

Museum labels and fieldnotes

George Lyras

The vertebrate collection of the Museum of Paleontology and Geology of the University of Athens contains a complete skull of a woolly rhinoceros (*Coelodonta antiquitatis*) and a molar of a woolly mammoth (*Mammuthus primigenius*). They were described and figured by Melentis (1961, 1966) as elements of the Pleistocene fauna, which was discovered near Megalopolis in the Peloponnesus (southern Greece).

This skull of *Coelodonta* is the only known specimen of the genus in Greece. There are two reports of uncertain occurrences of the woolly mammoth, one from Macedonia and the other from Thessaly, both in northernmost Greece, but Megalopolis in southern Greece provides the only certain determination of the species in Greece (Doukas & Athanassiou, 1999).

Some years ago in a meeting, Evangelos Velitzelos (University of Athens) was explaining that there is no palaeobotanical or geological evidence that the ice caps had ever reached Greece during the Pleistocene period. To the question "how then do you explain the presence of a woolly rhino in Peloponnesus?", he replied, "The rhino has legs, maybe it walked all the way down, from Poland till here". It was a funny way out of course, but the truth is equally unbelievable. The rhinoceros skull was never excavated in the Peloponnesus; it was simply acquired, together with some mammoth molars from Ukraine some time at the beginning of the twentieth century.

How could this have happened? Melentis wrote an elaborate doctoral dissertation on

the fossil elephants of Megalopolis and he published a series of articles (e.g. Melentis, 1961, 1963, 1966) on all the fossils from Megalopolis, including the skull of the woolly rhinoceros (Fig. 1) and the molar of the mammoth. The fossils from Megalopolis were excavated by Skoufos in 1902 (Fig. 2) and they remained in boxes till the sixties, when Melentis started to work on them. At that point the material from Megalopolis got mixed with some fossils from Ukraine. This happened because these fossils have the same brownish-black colour (Fig. 3) and obviously at that time there was no good record of the fossils stored in the collections. In his papers, he described several Middle Pleistocene species (which is the actual age of the locality), some Late Pleistocene species (the material from Ukraine and some incorrect determinations) and one Early Pleistocene elephant as well (the product of incorrect determination). It seems that Melentis never suspected any mistake. Neglecting the field notes written by Skoufos which clearly stressed



Fig 1 Lateral view of the skull of the woolly rhinoceros, *Coelodonta antiquitatis*, from the collection of the Museum of Palaeontology and Geology, Athens, Greece, wrongly ascribed to the Pleistocene fauna of Megalopolis, Greece.

Zij-aanzicht van de schedel van de wolharige neushoorn, *Coelodonta antiquitatis*, uit de collectie van het Museum van Paleontologie en Geologie, Athene, Griekenland, ten onrechte toegeschreven aan de pleistocene fauna van Megalopolis, Griekenland.

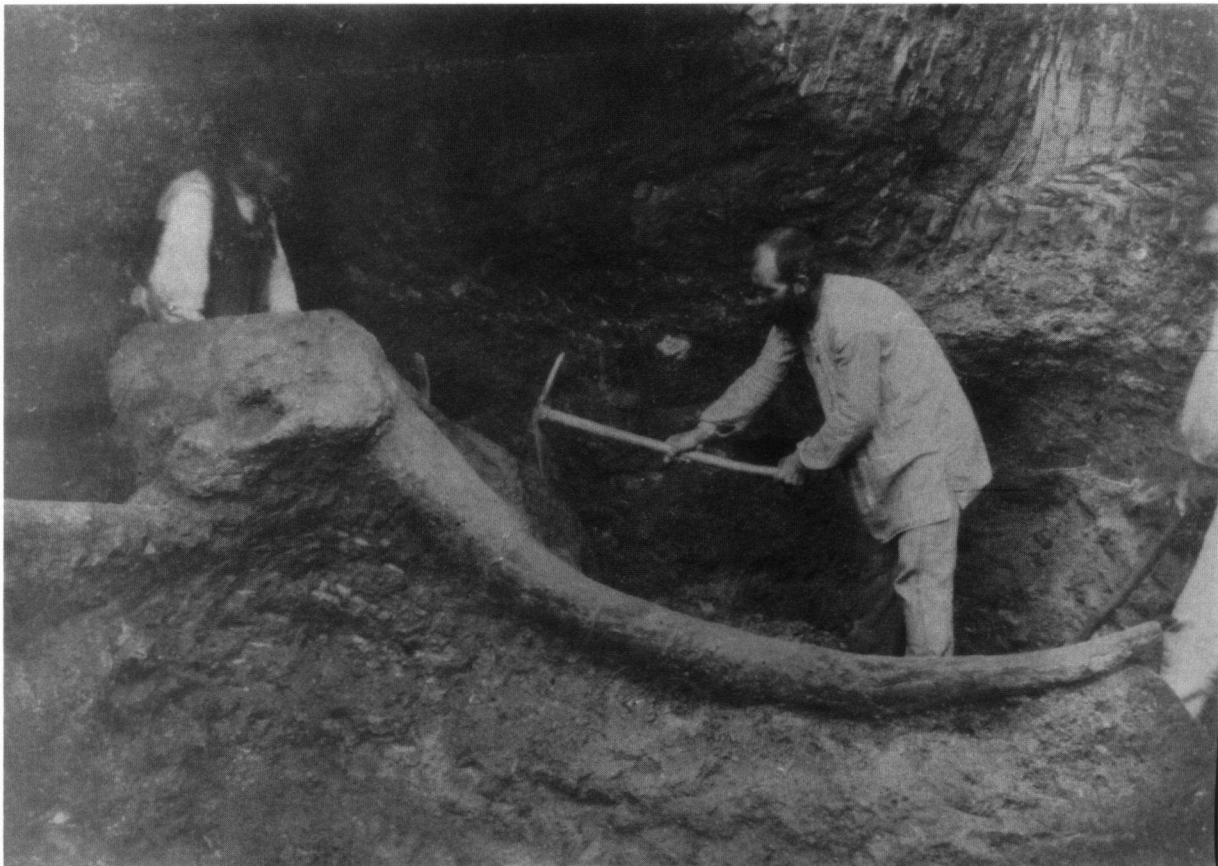


Fig 2 Two old field photos from the excavations of Skoufos in Megalopolis in 1902. Archive of the Museum of Palaeontology and Geology, Athens, Greece.

Twee oude veldfoto's van de opgravingen van Skoufos in Megalopolis in 1902. Archief van het Museum van Paleontologie en Geologie, Athene, Griekenland.

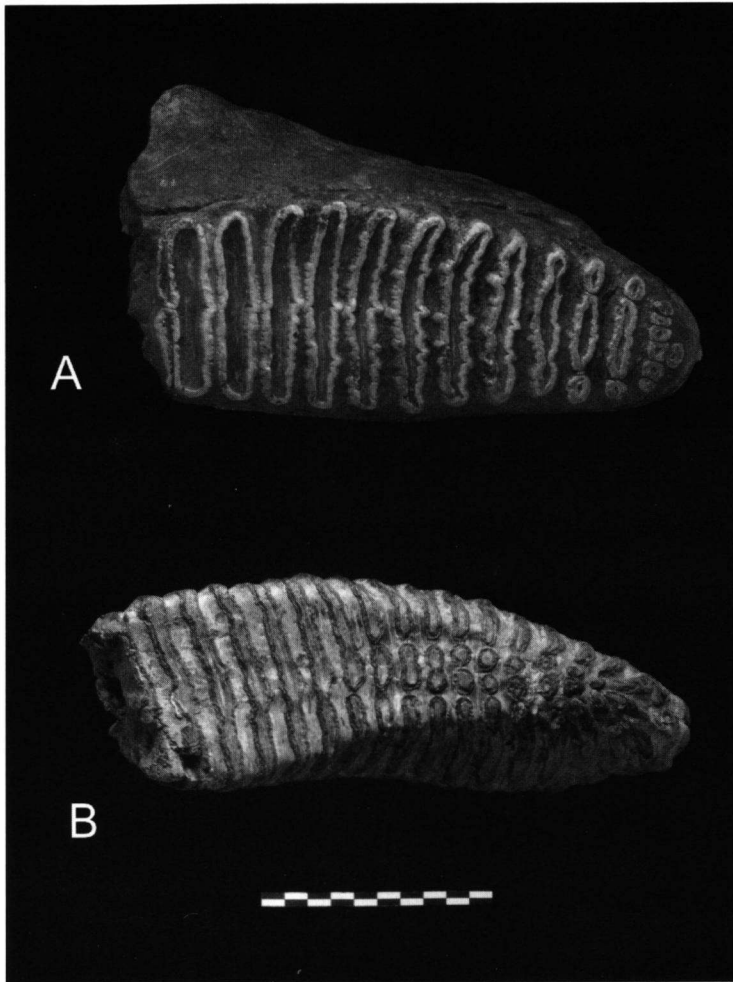


Fig 3 Occlusal view of elephant molars. A = *Elephas antiquus* from Megalopolis, B = *Mammuthus primigenius*, which was supposed to come from Megalopolis as well, but in reality of Ukrainian origin.

Oclusievlak van olifantskiezen. A = *Elephas antiquus* van Megalopolis, B = *Mammuthus primigenius*, eveneens verondersteld uit Megalopolis te komen, maar in werkelijkheid afkomstig uit Oekraïne.

that all the material originated from a single cross section of only a few meter thick, Melentis assumed that the material had been collected from a wider area and therefore it was very well possible that it contained fossils from all stages of the Pleistocene.

Recently, Athanassios Athanassiou (Hellenic Ministry of Culture) started field work in Megalopolis and he found only Middle Pleistocene vertebrates. George Illiopoulos (University of Crete) took some samples from the *Coelodonta* skull and from some *Elephas antiquus* bones from the old collection and conducted a REE (Rare Earth Elements) analysis. He discovered that the rhinoceros skull was fossilized in a different environment than the other fossils.

Socrates Roussiakis (University of Athens) went through the archive of the University and found out that the University acquired some fossil mammal remains from Ukraine (at that time part of Russia) in 1904. Actually, in the collections of the Museum there are some mammoth molars with notes written in Cyrillic characters, indicating that they come from the Ukraine as well. These molars are very similar to the mammoth molar that was thought to have been excavated at Megalopolis.

Today, it is obvious that the fossils of the old collection of Skoufos all belong to the typical Middle Pleistocene faunal elements of Europe. The molar of the woolly mammoth and the skull of the woolly rhino are, simply, mistakenly related to the rest as a result of bad curatorship.

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