

HOLIDAY REPORT

Fossil dwarf elephants on Tilos

The Greek island of Tilos is reached by tourists in three hours by ferry from Rhodes. Around 50,000 years ago, during a period when sea level in the Eastern Mediterranean was much lower, a number of African elephants swam from what is now the Turkish mainland to the island of Tilos. Isolated there, they developed in to smaller creatures in response to the conditions on the island.

In 1971, Prof. Symeonidis from Athens University visited the island to investigate reports of human bones found in rocks on a beach near the capital of the island, Megalo Horio. He was told of bones in the nearby Harkadio Cave, since when, ongoing digs each summer by staff and students of Athens University have revealed partial and damaged skeletons of over forty elephants. These have a maximum height of 1.5 m, compared to the normal height of an African elephant of 4.0 m.

The Harkadio Cave can only be visited if the geologists are present, but in nearby Megalo Horio there is a small museum under the Town Hall devoted to the finds from the Elephant Cave. It is opened by request at the Town Hall, when Vicky will enthusiastically give a guided tour of the museum and its exhibits providing an English translation of the Greek text. If time is available she will follow this up with a tour of the adjacent Church and give a talk on the history of the island from the Neolithic to the present day. Most of the bones have been taken to Athens University for study but the partial skeletons of one adult and one juvenile are imaginatively displayed along with information about the finds and

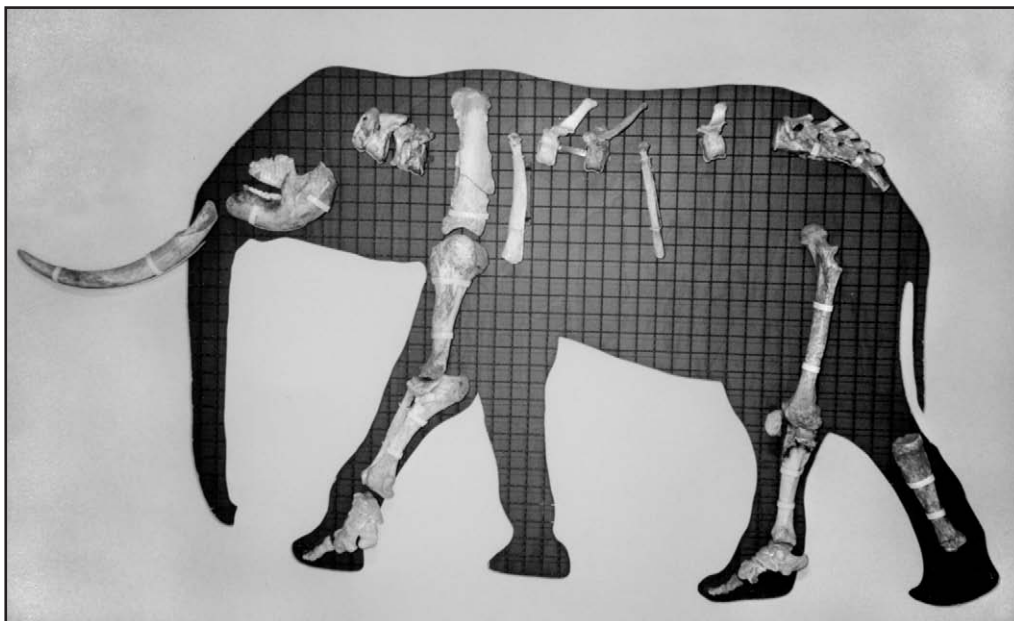
background. A purpose-built museum is under construction adjacent to the cave, and it is hoped that more of the material in Athens will be brought back to the island when this is opened.

It is thought that the elephants were sheltering in the cave when a roof collapsed, probably due to an earthquake, and killed them around 3000-4000 years ago. Their remains were then buried by a deposit of pumice erupted from the neighbouring island of Nysiros. The eruption and earthquake events could well have been connected. It is surmised that the loss of a part of the elephant population, possibly including the matriarchs, resulted in the colony becoming extinct. However, there is evidence that man worked the bones at the same time, so human involvement in the extinction of the elephants has not been ruled out.

The geology of the island appears to be limestone unconformably over volcanics, all now very strongly folded. The limestone is metamorphosed and altered, with crystalline bands following the bedding, and much of both the limestone and its veins are bright red. There are some local drift deposits of pumice that is thought to have come from an eruption on Nysiros about 8000BC. Soils filling voids in the limestones are bright red, and similar material containing limestone blocks is being exposed in ravines re-excavated by modern streams. The writer would like to know more about the geology of this fascinating island.

Tilos is very small and quite mountainous, rising to 651 m. It is unusually green and well watered for an island in the Aegean. In spring there is a wealth of wild flowers and abundant birds. With a little help from the island bus it can be thoroughly walked using old donkey paths in about a week.

Alan Filmer



Fossil bones of the dwarf elephant that have been recovered from the Harkadio Cave on Tilos.