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MYTH AND MAMMOTH IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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TRADITIONS have an incalculable appeal to the human mind. Often tenuous, remote, impossible to prove, they are occasionally startling. The frustrated researcher upon some fascinating problem of human history which fails, otherwise, of solution comes again and again to the consideration of floating tales which seem to hold a kernel of truth, a hint—just a faint hint—of veracity masked in the trappings of legend. Such material may be used, but on the whole it is ghostly, disembodied, and unverifiable. Lacking corroboration, it fails to bring conviction. Often the tale has been borne by some single native who, long since disappeared into forest anonymity, is no longer available for questioning. His story may, however, have passed through several intermediate hands and be quoted in old books whose scholarship is naive. The result is that, use these sources as we may, we turn seriously to other more tangible means of establishing truth. Then, if the search languishes, we are prone to return, still captivated, to the tale spun long ago.

It is just ten years since Dr. W. D. Strong published his well-known study, "North American Indian Traditions Suggesting a Knowledge of the Mammoth."[1] It was written at a time when American archaeologists were somewhat more conservative on the subject of human antiquity in the New World than they are today. Nevertheless, it is a careful, measured presentation of certain oral traditions suggesting knowledge of fossil vertebrates on the part of the American Indian. At no point does Strong suggest that these data can take the place of objective evidence. In fact, he specifically comments, "conclusive proof of such suggested associations will generally rest with the paleontologist and archaeologist. . . ."[2] He also thinks that many of these tales can be dismissed as mythical rationalizations based on the mere observation of fossil bones by the aborigines. A residue, however, he feels are less easily explainable.

In the ten years which have elapsed, the association of man with extinct animals in the New World has been completely substantiated. Yet nowhere, to date, has there been clear and satisfying evidence of human association with extinct animals on the upper archaeological horizons from which certain of these legends might seem to have been derived. Nevertheless, there has been a tendency here and there to refer to this legendary material as though it completely settled the question of the survival of the mammoth or mastodon into the last few centuries. The pause in archaeological activities engendered by the war has perhaps drawn us back to this tantalizing, if somewhat sterile, field. At all events, Strong's paper is sometimes used, without adequate reference to his own restrictions, as "proof" of late survival. Dr. Ashley-Montagu, for example, in a late paper labels as "generally accepted" the conclusion that Indian myths relating to fossil animals may be regarded as historical tradition.[3]

That phrase, "generally accepted," is an easy and dangerous one. So far as I know, no one has taken a vote on the subject, nor does Strong commit himself on the question of recency of survival with quite the same vigor as does Ashley-Montagu. G. G. Simpson has expressed himself against the authenticity of certain myths of this kind,[4] and his standing as a paleontologist is well known. If Ashley-Montagu means to imply that Strong has successfully demonstrated the extreme recency of a Pleistocene form, I would disagree, until, that is, there is accompanying unequivocal archaeological proof. I am sure Strong would assent to this stricture. Until such time, phrases like "generally accepted" must, I think, be avoided in the interests of maintaining an objectively impartial approach.

Recently there came into my hands some source material dealing with the history of paleontology at the close of the eighteenth century. By chance it threw light upon events which, I have become convinced, have played their part in creating a favorable background for the development of legends about ex-

[1] Strong, 1934.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

[3] Ashley-Montagu, 1944, p. 569.

[4] Simpson, 1942, p. 132. He says in part, "Various reported Indian legends of fabulous beasts represented by fossil bones have little ethnological and no paleontological value; the data are sparse, often untrustworthy and carry little conviction of *genuine and spontaneous* (truly aboriginal) reference to real finds of fossils." [Italics mine. L. E.]

tinct beasts in the New World. In trying to set forth these views, I do not pretend to explain the origin of every individual tradition relating to strange animals, nor to minimize the interest of such traditions. I do, however, hope to show that the latter half of the eighteenth century and the earlier portion of the nineteenth were a favorable seed bed for the creation of myths such as we have been discussing. We have, in short, occupied ourselves with so-called aboriginal tradition. Rather strangely, for anthropologists, we have paid absolutely no attention to the intellectual environment, the cultural milieu out of which many of these legends, endlessly repeated in the literature, came. It is this background which I propose to examine.

The first European intruders into the New World entered a region in which, because of its small population and simple cultures, there had been no serious interference with the fossil relics of the ancient past. Bones were scattered widely along the eroding banks of streams or in other fossiliferous localities. Some were enormously large and quickly attracted the eye of the curious. It was not long until the natives were being plied with questions about them.

Though Thomas Jefferson was not the very first individual to record Indian traditions surrounding extinct fossil remains, his *Notes on Virginia* written in 1782 was probably the first widely circulated book which made mention of such legends. The author's prominence and his many controversies with the French scientist Buffon caused his book to receive marked attention abroad.

Jefferson, after making ample reference to widespread remains of the mammoth, goes on to narrate a legend, secured from a Delaware chief, to the effect that these animals were yet in existence. President Jefferson further recites the case of a man named Stanley who, taken prisoner and apparently transported across the Rockies, was also told that these animals still existed. Jefferson says that, from the natives' description, Stanley "judged it to be an elephant." This last remark has been viewed as significant. It must be noted, however, that the data come to us at third hand and that the quotation given above—i.e., Stanley "*judged*" —is the sole comment made by Jefferson in regard to the case. The question as to how much or how little this may mean has to be viewed in the light of the religious and other prejudices of the period.

The tradition given by Jefferson refers to Big Bone Lick, a fossil deposit of unusual character, and one discussed before Jefferson's time.[5] During the earlier period, similar Shawnee myths are encountered, but there is no reference to the animals as still in existence. Descriptions are vague, the animals are described as carnivorous, and it is obvious that only "myths of observation" are involved. What, we may inquire, put such emphasis upon survival that Jefferson eventually records "the traditionary testimony of the Indians, that this animal still exists in the northern and western parts of America"?[6]

It must be remembered that the eighteenth century and the beginning years of the nineteenth marked the rise of intense zoological interest among the intelligentsia of the New and Old Worlds. The great eighteenth century forerunners of Darwin—Buffon, Cuvier, and others—were beginning to approach, with much hesitancy and many misgivings, the problem of specific change. Others fought back with vigor. America, with its strange animals, its mysterious bones, and a human race unaccounted for in Biblical terms, had contributed to those uneasy stirrings. A science was being born. The specialist bewailing the lack of interest in his subject today may be surprised to learn that mammoth, sloth, and other bones were taken back to Europe and exhibited for a fee in polite circles. We find Jefferson advising one lad that he may make a fortune in this way.[7]

Men crossed the Atlantic to pursue the subject. Indians were questioned. Jefferson's legend was plagiarized and repeated. But one must keep the background of all this in mind: In spite of intense stirrings of curiosity, religious conservatism held the field—would hold it until Darwin. Men knew but little of the science which was to become geology. They sought explanations of the mammoth in terms of Biblical quotations. They talked of Behemoth. The millenial swing of the glacial pendulum was unknown. Here were bones. If the beast had existed, he must still exist. Jefferson, for example, certainly no religious fanatic,

[5] Simpson, *op. cit.*
[6] Ford, 1904, p. 427.
[7] Letter to Charles Wilson Peale, May 5, 1802.

comments almost piously, "such is the economy of nature that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken."[8] Decades later, Thomas Ashe reiterated this view.[9] Later in this same paper Ashe wavers toward the notion of extinction, but never dares to confront the heretical thought openly.

As for the Indians, involved in their own vast animal mythology, it is quite likely that they responded to these myriads of questions with elaboration and desire to please. We know, for example, that Jefferson, who had described certain sloth bones as Megalonyx, which he conceived as a huge lion-like carnivore, grew doubtful finally and began to entertain the thought that his Megalonyx might, after all, be a herbivore similar to one of the South American sloths (from Paraguay) described by a Spanish zoologist.[10] Despondent, he appealed once more to the Indians. Obligingly they assured him it was just such a ferocious beast as he had conceived it to be. The pleased Jefferson then reaffirmed his belief in his creation. Not the least interesting part of this little byplay is the fact that a legend which Jefferson had first thought referred to the mammoth later was affixed by him to his giant lion. In this he was imitated by Ashe.

The Indians found no difficulty in suggesting that these creatures for which the white men seemed to be searching lay farther on in the heart of the wilderness, or "across the lakes." They were not paleontologists, and the time stream meant little to them. The bones were there. Doubtless grandfather had seen them alive. Probably they still existed somewhere across the lakes. It was not a day in which skilled ethnologists employed subtle techniques in questioning. We can imagine extensive descriptions of elephants more than once eliciting enthusiastic affirmatives from the impressed Indians. Gold, to the white man's sorrow, was often sought by the same methods.

Two other items of information available to us make the occasional appearance of elephant descriptions (such as the one which Strong quotes from Swanton) seem less spectacular when we consider their comparatively late date. The Indians of the Southeast, as is well known, began to intermingle very early with runaway Negro slaves. As a matter of fact, many such Negroes, freshly brought from Africa, were more intimately acquainted with the bones of elephants than were their white masters. Howorth, quoting from an early history of Carolina, describes how certain Negro slaves had identified several disinterred molars as those of an elephant.[11] It must be clear, in the light of this evidence, that vague descriptions of elephants among the Indians of the colonial Southeast, even if recognizable, do not demand an immediate assumption of indigenous origin.

In the North, too, there are many complicating features which may give rise occasionally to stories.[12] From the middle of the eighteenth century right down into the nineteenth, the collection of mammoth ivory was an important industry in Siberia, and complete carcasses were found. Such ivory was searched for in Alaska by the Russians. And, to add to the complications, the existing elephant is known to have survived in China as late as the period of the Shang Dynasty. When we consider these facts, taking into account the circumpolar distribution of design elements, scapulimancy, and other cultural traits such as myths, it would not be surprising if a few reminiscences of elephant-like creatures should be encountered in that northern region so closely linked to the Old World.

We come now to a summary of the views which the foregoing material seems to justify. First of all, and perhaps most importantly, it must be emphasized that in the period of Jefferson and Ashe, paleontology as a science was in its birth throes, "the sucession of species in the rocks undreamed of," to quote Osborn.[13]

[8] Ford, 1904, p. 427.

[9] Ashe, 1806.

[10] Letter to Colonel John Stuart, August 15, 1797.

[11] Howorth, 1887, p. 274. The work to which Howorth refers is Catesby, 1743, Vol. II, Appendix, p. vii. A fuller account is given by Simpson (*op. cit.*, p. 134), who quotes Catesby as follows: "At a place in Carolina called Stono was dug out of the Earth three or four Teeth of a large animal, which by the concurring Opinion of all the Negroes, native Africans, that saw them, were the Grinders of an Elephant, and in my Opinion they could be no other; I having seen some of the like that are brought from Africa." Simpson estimates the date of this episode as prior to 1739 and comments that these Negro slaves made the first technical identification of an American fossil vertebrate!

[12] It must be noted that few, if any, of the most suggestive stories quoted turn up with the persistence of really substantial legend. Frank Speck has pointed out the dangers of confusing accounts of supposedly extinct animals with purely mythological beings. Speck, 1935.

[13] Osborn, 1929, p. 201.

People, as a consequence, sought explanations of fossil remains which would relate these fossils to the immediate historical past[13a] or even demonstrate their survival in the unknown interior of the continent. There were, it must be emphasized, strong religious pressures encouraging the latter view. The wavering and contradictory hesitancy in the writings of Ashe, for example, are illustrative of the timidity with which the subject of extinction was being treated. There can be no doubt that this attitude played its part in encouraging the natives to refer these unknown animals in which the whites manifested such interest to out-of-the-way regions.

Big Bone Lick seems the center of a myth which was perpetuated in the literature. Even Koch's Osage story, reviewed by Ashley-Montagu, sounds suspiciously like a variant version of it. The fact that mammoth bones have been occasionally unearthed in deposits or areas referred to by the myths is not impressive when one considers the wide distribution of remains of mammoth and mastodon or the possibility that the bones themselves produced the legends.

In fact, these stories seem to show a suspicious growth in numbers just at the time when white interest and enthusiasm were keenest. We have noted also that African migrants acquainted with the huge bones of the elephant became widely distributed in the Southeast during this same period.

The results of our survey are sufficient, I believe, to make imperative a continued archaeological pursuit of the time of extinction. Certain of the tribes referred to by those impressed with legendary descriptions of huge beasts have moved about, even in the protohistoric period.[14] It would be better, if we seek to establish the existence of the mammoth or any other extinct form in the more recent past of these particular areas, to obtain its remains from verifiable archaeological levels. The lack of such evidence from horizons excavated to date tends to negate all claims for legendry which would demand the presence of the mammoth or the horse at the time of white intrusion, or immediately prior to it. Too often there is a tendency to speak as though these early reports settled the matter, even though the records show that similar beliefs were once entertained about the Old World mammoth, only to be abandoned later. We cannot, in all fairness, regard the matter as settled so long as the archaeological evidence does not confirm the myth and so long as other evidence shows that the American Indian, far from living in a vacuum, was being affected by the zoological enthusiasms of his white contemporaries.

[13a] John Rankin, for instance, in 1826, was still defending the view that fossil bones were those of existing species of animals, killed in the course of Roman games or in the hunts of Mongolian sovereigns.

[14] It is to be noted, for example, that the Shawnee seem to have moved west to the Ohio and the neighborhood of Big Bone Lick about 1728. They did not long precede the whites in that region about whose fossil remains they spoke so glibly. Weslager, 1943, pp. 346–347.

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