Men, Saints, or Dragons?

"There were giants in the earth in those days..." Genesis 6:4

During the Pleistocene epoch of prehistory (three million to one thousand years ago) many islands in the Mediterranean Sea provided the habitat of animals that developed in a unique fashion: they became either dwarfed or gigantic. For instance, there were dwarfed elephants (the smallest only three feet high at the shoulder) on Cyprus, Crete, Sicily, Malta, Sardinia, Melos, Naxos and Delos, and enormous hippos on Cyprus, Crete, Sicily and Malta. Deer became dwarfed on Creta and Kythnos while the Balcanic Islands produced a dwarfed antelope. Rodents became "gigantic" on Malta, Sicily, and Menorca. Swans and vultures became gigantic on Malta.

The two largest living terrestrial mammals, elephants and hippos, became dwarfed on some Mediterranean islands while other, normally small animals became larger. We shall explore man's interpretation of their bones as the remains of humans, saints, animals or monsters. Man did not usually folklore to describe other influences on these interpretations. It is common all over the world. Punishment (I. 15) refers to the discovery of a number of giant skeletons including one fifteen feet long, all identified as the bones of Greek heroes.

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Cyprius

The first person to find bones in Cyprus was the Dutchman Cornelis de Brujin, who traveled throughout the Levant and Cyprus in the 17th century. In his book (Reizen door de vorstachtige dela von Klein Asia, 1688) he described a visit in 1685 to a "certain place in the mountains where bones of man and beasts are seen in the rock, grown together and petrified. I reached my goal and had some bones broken out of the rock. The most important was not dissimilar to a long bone of a human arm. ... I also found human and other bones, of many kinds, including many teeth of large dimensions."

"On the rocks I saw candles, from which I opined that this place is held in reverence; as I was told, Croeks sometimes came to pray there, believing that possibly some bodies of their saints were buried there."

The bones he believed to be a human long bone, which he pictures, is in fact a humerus of the Crocodile pygmy hippopotamus. The next person to report bones of the hippopotamus was "General" (self-appointed) Luigi Palma di Cesnola, American Consul at Larnaca, and antiquarian and tomb robber extraordinary. From just one archaeological site in central Cyprus, Idalion, he robbed 10,000 tombs! He was later to become the first Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Elizabeth McFadden has recently written a fascinating biography of di Cesnola, The Glitter and the Gold. At Cape Pyla, on the southern coast, di Cesnola was taken in the late 1800's to a cave. He wrote (1877): "It was a large cavern which my guide called 'Spilja Macaria,' the entrance of which faces the sea. This cave contains a great quantity of bones, some of which competent authorities have recognized as human. It is about 60 feet above the level of the sea."

I succeeded penetrates into the cave, and found petrified bones on the floor and in the walls, forming a solid mass. How they ever came there will probably remain a mystery."

"My guide told me with religious awe they were the bones of 'Forty Saints,' and that a few years ago it had been custom of the peasants of neighboring villages to make a pilgrimage to this cave."

"Beneath the chapel the rocks are full of fossil bones, called by the villagers the bones of St. Phanourios, but in reality they are the remains of the pygmy hippopotamus."

"St. Phanourios was a youth who lived in Asia Minor, and was slain by robbers in his companionship. He touched a horse to the steep cliff, but his horse slipped and he and his steed were killed."

"The chapel is much resorted to by villagers, who cut out the fossil bones, and, powdered them, mix them with a drink of water. This draught is said to be a sovereign cure for nearly every known disease."

"Supposedly one can still see the footprints of his horse: I couldn't. The custom of producing this draught is still practiced today. St. Phanourios is the 'Reveler' and can reveal a person's desires once he drinks the mixture."

When it was decided to separate the dwarfed Crocodile pygmy hippopotamus from the genus Hippopotamus, the word Phanourios was chosen as the new genus after the saint whose name is frequently connected with pygmy hippopotamus fossils. An instance of the association of pygmy hippo bones with religion is found in Miss Bate's field notes for 6-V-1902. This site was not seen since then until the author re-discovered it in June, 1973. This cave has been made into a little chapel by adding walls and a roof. Hippo bones are found in the worn limestone cave floor to the right of the entrance. According to Bate: 'In the afternoon my men took me to another cave above Psalaios Chalki (farm). They called it St. Elias and consecrated it a sacred spot. A spot of entrance has been built round the mouth of the cave."

1 The recent chapel of Ayios Phanourios, west of the village of Ayios Georgios on the northern coast of Cyprus. Freshhippo bones are found on the left of the basement.

2 Close-up of some of the bones from Ayios Phanourios. To the right of the pencil is the exca-vation of two dwarfed hippos.
...so I am afraid these embedded fragments cannot claim to be parts of pre-Adamic man.

For decades afterwards, visitors to the cave report seeing the bones and skulls in the crevices and corners where the people had scrambled for air.

The bones of the dwarfed Creten deer were supposedly found by Sir Arthur Evans in a shaft in the Minos Palace of Knossos. If these really are the bones of the Pleistocene dwarfed deer, they were not contemporary with man and were set up as a shrine for some reverential reason.

Sicily

The first notice of fossils in Sicily—in this instance of dwarfed elephants—was by atmospheric chemist, Empedocles of Agrigenta. He was the father of the science we now know as physics. Also he was a doctor and a poet. He was the first to introduce a precise concept of “element” into science, cured a plague at Selinus, described “the first real experiment” in the West, wrote lyric poetry on Natural Selection, believed in reincarnation, and, finally, claimed to be a god! He thought that these bones were the skeletons of Homer’s Polyphemus (a Cyclops or Kyklops) who was 300 feet tall.

The Cyclopes, according to Homer’s Odyssey, were a gigantic and lawless race of shepherds who devoured humans. Their name is derived from the word meaning “round-eye” in reference to the one circular eye in the middle of their forehead. The term has also been explained to mean “wheel-eyed,” since the eye was supposed to be as large as a wheel. Certain Cyclopes made thunderbolts for Zeus under Vulcan’s guidance. Their workshop was in Mount Etna or in several other volcanoes in Sicily. They lived along the southern and eastern coast of the island. Their association with Mount Etna is thought to stem from the glow in the night sky over the peak which was visible far out to sea when the volcano was alive.

Odysseus in the Odyssey put out the eye of one Cyclops, Polyphemus, so he could escape from the island. The Cyclopes Rocks at...
Aci Trezza, Sicily, are believed to be the stones hurled by Polyphemus at Odysseus during the latter’s escape.

In the 14th century, Giovanni Boccacio (the author of the Decameron), in the fourth book of his Genealogy of the Gods, refers to the bones of the Cyclops, citing Empedocles as his source.

In reference to the Cyclops belief, the Austrian paleontologist and founder of the science of paleobiology, Othenio Abel, working in the early 1900’s, has stated:

“Sailors of Homeric days, blown off course and finding such skulls, had never seen elephants. Hence they hit on the idea that the skulls must be those of huge beings with one great eye in the middle of the forehead. Thus the myth of the one-eyed Cyclops probably originated—as, indeed, most legends of giants are based on finds of large primordial mammals.”

The Cyclops is based on the unique and greatly enlarged nasal opening of the elephant which to the unknowing looks like two eye sockets merged into one in what appears to be the forehead.

In 1678, the German Jesuit scientist, Athanasius Kircher, published his Mundus subterraneus (“Underground World”) after examining the Sicilian bones. He was famous for his studies of languages and classical antiquity and for inventing the “burning mirror” and the “magic lantern.” His book is considered a milestone in the fields of volcanology and speleology, though he still thought that all of the fossils were the bones of giants. However, the giant is now only 30 feet tall! In this book he includes four pictures of the different “types” of giants.

Kircher felt that the cause of volcanoes was in subterranean caves, some of which contained water or fire or air. He believed that in the air-filled caverns lurked “dragons.” In fact, the skulls of Pleistocene bears and rhinoceros were often explained as being the remains of dragons. In another one of Kircher’s books he pictures the types of cages Noah must have used for the different animals.

In Sicily, around 1829, there was a great demand for bones for the manufacture of lampblack, used in sugar refining. The bones from a large cave, the “Grotta di San Ciro” (about two miles from Palermo), were collected in large quantities and sent to England and Marseilles. Within the first six months of the operation, 400 quintals (40,000 kilograms) were sent from San Ciro, the vast majority of which were dwarfed hippo remains.

During this period a lively discussion arose about the origin of the bones. One Sicilian, Professor Ferrara, maintained: “. . . they consisted of the skeletons of elephants captured by Metellus from Hasdrubal 504 years before the Christian era and of the Hippopotamus imported by the Saracen rulers of Sicily during the Middle Ages.”

The dispute over the origin of the bones was the reason for the government investigating the cave and producing the first real scientific collection of remains.

Dr. John H. Cooke (1891) states that most of the caves in Sicily are:

“. . . invested either with a mythical or an historical importance (and) from time immemorial have been credited as being the haunt of a gigantic race of ghouls.”

Malta

The first description of Maltese fossils is by Abela in his Sescrittone di Malta (1647). He described teeth and bones of great dimensions which were thought to belong to the Cyclopes or ancient inhabitants of Sicily. These remains were referred to by Abela and others as belonging to the “Giant Epoch.” Abela states:

“What further testimony can we desire of the habitation here of the Cyclops . . . than that given by the gigantic bones found in Malta [such as] a bone which the owner used as a cross-bar for the door! We ourselves have seen a molar tooth of the thickness of the finger, and an inch in length, which was extracted from a gigantic head.”

Dr. Andrew Leith Adams, collecting fossils in Malta around 1870, was told by a friend that even Maltese of considerable intelligence disliked his interference with the relics of the deluge: since they had been placed there in token of divine wrath, they should not be disturbed. Though Adams was unable to prove man’s association with the bones, a friend of his said:

“. . . some future paleontologist may be more fortunate than you have been, and not only establish man’s presence there, but also show that he rode the donkey elephant!”

Dr. Cooke stated:

“The ancient inhabitants of Malta, like those of the neighboring countries, were ever ready to assign to the heroic all that was in the least incomprehensible to them.”

Maybe the Maltese assigned what they did not understand to the heroic, but most people have assigned things they can not comprehend to the “monstrous.” To the dragons of Cyprus and the Cyclopes of Sicily we can well add today’s Loch Ness “monster.”

Suggested Reading

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