



KARL SHUKER hails a palaeontological discovery that may shed light on a monstrous cryptid

A FOSSIL NANDI BEAR?

One day in 2013, while conducting postgraduate research at Kenya's Nairobi Museum, palaeontologist Matthew Borths from Ohio University opened a cabinet drawer and made a truly incredible discovery: an enormous fossil lower jawbone bearing some teeth, plus some individual teeth, a heel bone, and some distal toe bones. Borths learned that they had been collected in 1978-1980 during excavations at an early Miocene fossil bed named Meswa Bridge, in western Kenya, but had never been formally examined, lying forgotten and unstudied ever since. Moreover, he discovered that another Ohio University palaeontological researcher, Nancy Stevens, had also seen them in that same drawer when she too had been conducting research at Nairobi Museum. After Borths contacted her, they researched the remains and revealed that they belonged to a hitherto undescribed but quite enormous species of primitive mammalian carnivore known as a hyaenodont.

The hyaenodont lineage's most recent fossils are around five million years old (those of the giant new species were some 22 million years old), after which they apparently became extinct. Using three different methods to estimate size, Borths and Stevens obtained estimated total body masses for this very belatedly recognised species of 280kg (617lb), 1,308kg (2,884lb), and 1,554kg (3,426lb), plus a total length estimated at up to 2.5m (8ft) and a height of up to 0.75m (2ft 6in). If the creature had attained the upper estimates of mass, length, and height, it would have been at least as big as the polar bear, today's largest terrestrial mammalian carnivore. In a 17 April 2019 *Journal of Paleontology* paper, they formally named this giant hyaenodont *Simbakubwa kutokaafrika*, which is Swahili for 'big lion from Africa'. For although entirely unrelated to it, this huge beast would definitely have been an apex predator in its time, just like the lion is today.

All in all, an exceedingly interesting palaeontological find – but what bearing does it have upon cryptozoology? Let's rephrase that question as: don't you just love totally random coincidences? Kisumu County in western Kenya contains Meswa Bridge, the site where the long-overlooked remains of a monstrously huge fossil mammalian carnivore were discovered; and Kisumu County just so happens to be situated immediately below western Kenya's Nandi County, which contains the dense, once-contiguous Nandi Forest

where a monstrously huge mystery mammalian carnivore dubbed the Nandi bear has been reported many times.

But what is, or was, the Nandi bear? (Alleged sightings during the past 70 years have been far fewer than back in the early 20th century, leading to speculation that even if it were real, it may now have died out.) In fact, this ferocious, greatly feared cryptid has been described in so many different ways by eyewitnesses down through the years that some cryptozoologists, including Dr Bernard Heuvelmans and myself, have opined that the Nandi bear is almost certainly a non-existent composite. That is to say, it has been 'created' via the erroneous lumping together by native traditions and Western investigators alike of sightings of several very different animals, known and unknown, which may include such disparate species as hyaenas, baboons, large male ratels, aardvarks, and possibly even one or more prehistoric survivors, like the giant short-faced hyaena *Pachycrocuta brevirostris*,

the African bear *Agriotherium africanum*, the giant baboon *Dinopithecus ingens*, and/or maybe one of those bizarre claw-footed ungulates known as chalicotheres. All of these were still in existence in Africa as recently as the Pleistocene (2.5 million to 11.7 thousand years ago), as confirmed by fossil finds.

Should a surviving hyaenodontid (not necessarily *Simbakubwa* itself, but potentially a modern-day reclusive descendant, one whose morphology and gait may have changed somewhat during the 22 million years of evolution occurring from *Simbakubwa*'s time into modern times) now also be added to this list? Who can say? Everything about the Nandi bear is highly speculative, but my cryptozoological antennae definitely began twitching when I saw how unexpectedly close to one another were the fossil bed where *Simbakubwa*'s remains were found and the Nandi Forest where the Nandi bear was traditionally reported. Just for the record, I have modified my opinion recently as to the most likely identity of the Nandi bear, thanks to a remarkable and exceedingly exciting but previously obscure report that I only lately obtained, and which I am now actively investigating. More news if and when I have it.

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