

The elephants in Rome: history, legends and anecdotes

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SUMMARY: In this paper the problem that the findings of elephant bones raised in the past is briefly discussed: were these elephants fossil or actual? In fact not all researchers thought these elephants to be fossil. Father Pianciani counted the elephants that were imported in ancient Rome and the elephants captured to Carthaginians, to demonstrate that fossils had been discovered. The theory about the disappearance of these animals and the legends and anecdotes are also discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past, the finding of bones of exotic animals in the Rome area was not considered always interesting, even if these animals today do not live at this latitude. Probably this apparent indifference was due to the conviction that these bones were of animals imported by the ancient Romans. For this reason that, when in the Rome area elephant bones were found, people thought these bones pertained to the elephants imported by ancient Romans or to the elephants captured Hannibal.

It is curious, but this conviction even today is deep-rooted into the population. In fact, some years ago, during an excavation intended to recover *Elephas antiquus* bones near Rome, the inhabitants thought these bones were bones of Hannibal elephants.

2. THE ELEPHANTS OF ANCIENT ROME

Although Ciampini in 1689 described some giant bones found near Vitorchiano (Viterbo) classifying them as fossil bones of elephant (Clerici 1908), in the first half of the XIX century some researchers still thought it was not possible that fossil elephants could be found in Roman sediments. In fact these findings were considered jokes of nature or the product of fermentation, due to the resemblance of some fossils with bones of living animals, and also

sketches of organisms or life germs enclosed into the rocks (De Angelis D'Ossat 1942).

Father G. B. Pianciani, of the Jesus Company, professor of Natural Sciences in Viterbo, devoted some of his works to prove the true nature of these bones (1817, 1836). In the work of 1836, Father Pianciani counts the elephants that were imported in ancient Rome. He mentions 4 elephants captured to Pyrrhus by Curius Dentatus in 479 and the more than a hundred that Metellus captured to Carthaginians; in additions there were several elephants that Claudius Pulchrus, L. Lucullus and M. Lucullus imported for the battles in the arenas. There were also some emperors (Nero, Domitianus, Septimius Severus) who imported exotic animals, among which were also elephants. The pachyderms were very much appreciated also by the population. The elephants were bred, also with success. In fact, Father Pianciani quoted Columella, that stated "*Inter moenia nostra natos animadvertimus elephantes*" (within our walls elephants were born).

3. ACTUAL OR FOSSIL ELEPHANTS?

Another big problem was to demonstrate that these bones were fossilised. But how does one demonstrate it? The problem was undoubtedly considerable, also because Father Pianciani well knew that some had asserted that these

bones were too recent and therefore that these bones were buried in historical time. On the other hand, analysing carefully some bones found near Magognano (Viterbo), he recognised that these bones were not too ancient. Besides he underlines that “è più che evidente dallo stato in cui si trovano rotte e disperse e dai frammenti e tritumi quasi tutti vulcanici, cui sono congiunte, che non sono di quadrupedi morti sul luogo, né sepolte da uomini caritatevoli, ma trasportate dalle acque, e da queste involuppate di terre, ghiaja, e ciottoli.” (because they are broken and scattered into volcanic sediments, it is clear that these bones were not buried by men but only floated down in a river, together with gravels and pebbles). Furthermore Father Pianciani rejects the assumption that “le acque hanno potuto condurre da’climi dell’Asia, e dell’Affrica nelle nostre contrade le spoglie indicate.” (water had led these bones from Asia and Africa to our country). Then he concludes “che queste ossa sono veramente fossili.”(that these bones are really fossils).

Finally Father Pianciani wonders: “qual sembra dunque che sia stata l’epoca, quale la causa del seppellimento delle nostre ossa?” (what is the age and why are these bones buried?). His answer is that the cause was “una grande, ma passeggera inondazione” (a big but temporary flood). And this flood was “l’ultima rivoluzione del globo” (the last revolution of the globe), it is the Flood.

Still, Father Pianciani wonders for what reason these giant animals are not quoted in ancient literature or in legends if these bones were not buried by “quella grande catastrofe o anteriormente, ma vissuti in epoca meno antica” (the Flood or before, but lived in recent time)?

4. LEGENDS

Legends about fossil elephants are not numerous. The best known is the legend of the Cyclopes: the findings of bones of *Elephas falconeri* originated, probably in Sicily, the legend of giant men with only one eye.

However several legends about giant humans were probably produced from the findings of bones of enormous animals (Abel 1945).

The finding of fossil bones of elephant, in 1459 near Viterbo is very interesting: “Nel detto tempo fu trovato le ossa di uno animale grandissimo in quello della solfatara di Viterbo. E alcuni portavano per alicorno, ma i più dicevano alifante a tempo del Diluvio” (Near Viterbo were found the bones of an enormous animal. Some thought they were bones of alicornus, others the bones of an elephant that lived at the time of the Flood) (De Angelis D’Ossat 1942). The *Alicornus* was a mysterious monster, probably half wolf and half alicorn (a horse with wings and one horn on the head).



Fig.1 - Fragment of skull of a juvenile specimen of *Elephas antiquus*, found in Via dei Fori imperiali, Rome.



Fig.2 - Skull of *Elephas antiquus*, found at Montesacro, Rome, ventral view.

It is also interesting to underline the existence of another legendary animal: the *Odontotyrannus*.

But what is Odontotyrannus? Odontotyrannus was a monster characterised by three horns. It ate humans and lived in the Ganges river. Probably, the legend of this animal was born from the findings of tusks of elephants. Father Pianciani wrote (1836) that this animal was quoted for the first time by Aesop, then by G. Valerio, Cedreno and Glica; Cedreno and Glica thought it was an amphibian, while Cuvier a mastodon.

Eichwald (1853) complicated this problem by describing some teeth of elephants as those of "*Elephas odontotyrannus*".

It is clear that about this legendary animal there was, and there is still now, a lot of uncertainty.

5. DISAPPEARANCE

Very interesting is a note that Ponzi expounded at the Pontifical Academy of Nuovi Lincei, in the 1862. In this scientific note he spoke about the geology of Central Apennines (Italy), and indirectly about the extinction of the elephants. It is important to underline that Ponzi considered all the elephant species to be of

Pliocenic age and not Pleistocene age. The following text is a summary of Ponzi's opinion.

- In the Pliocene the elephants, together rhinos and hippopotamus, lived in the woods that covered a wide part of the Apennines. The climate was the same all over the earth, and very similar to that of the tropical areas.

At the end of the Pliocene, the earth cooled down so much that "le acque dei monti tutte si gelarono" (the waters froze in the mountains). Therefore the animals that were not able to live in these extreme climatic conditions, such as "*Elephas antiquus, E. meridionalis, E. primigenius, Hippopotamus major, Rhinoceros megarhinus*", died and were extinguished. Some other animals took refuge in caves; being so protected there lived as long as the temperature returned to acceptable values. Anyway, some of them died in these caves thus making the bone beds.

When the temperature increased, the climate was similar to the present one. Life grew again: "quel residuo di animali per avventura salvati nelle spelonche esce in libertà; con questi compariscono nuovi esseri, e la vita generale assume un carattere particolare attinente al nuovo ordine delle cose" (the animals came out from caves; new species appear and life submit itself to the new environments). The elephants

lived only in the equatorial areas, where there is a hotter climate.

In the Apennines mountains, due to the increasing of the temperature, the ices thawed and “grandi correnti diluviane ebbero origine”, “sbaragliando tutto ciò che incontrano” (produced devastating floods that destroyed every thing). Such floods produced enormous sedimentary deposits, as breccias where today it is possible to find several fossil bones

6. ANECDOTES AND CURIOSITIES

It is curious but sometimes tusks and bones were not recognised as such: for that reason these materials were thrown out!

Meli (1918), quotes a finding near the monastery of S. Pietro in Vincoli. In the year 1916, during the excavation of a hole, there were found some bones and teeth of an elephant. Initially the workers considered such materials as stones and then some were piled up in the ground, others thrown into the same hole. Only two years later (April 1918) a bricklayer showed Meli part of a tusk, thinking it was a putrefied trunk of a tree. Immediately Meli realised that this “trunk” was in reality a fragment of a tusk; so he was accompanied by the bricklayer to the hole and recovered the other parts of the tusk and the teeth. These parts of elephant were classified by Meli as “*Elephas africanus*”.

An other curiosity is the argument between Tuccimei and Clerici (see Clerici 1891) about the age in which lived “*E. meridionalis*”. In fact, Tuccimei (1891) thought that “*E. meridionalis*” lived in the Pliocene while Clerici (1888) considers it belonging to Pleistocene.

Tuccimei, in his work of 1891 attacks and criticises Clerici, since he thinks it is not possible to find *Corbicula fluminalis* together with “*E. meridionalis*”, Clerici (1891) counter-attacks Tuccimei and demonstrates by quoting several Authors, that *Corbicula fluminalis* is found together with “*E. meridionalis*”. The quarrel is based on fossil material found at Rome and in the area around Rome and, due to the style of their quarrels, can be argued that Tuccimei and Clerici were not friends.

Finally a curiosity. Few people know that

during the building of the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, while excavating the foundations for the penultimate pillar (east side), at 14 meters of depth, was found a giant skeleton of elephant. This excavation cut the skeleton, damaging it. After a check, this skeleton was not excavated, because it was too expensive and because it required a lot of time (Antonioni 1970)! It is important to underline that this finding was located about fifty meters from the Campidoglio, in downtown Rome.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Today we smile when we read scientific papers written about a century ago. In fact in these recent years scientific progress has been very rapid.

Once those who thought that elephants lived in Italy, were considered almost heretic. Father Pianciani, in order to demonstrate that the bones found were fossils, had to count also the Pyrrhus's and Hannibal's elephants! Now we all know that elephants lived also in Italy and then at Rome. Anyway, the finding of a skeleton of elephant still arouses among students great emotions.

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