

Did endemic dwarf elephants survive on Mediterranean islands up to protohistorical times?

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SUMMARY: The wall paintings of the 18th Dynasty tomb of Rekh-mi-Rē, vizier of Thutmosis III, at Thebes (Egypt) show, among other figures, that of a small-sized elephant borne by the Syrian tributaries as a gift to the Egyptian pharaoh. It has been observed that this proboscidean cannot be an immature specimen in view of its large tusks, and that it could be referred to the Asiatic elephant, which seems to have lived in historical times in the western Near East. But, in the light of archaeological and paleontological evidence, it cannot be excluded that the elephant depicted in the Rekh-mi-R tomb could also represent a dwarf proboscidean, possibly imported to Egypt from somewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean islands where endemic dwarf elephants might still have survived up to protohistorical times.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to paleontological evidence, several Mediterranean islands have provided remains of Middle/Late Pleistocene proboscideans. These are Giglio (Tuscan archipelago), Sardinia, Favignana (Egadi islands), Sicily, Malta, Kythera, Euboea, Cyclades (Milos, Kythnos, Seriphos, Delos, and Naxos), Crete, Dodecanese islands (Rhodes, Tilos and Kos), Icaria, Samos, Chios, Gökçeada (Imbros), and Cyprus (Kotsakis 1990, Masseti 1993, Caloi *et al.* 1996). Recently fossil elephant teeth have also been discovered on the island of Astypalaia (Dodecanese, Greece) (Maria Kollas, pers. com.). Most of these forms are reputed as endemic to the islands - they are often dwarf - and appear to derive from the straight-tusked elephant, *Elephas antiquus* Falconer & Cautley 1847, a species dispersed up to the Late Pleistocene in the western Palaearctic. It is generally believed that all these elephants became extinct in pre-Neolithic times. But, in the light of archaeological evidence, one of these forms should have survived further into the Holocene.

2. THE DWARF ELEPHANTS OF THE ISLAND OF TILOS (DODECANESE, GREECE)

Available evidence, in fact, records, the existence of dwarf elephants in relatively recent times in only one Mediterranean island, the island of Tilos (Dodecanese, Greece). Located between Rhodes and Kos in the Eastern Aegean sea, at about 20 km from the nearest point of the Anatolian mainland (Bozburun peninsula), this island was inhabited by an endemic fauna which was discovered in the cave of Charkadio and included dwarf elephant remains (Fig. 1). These proboscideans have been described as belonging to the genus *Elephas* (Symeonidis *et al.* 1973, Theodorou 1983, 1988), but are still specifically unnamed (Alcover *et al.* 1998). They have often been compared to *Elephas falconeri* Busk, 1867, a taxon described from Sicily and Malta (Ambrosetti 1968). The form is, however, slightly larger than the Sicilian pygmy elephant, whilst the age of the deposits of the discovery site ranges from the very late Pleistocene to the Holocene (Theodorou 1983, 1988). Two dates were obtained through the ¹⁴C dating of the elephant bones: 7090±680 and 4390 ±600 bp (Bachmayer & Symeonidis

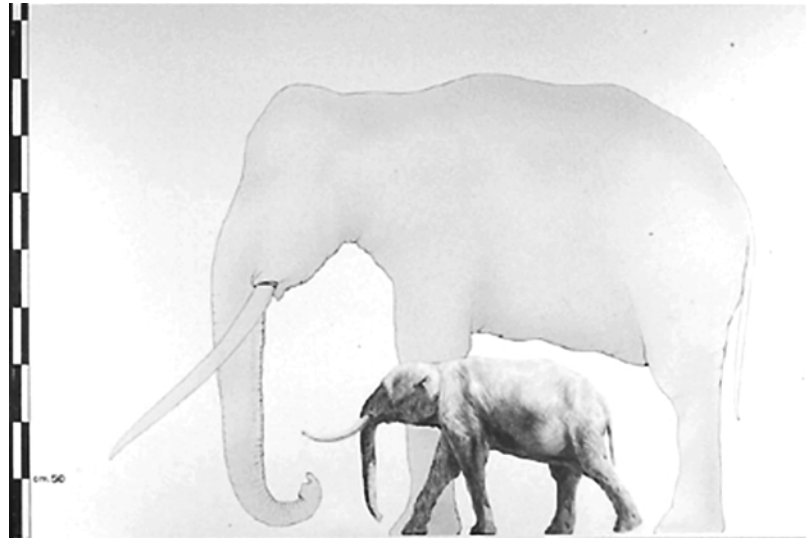


Fig. 1 - Artist's reconstruction of the extinct dwarf elephant, *Elephas antiquus cf. falconeri* Busk, 1867, of Late Pleistocene-Holocene Tilos, adapted from the osteological material in the Museum of Megalochorio (Tilos, Greece), and compared to the size of its supposed ancestor *E. antiquus* Falconer & Cautley, 1847 (drawing by A. Mangione).

1975, Bachmayer *et al.* 1976). These datings relate to different parts of the cave and appear to prove the simultaneous existence of the elephants and post-Palaeolithic man (Bachmayer & Symeonidis 1975, Bachmayer *et al.* 1976, Bachmayer *et al.* 1984). Furthermore, if such dating is reliable, we can presume this taxon survived at least until the beginning of the Aegean Bronze Age.

3. THE "PYGMY ELEPHANT" OF THE WALL PAINTINGS OF THE 18TH DYNASTY TOMB OF REKN-MIR, AT THEBES (EGYPT)

Several years ago, Rosen (1994) and White (1994) carried out a correspondence in the pages of *Nature* on the interpretation of the figure of a small-sized elephant depicted on the wall-paintings of the 18th Dynasty tomb of Rekh-mi-Rē, vizier of Thutmosis III and Amenhotep II (from about 1470 to 1445 BC) (cf. Davies 1935), at Thebes (Egypt) (Fig. 2). Sparked off by the assumption of Lister (1993) that Siberian dwarf mammoths lived up to the time of the Egyptian pharaohs, this correspondence led Rosen to suppose that the decoration

effectively portrayed a dwarf mammoth, whereas White claimed that it was actually a small-sized African elephant. As already noted by the two correspondents, the image represents an adult specimen characterized by well developed tusks. According to other authors, such as Davies (1935), and Osborne & Osbornova (1998), it displays morphological patterns which might be referred to Asian elephants, *Elephas maximus* L., 1758, that possibly lived in the Near East at the time. According in fact to pictorial, written and osteological evidence, it seems that wild herds of proboscideans lived in the ancient land of Niya, located in western Syria, between the late second and early first millennium BC (Hatt 1959, Buitenhuis 1990, Gabolde 2000). Regarding the peculiar size of the elephant in the Egyptian painting, as far back as 1935, Davies N. de Garis remarked that the artists kept the animals small so that they would not dominate the tribute bearing procession, although the length of the tusks tends to suggest that they were thinking of an adult specimen. White (1994) and Osborne & Osbornova (1998), also noted that the differential scale of the human and animal



Fig.2 - Detail of the wall-painting of the tomb of Rekh-mi-Rē, at Thebes (Egypt), showing a small-sized elephant borne by the Syrian tributaries (photograph by N. Douek Galante).

figures is the result of stylistic convention rather than naturalistic representation (cf. Pirenne 1962, Aldred 1984). It can be observed, however, that this conventional Egyptian method of portraying the size of animal and human beings is not consistently adopted in the wall-decoration of the Rekh-mi-R tomb. The tusks of the portrayed specimen are in fact much smaller and inconsistent with those shown being carried by the Syrian to the right, and the Minoan and Nubian bearers pictured in other sections of the wall-painting (cf. Evans 1928). This incongruence contrasts with the representation of other animals in the same picture. For example, the giraffe portrayed with the Nubian bearers takes up the entire available vertical space of the register. It therefore seems arguable that rather than with evidence of the stylistic convention to which the artists had to conform, we may actually be dealing with the portrait of a dwarf elephant. But, as already observed, there is no fully convincing evidence for the identification with the morphology of an Asiatic elephant. Thus, it may be possible to trace the morphological characteristics of the proboscidean to geographical species closer to ancient Egypt, possibly even among the

Mediterranean islands where paleontological evidence records the occurrence of dwarf and pygmy elephants from at least as far back as the Middle Pleistocene. But how could it come about that an insular dwarf elephant was brought to Egypt by Near-Eastern tributaries? How did they get hold of it? And which Mediterranean island did it originally come from?

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the paintings of the Rekh-mi-R tomb, the Near-Eastern tributaries borne the small-sized elephant, together with other goods which were so clearly precious for the Egyptian market, that they could be offered to the pharaoh. In this contest, an adult dwarf elephant would have cut a fine figure. Its value could have been related more to its curiosity appeal than to its effective economic worth, or even to both. On the other hand, there is considerable archaeological evidence for the circulation and trade of materials and ideas between the Mediterranean and south-eastern Asia. Cultural interaction between Crete, Cyprus, the Near East and Egypt increased markedly during the Late

Bronze Age (Stubbings 1951, Benzi 1996). The main maritime route connecting the Aegean to the Near East during the Bronze Age passed between Rhodes and the peninsula of Bozburun (Niemeier 1998), located a few marine miles off the northern coast of the island of Tilos. And the Minoan presence on Tilos and the other islands of the so-called "eastern Aegean string" is documented from at least ca. 2000-1800 BC onwards (Sampson 1983, Niemeier, 1998). This is not to say that the living proboscidean depicted in the Rekh-mi-R tomb is definitely the portrait of a Tilos elephant actually captured by the Aegean Bronze Age people on the island. It may have been a dwarf representative of the genus *Elephas* which survived on any Eastern Mediterranean island during the time of the Minoan-Mycenean control. It cannot be excluded that from this as yet unidentified island the dwarf elephant could have been exported to a mainland area where it could have represented a precious and rare curiosity to be exchanged as costly gift between Aegean, Near Eastern and Egyptian rulers. While hopefully awaiting a revised dating for the elephants of Tilos, further investigations are also needed to better understand the significance of the Egyptian painting.

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