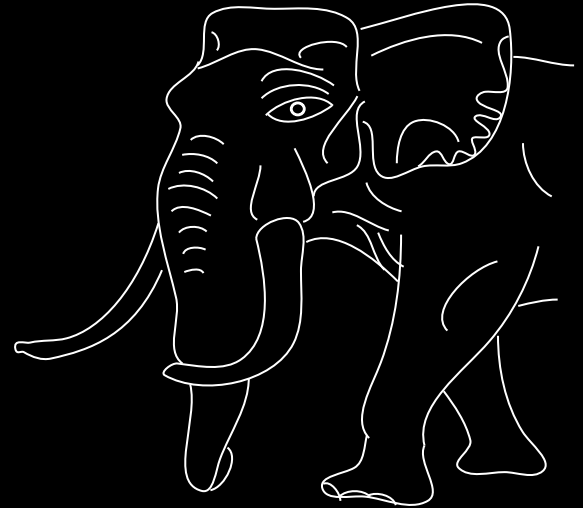
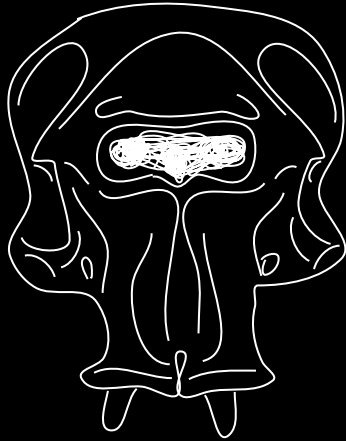


POLYPHEMUS OR PACHYDERM?

LOOKING TO THE POSSIBLE INSPIRATION FOR
THE CYCLOPS MYTH.



A Presentation by Avery Griffith, CLAS1640A

Why did I choose this topic?

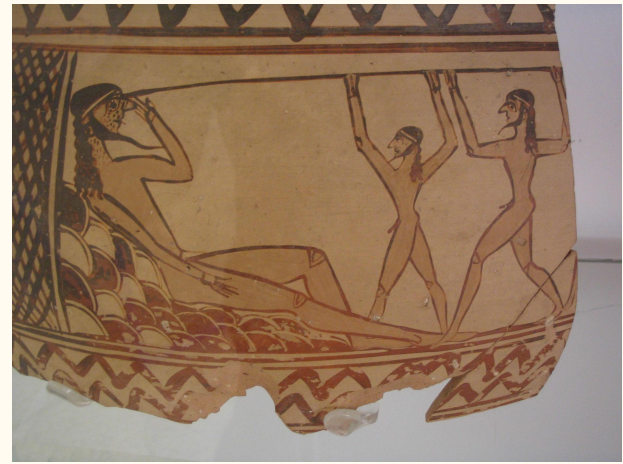
- I hold immense personal interest in zoological and paleontological subjects
- I'm personally very interested in trying to find the inspiration behind certain elements of mythology or fiction and see how they relate to natural history or historical events
- This topic involves one of the greatest stories ever told; Homer's The Odyssey, and may also involve some of the most bizarre & fascinating animals to ever exist.
- One of the critical themes of this course involves applying our perceptions and understandings of contemporarily-relevant concepts and ideas to our past. Which is very much applicable to the topic of this presentation.

The Cyclopes (as we know it)

A Cyclops, derived from the greek “*kúklos*” (meaning “Circular eye”) describes a race of giant, cannibalistic men often described to possess divine strengths, powers and heritage.

The earliest appearances of Cyclops in greek oral history or iconography arises in the 8th Century BC within the Homeric Odyssey. In book 9 where the hero Odysseus and his crew face off against the cyclops, Polyphemus. Besting the monster by inebriating him with wine and blinding him with a sharpened wooden stake.

Though it is never explicitly stated in the Homeric Odyssey that Polyphemus possessed only one eye, later depictions of cyclopes within Greek and Roman iconography depict Polyphemus and other Cyclopes with a singular eye.



Archaic or late geometric period krater depicting Odysseus and a friend stabbing the giant Polyphemus in his only eye, clay, 670 BCE. (Above)



A stone mask in the form of a cyclops, from Roman Arausio (Orange), France, 1st century CE. Archaeological Museum, Orange (Left)

Polyphemus, The “Textbook” Cyclops

In book 9 of the The Homeric Odyssey; The hero Odysseus and his men wind up on the island of Sicily and come face to face with the fearsome Cyclops Polyphemus. The following text shows translations describing Polyphemus and habits of Cyclopes culture, which will be important later on in this presentation.

“They hold no councils, have no common laws,

but live in caves on lofty mountaintops,

and each makes laws for his own wife and children,”

(Book 9: A Pirate in a Shepherd's Cave, lines 112-114)

Around that cave was built a lofty courtyard,

of deep-set stones, with tall pines rising up,

and leafy oaks. There lived a massive man

who shepherded his flocks all by himself.

He did not go to visit other people,

but kept apart, and did not know the ways

of custom. In his build he was a wonder,

a giant, not like men who live on bread,

but like a wooded peak in airy mountains,

rising alone above the rest. (Book 9: A Pirate in a Shepherd's Cave, lines 185-192)



Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein's 1802 head and shoulders portrait of Polyphemus

Did Cycloptic Giants really roam the ancient Mediterranean Islands?

No

Based on the descriptions and depictions of the “Greek” Cyclops, we can't say that such a creature (or race?) truly existed.

HOWEVER...

Scattered throughout the mediterranean islands lay the skeletons of a certain group of animals with STRIKINGLY similar morphological features to what one could mistake for the bones of these monocular Giants...

The remains of PYGMY ELEPHANTS

The ~~big~~ small deal with *Palaeoloxodon*

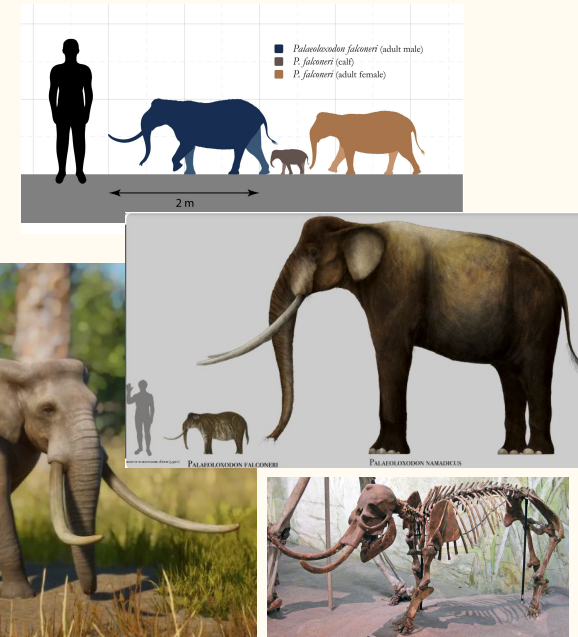
In the mid pleistocene, around 800,000 years ago a group of European Straight-Tusked Elephants (*Palaeoloxodon Antiquus*), Amongst the largest mammals to ever walk the earth, found their way to the mediterranean islands.

On these islands, resources like food and territory were much more confined than the mainland, benefiting animals that could accommodate with limited space.

What better way to make the most of the space you have, than to downsize?

Over the course of 300kya (or even as quickly as 100kya); these elephants became gradually smaller and smaller, through an evolutionary phenomena known as insular dwarfism.

By 500,000 years ago (possibly as early as 690kya), on the islands of sicily and malta, a new species no taller than a large dog had arose; *Palaeoloxodon Falconeri*



Size Comparison Of *P. Falconeri* with a person (top)

Size comparison of *P. Falconeri*, a person and *P. Namadicus* (only slightly larger than *P. Falconeri*'s direct ancestor) (right center)

Reconstruction of *P. Falconeri* (left)

P. Falconeri skeleton at Nebraska State Museum of Natural History (bottom right)

Cyclops Skulls?

The skulls of all *elephantidae* are recognisable for their non-obvious eye sockets on the sides of their heads, tusk sockets at the front base of their skulls and a large olfactory socket in the center of their faces; the attachment point for their trunk.

To many who are unfamiliar with anatomy of non human species, one could point out many similarities between the skull shape of humans to that of an elephant, especially when compared to the skulls of other animals from the mediterranean.

Would it not be fair to assume that the *ancient* ancient greek peoples looked to these fossilized skulls, not having access to living analogs nearby, and interpreted them to be the skulls of giant, monocular monsters?

Many historians believe that this is exactly the case, and that the origins of the myth of the cyclops stem from the early discoveries of these skulls!



Skull of *P. Falconeri* housed in Museo di Storia Naturale di Verona, showing off the prominent nasal cavity and tall, human skull-like shape.

Parallels to Polyphemus

The remains of *Palaeoloxodon Falconeri* can be found on the island of Sicily, where Polyphemus is said to reside.

The Morphology of an elephant's skull hold similarities to descriptions of Cyclopes and through some translations describing polyphemus (I.e. mention of a prominent brow and large stature and the presence of a large, seemingly eye-like socket in the center of the skull)

Polyphemus is mentioned to live alongside other cyclops, though we have no direct evidence of *P. Falconeri* living in social groups, based on all living analogs and social evidence in related species these dwarf elephants were almost certainly social, like Polyphemus.

Polyphemus, a male cyclops, lives away from the larger community of cyclops. Also assuming *P. Falconeri* social structure is similar to living elephants/ closely related extinct taxa, males of this species would be solitary.

Polyphemus lives in a cave. Much of the material uncovered of *P. Falconeri* has been uncovered specifically in caves on mediterranean islands (including sicily).

Is the Cyclops Skull Theory supported?

Many historians and experts (Such as Austrian Paleontologist; Othenio Abel) present/ support the theory that ancient Hellenistic peoples interpreted the skulls of *Palaeoloxodon* as that of cycloptic monsters.

But this theory is not sheltered from criticisms from other historians and experts (Such as Greek Mythology scholars; Mercedes Aguirre and Richard Buxton) argue that the evidence is unfalsifiable.

This theory must be taken with a grain of salt, we cannot definitively state that the Skulls of *Palaeoloxodon* were indeed responsible for the Cyclops myth.

But with striking correlations, both locationally and morphologically, one can't help but ponder on such a hypothesis...

“Monster Bones”, It’s happened before?

Interpretations of prehistoric fossils as “monster bones” would not be exclusive to that of the cyclops & Palaeoloxodon (If this interpretation is to be considered relevant).

Throughout history people have reconstructed the bones of the animals of antiquity as belonging to mythical creatures.



The partial fossilized skeleton of a Woolly Rhinoceros was uncovered in Magdeburg Germany in 1663, the bones were interpreted to belong to a unicorn, hence its title “The Magdeburg Unicorn” (left)

In 1590, the dragon statue below was sculpted by Ulrich Vogelsang, who modeled it after the skull of a fossilized Woolly Rhinoceros skull (bottom right) uncovered by quarrymen in Klagenfurt Austria in 1335 who at the time thought the skull belonged to a dragon.



Other Mythical creature bones?

Many other mythical creatures in literature and oral tradition (and specific examples of their renditions) may also stem from the discovery and misidentification of fossilized animal remains.

One such example includes specific renditions of the Griffin, as presented by historian and classical folklorist; Adrienne Mayor in her book *“The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, and Myth in Greek and Roman Times,”* to the product of ancient peoples reconstructing the mythical Griffin based off of the fossilized remains of dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals.



Golden Griffin head from 7th century BCE Iraq housed in Teheran Archeological Museum (Top Left)

Fully articulated skeleton (Bottom Right) and complete skull (Top Right) of Psittacosaurus, a dog-sized dinosaur from Mid-Cretaceous Central Asia. Their remains can be commonly found in nearby Uzbekistan though The 2 shown below were uncovered in China. Remains of this species are often found fully articulated. RESEMBLANCE IS PRETTY UNCANNY HERE!

Other crazy insular dwarfs & giants in the Pleistocene of the Mediterranean?

Sicilian/Maltese Dwarf Hippos?

Giant & Dwarf Mediterranean Deer?

Giant & Dwarf Maltese Swans?

Balearic Dwarf Cave Goats?

Dwarf Wild Ox?



1. *Tilos Elephant* - *Palaeoloxodon tiliensis* (Tilos, Dodecanese)

2. *Cyprus Elephant* - *Palaeoloxodon cypriotes* (Cyprus)

3. *Sardinian Giant Deer, male* - *Praemegaceros cazioti* (Sardinia)

4. *Cretan Deer, male* - *Candiacervus dorothenensis* (Crete)

5. *Cretan Deer, female + male* - *Candiacervus ropalophorus* (Crete)

6. *Dwarf Aurochs* - *Bos primigenius bubaloides* (Pianosa)

7. *Dwarf Hippopotamus* - *Hippopotamus minor* (Cyprus)

8. *Kasos Deer* - *Candiacervus cerigensis* (Kasos, Crete)

9. *Mouse Goat* - *Myotragus balearicus* (Majorca)



Reconstructions/ size comparisons of various Pleistocene dwarf/ giant mammals from the Mediterranean (left) Depiction of Maltese Giant Swan & *P. Falconeri* (above)

Thank you + sources

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