, with the side-effect of allowing increased deadly UV radiation to reach survivors on the surface (46); (ii) atmospheric injection of nitrogen compounds (NO_x), sulfates, dust, soot, and other toxic chemicals from the impact and widespread wildfires (46), all of which may have led to cooling by blockage of sunlight, with the side-effect of diminished photosynthesis for plants and increased chemical toxicity for animals and plants (46); and (iii) injection of large amounts

of water vapor and ice into the upper atmosphere to form persistent cloudiness and noctilucent clouds, leading to reduced sunlight and surface cooling (46). Although these cooling mechanisms tend to be short-lived, they can trigger longer-term consequences through feedback mechanisms. For example, noctilucent clouds can reduce solar insolation at high latitudes, increasing snow accumulation and causing further cooling in a feedback loop. The largest potential effect would have been impact-related partial destabilization and/or melting of the ice sheet. In the short term, this would have suddenly released meltwater and rafts of icebergs into the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans, lowering surface-ocean salinity with consequent surface cooling. The longer-term cooling effects largely would have resulted from the consequent weakening of thermohaline circulation in the northern Atlantic (54), sustaining YD cooling for >1,000 years until the feedback mechanisms restored ocean circulation.

Clovis and Megafauna. The impact-related effects would have been devastating for animals and plants. For humans, major adaptive shifts are evident at 12.9 ka, along with an inferred population decline, as subsistence strategies changed because of dramatic ecological change and the extinction, reduction, and displacement of key prey species (55, 56). Many sites indicate that both Clovis people and extinct megafauna were present immediately before the YD event, but, except in rare cases, neither appears in the geologic record afterward. At Murray Springs, butchered, still-articulated mammoth bones, Clovis tools, and a hearth were found buried directly beneath the black mat, indicating that it buried them rapidly (37). YDB markers, including Ir at 51 ppb, occur inside an extinct horse skull at the Wally's Beach Clovis kill-site (57), again suggesting rapid burial following the YD event. It is likely that some now-extinct animals survived in protected niches, only later to become extinct because of insufficient food resources, overhunting, climate change, disease, flooding, and other effects, all triggered or amplified by the YD event.

Conclusions

Our primary aim is to present evidence supporting the YD impact event, a major ET collision over North America at 12.9 ka, which contributed to the YD cooling, the massive extinction of the North

American fauna, and major adaptations and population declines among PaleoAmericans. The unique, carbon-rich, YDB layer, coupled with a distinct assemblage of impact tracers, implies isochroneity of the YDB datum layer and thus highlights its utility for correlation and dating of the North American late Pleistocene. These associations, if confirmed, offer the most complete and recent geological record for an ET impact and its effects, such as global climate change and faunal extinction. This evidence also would represent a record of a major ET event having serious, widespread consequences for anatomically modern humans.

Methods

Elemental analyses were performed by using prompt gamma-ray activation analysis, neutron activation analysis, and inductively coupled plasma MS. Microspherules, glass-like carbon, and carbon spherules were analyzed by SEM/x-ray fluorescence. These methods are very standard and discussed further in *SI Text*, "Methods."

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