Indian Mythology and Extinct Fossil Vertebrates

Author(s): Loren C. Eiseley

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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

INDIAN MYTHOLOGY AND EXTINCT FOSSIL VERTEBRATES

In a brief communication in this journal, Dr. Ashley Montagu gives an account by Albert Koch of an Indian tradition suggesting knowledge of the mastodon.[1] This account was published in 1841. Dr. Ashley Montagu suggests that it is "perhaps the earliest record of an Indian tradition concerning an extinct mammal." In addition he quotes an unnamed paleontologist as inclining to the view that the horse never became extinct in America. Dr. Ashley Montagu further indicates that the validity of these Indian historical traditions has been generally accepted.

Since these views, along with the whole subject of Indian traditions about extinct beasts, are highly controversial, I should like to venture a few remarks on the subject, and to contribute some additional material to the history of science.

Albert Koch is not the earliest writer to record Indian traditions regarding extinct mammals. Thirty-five years before, in 1806, Thomas Ashe had published an account of a tradition purporting to come from a "Shawanece" Indian.[2] A quarter of a century prior to Ashe's publication, Thomas Jefferson had given an account of the same legend in his *Notes On Virginia* published in 1782. This tradition was interpreted by Ashe, drawing from George Turner and Thomas Jefferson, before him, as referring to "Megalonyx." Like Turner and Jefferson, Ashe interpreted "Megalonyx" as a gigantic carnivore. His pamphlet suggests that his "Megalonyx" was a composite which he had created by combining sloth claws with mastodon teeth, and imaginatively reconstructing a giant lion twenty-five feet high and sixty feet long! Paleontology, one must remember, was in a very naive state one hundred and thirty-eight years ago. Ashe notes that this perfectly imaginary beast is alleged by the Indians still to exist "beyond the lakes."[3]

This intriguing little pamphlet is, if one reads between the lines, exceedingly revelatory of the interest which, even at the close of the eighteenth century, was beginning to animate those who had glimpsed fossil bones in the New World. Here, because of a small population, vast unpeopled wildernesses, and no intensive agriculture, fossil remains were much in evidence. Since this was long before Darwin, and before our knowledge of the glacial events of the Pleistocene, *every attempt was being made to correlate these remains with at least moderately recent events or with Biblical behemoths.* We may presume, says Ashe, "that the wise Creator of everything would not suffer so great a link in the chain as the Megalonyx to be entirely broken off. He continues every created species nor can they cease while the earth remaineth."[4]

We cannot comprehend the myth-making proclivities of this era scientifically unless we keep the intellectual climate of the age in mind. "Very true," the reader is apt to agree, "but what has this to do with Indian myths of this period?"

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[1] "An Indian Tradition Relating to the Mastodon," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 568–571, 1944.

[2] Ashe, Thomas, *Memoirs of Mammoth and Other Extraordinary and Stupendous Bones*, printed by G. F. Harris, Liverpool, England, 1806.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 49. Ashe's paper is interesting, not for its originality, but because of its transparent revelation of both the scientific weaknesses and popular interests of the time. Not even Jefferson conceived of his "Megalonyx" unaided. Such ideas were in the air.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Two things, it could be pointed out, are involved here: First, it is plain from the discussions in the pamphlet that white men, actuated by curiosity and religious bepuzzlement as well as ignorance of interior North America, were avidly questioning Indians about these giant bones.[5] This means, ethnological techniques not having come into practice, that explorers were probably getting pretty much the answers they sought out of the vast animal mythology of the natives. No one who remembers the story of the desperate Spanish search for mythical golden Quivira should be surprised at this.

Second, the Indians themselves were certainly not immune to curiosity, particularly when fossil marvels were pointed out to them.[6] To men with no knowledge of geology, no knowledge of the great time stream of which we of to-day are so intensely aware, would not every bone, even if strange, be that of a mighty beast still living in grandfather's day or perhaps even now existing somewhere "across the lakes" or over the farthest hill?

Almost as if to document the subject further, Ashe comments that the Siberians assert that the mammoth lives underground. Again we see the primitive myth-makers at work in an area where frozen carcasses lend an even more vivid reality than bones. Must we say on this basis that the Siberian folk knew the living animal? Obviously not.

Finally we must remember that though these early accounts have been reported to us by men of our own race, their time conceptions were, geologically, little clearer than those of the natives whom they interviewed. Interesting as these early data are, they will never establish, unaided, the time of the extinction of the Pleistocene mammals.

Some time ago I endeavored to point out what would be necessary and desirable to clinch and demonstrate recent survival.[7] Dr. Ashley Montagu's reference to the possibility of the survival of the horse reminded me that I had had more than one campfire conversation with the late Dr. Edgar Howard on that very subject. He was somewhat inclined, at one time, toward this view. I argued that if the horse survived, it was strange that its bones had not been found in archaeological sites, from known cultural horizons. "Well," Dr. Howard countered, "perhaps it wasn't eaten."

Now the horse was eaten in paleolithic Europe. It was eaten, apparently, on the Folsom horizon in the New World. I submit that for it to have been alive and completely ignored by the American aborigines of later times flies in the face of all our knowledge of the world's hunting peoples.

The only way that a scientific demonstration of recent survival of the Pleistocene

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[5] G. G. Simpson has called attention to a letter by James Wright (1762) which refers to a Shawnee tradition involving giant animals and giant men. After analyzing the data, Simpson's comment runs as follows: "They [the Indians] knew there was no reliable testimony or memory of the animals in life. This contrasts significantly with legends later given by Jefferson, also as coming from the Shawnees, and believed by him to prove that the species of animals represented by the bones was still alive." (George Gaylord Simpson, "The Discovery of Fossil Vertebrates in North America," *Journal of Paleontology*, vol. 17, p. 36, 1943.) This statement by one of our foremost paleontologists does not, I think, validate Ashley Montagu's comment that the legends "have been generally accepted."

[6] Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 27; Kindle, E. M., "American Indian Discoveries of Vertebrate Fossils," *Journal of Paleontology*, vol. 9, pp. 449–452, 1935.

[7] Eiseley, Loren C., "Archaeological Observations on the Problem of Post-Glacial Extinction," *American Antiquity*, vol. 8, pp. 209–217, 1942.

fauna can possibly be accomplished is by getting clear and authentic evidence of that fauna in association with human horizons which are dateable. It may be done. But so far the extensive excavations carried on by the University of Nebraska in a key area of the Plains and over a great vertical range of Recent time have yielded no horse remains below the protohistoric horizon. These facts, as I have pointed out elsewhere, cannot be airily dismissed while myth is brought forth as evidence. Somewhere the Pleistocene and Recent fauna interlock. That horizon must be found. Only so can the problem be settled in a manner satisfactory to those of us who demand artifacts and bones as evidence.

LOREN C. EISELEY

OBERLIN COLLEGE

THE CEREMONIAL DESTRUCTION OF SICKNESS BY THE WISCONSIN CHIPPEWA

A rather unique employment of sympathetic magic by the Chippewa is the practice of avoiding an impending plague by the destruction of a straw man made for the purpose. By the act of obliterating the straw man it is believed that the coming sickness is obliterated, on the principle that "like produces like, or in other words, that an effect resembles its cause."[1]

The ceremonial pattern is simple. A person is warned by his guardian spirit through the medium of a dream that sickness is about to descend upon the community. The person is always a man, and one recognized as having important powers secured through his fasting dream. He notifies the community by sending a runner with tobacco, the common method of invitation. The runner presents some of the tobacco (a bit of cut plug, or Standard) to each family, and tells them when and where to come, and to bring equipment for what they are going to do (*wiməsinəškíbijigən*—we are going to make an image). At the appointed time the people assemble, bringing food and tobacco, the men with guns, the women and children with knives, clubs, and axes. The Dreamer then tells the people his dream and why they are doing this. The food is laid out on the floor, tobacco is passed around and smoked, and the Dreamer gets up and dedicates the food and tobacco to the *manidog* (spirits) and asks their help in doing this thing. The people then eat, it being believed that the food and tobacco are really offerings which go to the *manidog*. After the feast the men take their guns, and the women and children their clubs, knives, and axes, go outside and cautiously approach the straw man which has been set a short distance away from the house by the runner. The figure is made of straw or hay (to be inflammable), varying in height from about two to four feet, and dressed in a miniature man's costume. It is either made by the runner the night before, or by the women just before the ceremony begins.

As the people approach the straw man the Dreamer gives the signal to shoot it with their shotguns, he joining them. The women and children then rush up to club it, cut it, and chop it to bits. The remains are gathered up by the people or runner, placed in a pile, and burned. They may return to the house where the Dreamer thanks them for their assistance.

[1] Frazer, J. G. The Golden Bough, pp. 37.