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978-1-108-00457-2 - Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature

Thomas Henry Huxley

Excerpt

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I.—ON THE NATURAL HISTORY

OF THE

MAN-LIKE APES.

ANCIENT traditions, when tested by the severe processes of modern investigation, commonly enough fade away into mere dreams: but it is singular how often the dream turns out to have been a half-waking one, presaging a reality. Ovid foreshadowed the discoveries of the geologist: the Atlantis was an imagination, but Columbus found a western world: and though the quaint forms of Centaurs and Satyrs have an existence only in the realms of art, creatures approaching man more nearly than they in essential structure, and yet as thoroughly brutal as the goat's or horse's half of the mythical compound, are now not only known, but notorious.

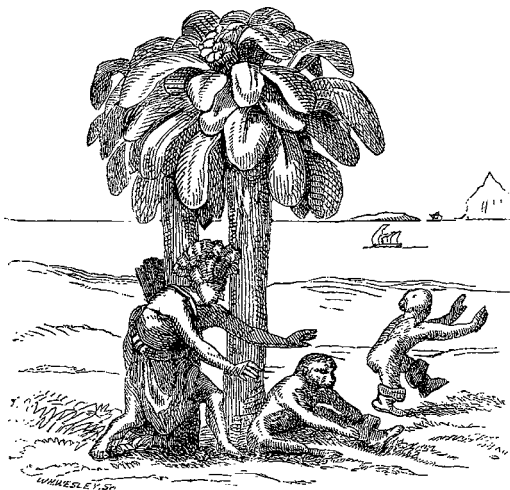


FIG. 1.—*Simiæ magnatum deliciæ*.—De Bry, 1598.

is entitled “De Animalibus quæ in hac provincia reperiuntur.”

* REGNUM CONGO: hoc est VERA DESCRIPTIO REGNI AFRICANI QUOD TAM AB INCOLIS QUAM LUSITANIS CONGUS APPELLATUR, per Philippum Pigafetta.

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tur,” and contains a brief passage to the effect that “in the Songan country, on the banks of the Zaire, there are multitudes of apes, which afford great delight to the nobles by imitating human gestures.” As this might apply to almost any kind of apes, I should have thought little of it, had not the brothers De Bry, whose engravings illustrate the work, thought fit, in their eleventh “Argumentum,” to figure two of these “*Simiæ magnatum deliciæ*.” So much of the plate as contains these apes is faithfully copied in the woodcut (fig. 1), and it will be observed that they are tail-less, long-armed, and large-eared; and about the size of Chimpanzees. It may be that these apes are as much figments of the imagination of the ingenious brothers as the winged, two-legged, crocodile-headed dragon which adorns the same plate; or, on the other hand, it may be that the artists have constructed their drawings from some essentially faithful description of a Gorilla or a Chimpanzee. And, in either case, though these figures are worth a passing notice, the oldest trustworthy and definite accounts of any animal of this kind date from the 17th century, and are due to an Englishman.

The first edition of that most amusing old book, “*Purchas his Pilgrimage*,” was published in 1613, and therein are to be found many references to the statements of one whom Purchas terms “Andrew Battell (my neere neighbour, dwelling at Leigh in Essex) who served under Manuel Silvera Perera, Governor under the King of Spaine, at his city of Saint Paul, and with him went farre into the countrey of Angola;” and again, “my friend, Andrew Battle, who lived in the kingdom of Congo many yeares,” and who, “upon some quarell betwixt the Portugals (among whom he was a sergeant of a band) and him, lived eight or nine moneths in the woodes.” From this weather-beaten old soldier, Purchas

fettam, olim ex Edoardo Lopez acroamatis lingua Italica excerpta, num Latio sermone donata ab August. Cassiod. Reinio. Iconibus et imaginibus rerum memorabilium quasi vivis, opera et industria Joan. Theodori et Joan. Israelis de Bry, fratrum exornata. Francofurti, MDXCVIII.

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was amazed to hear “of a kinde of Great Apes, if they might so bee termed, of the height of a man, but twice as bigge in feature of their limmes, with strength proportionable, hairie all over, otherwise altogether like men and women in their whole bodilyshape.* They lived on such wilde fruits as the trees and woods yielded, and in the night time lodged on the trees.”

This extract is, however, less detailed and clear in its statements than a passage in the third chapter of the second part of another work—“*Purchas his Pilgrimes*,” published in 1625, by the same author—which has been often, though hardly ever quite rightly, cited. The chapter is entitled, “The strange adventures of Andrew Battell, of Leigh in Essex, sent by the Portugals prisoner to Angola, who lived there and in the adjoining regions neere eighteene yeeres.” And the sixth section of this chapter is headed—“Of the Provinces of Bongo, Calongo, Mayombe, Manikesocke, Motimbas: of the Ape Monster Pongo, their hunting: Idolatries; and divers other observations.”

“This province (Calongo) toward the east bordereth upon Bongo, and toward the north upon Mayombe, which is nineteen leagues from Longo along the coast.

“This province of Mayombe is all woods and groves, so overgrowne that a man may travaile twentie days in the shadow without any sunne or heat. Here is no kind of corne nor graine, so that the people liveth onely upon plantanes and roots of sundrie sorts, very good; and nuts; nor any kinde of tame cattell, nor hens.

“But they have great store of elephant's flesh, which they greatly esteeme, and many kinds of wild beasts; and great store of fish. Here is a great sandy bay, two leagues to the northward of Cape Negro,† which is the port of Mayombe. Sometimes the Portugals lade logwood in this bay. Here is

* “Except this that their legges had no calves.”—[Ed. 1626.] And in a marginal note, “These great apes are called Pongo's.”

† *Purchas' note*.—Cape Negro is in 16 degrees south of the line.

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a great river, called Banna : in the winter it hath no barre, because the generall winds cause a great sea. But when the sunne hath his south declination, then a boat may goe in ; for then it is smooth because of the raine. This river is very great, and hath many ilands and people dwelling in them. The woods are so covered with haboones, monkees, apes and parrots, that it will feare any man to travaile in them alone. Here are also two kinds of monsters, which are common in these woods, and very dangerous.

“The greatest of these two monsters is called Pongo in their language, and the lesser is called Engeco. This Pongo is in all proportion like a man ; but that he is more like a giant in stature than a man ; for he is very tall, and hath a man's face, hollow-eyed, with long haire upon his browes. His face and eares are without haire, and his hands also. His bodie is full of haire, but not very thicke ; and it is of a dunnish colour.

“He differeth not from a man but in his legs ; for they have no calfe. Hee goeth alwaies upon his legs, and carrieth his hands clasped in the nape of his necke when he goeth upon the ground. They sleepe in the trees, and build shelters for the raine. They feed upon fruit that they find in the woods, and upon nuts, for they eat no kind of flesh. They cannot speake, and have no understanding more than a beast. The people of the countrie, when they travaile in the woods make fires where they sleepe in the night ; and in the morning when they are gone, the Pongoes will come and sit about the fire till it goeth out ; for they have no understanding to lay the wood together. They goe many together and kill many negroes that travaile in the woods. Many times they fall upon the elephants which come to feed where they be, and so beate them with their clubbed fists, and pieces of wood, that they will runne roaring away from them. Those Pongoes are never taken alive because they are so strong, that ten men cannot hold one of them ; but yet they take many of their young ones with poisoned arrowes.

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“The young Pongo hangeth on his mother’s belly with his hands fast clasped about her, so that when the countrie people kill any of the females they take the young one, which hangeth fast upon his mother.

“When they die among themselves, they cover the dead with great heaps of boughs and wood, which is commonly found in the forest.”*

It does not appear difficult to identify the exact region of which Battell speaks. Longo is doubtless the name of the place usually spelled Loango on our maps. Mayombe still lies some nineteen leagues northward from Loango, along the coast; and Cilongo or Kilonga, Manikesocke, and Motimbas are yet registered by geographers. The Cape Negro of Battell, however, cannot be the modern Cape Negro in 16° S., since Loango itself is in 4° S. latitude. On the other hand, the “great river called Banna” corresponds very well with the “Camma” and “Fernand Vas,” of modern geographers, which form a great delta on this part of the African coast.

Now this “Camma” country is situated about a degree and a-half south of the Equator, while a few miles to the north of the line lies the Gaboon, and a degree or so north of that, the Money River—both well known to modern naturalists as localities where the largest of man-like Apes has been obtained. Moreover, at the present day, the word Engeco, or N’schego, is applied by the natives of these regions to the smaller of the two great Apes which inhabit them; so that there can be no rational doubt that Andrew Battell spoke of that which he knew of his own knowledge, or, at any rate, by immediate report from the natives of

* Purchas’ marginal note, p. 982 :—“The Pongo a giant ape. He told me in conference with him, that one of these Pongoes tooke a negro boy of his which lived a moneth with them. For they hurt not those which they surprize at unawares, except they look on them; which he avoyded. He said their highth was like a man’s, but their bignesse twice as great. I saw the negro boy. What the other monster should be he hath forgotten to relate; and these papers came to my hand since his death, which, otherwise, in my often conferences, I might have learned. Perhaps he meant the Pigmy Pongo killers mentioned.”

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Western Africa. The "Engeco," however, is that "other monster" whose nature Battell "forgot to relate," while the name "Pongo"—applied to the animal whose characters and habits are so fully and carefully described—seems to have died out, at least in its primitive form and signification. Indeed, there is evidence that not only in Battell's time, but up to a very recent date, it was used in a totally different sense from that in which he employs it.

For example, the second chapter of Purchas' work, which I have just quoted, contains "A Description and Historically Declaration of the Golden Kingdom of Guinea, &c. &c. Translated from the Dutch, and compared also with the Latin," wherein it is stated (p. 986) that—

"The River Gaboon lyeth about fifteen miles northward from Rio de Angra, and eight miles northward from Cape de Lope Gonsalvez (Cape Lopez), and is right under the Equinoctial line, about fiftene miles from St. Thomas, and is a great land, well and easily to be knowne. At the mouth of the river there lieth a sand, three or foure fathoms deepe, whereon it beateth mightily with the streame which runneth out of the river into the sea. This river, in the mouth thereof, is at least four miles broad; but when you are about the Iland called *Pongo*, it is not above two miles broad.

. . . On both sides the river there standeth many trees.
 The Iland called *Pongo*, which hath a monstrous high hill."

The French naval officers, whose letters are appended to the late M. Isidore Geoff. Saint Hilaire's excellent essay on the Gorilla,* note in similar terms the width of the Gaboon, the trees that line its banks down to the water's edge, and the strong current that sets out of it. They describe two islands in its estuary;—one low, called Perroquet; the other high, presenting three conical hills, called Coniquet; and one of them, M. Franquet, expressly states that, formerly, the Chief of Coniquet was called *Meni-Pongo*, meaning thereby Lord

* Archives du Museum, Tome X.

of *Pongo*; and that the *N'Pongues* (as, in agreement with Dr. Savage, he affirms the natives call themselves) term the estuary of the Gaboon itself *N'Pongo*.

It is so easy, in dealing with savages, to misunderstand their applications of words to things, that one is at first inclined to suspect Battell of having confounded the name of this region, where his "greater monster" still abounds, with the name of the animal itself. But he is so right about other matters (including the name of the "lesser monster") that one is loth to suspect the old traveller of error; and, on the other hand, we shall find that a voyager of a hundred years' later date speaks of the name "Boggoe," as applied to a great Ape, by the inhabitants of quite another part of Africa—Sierra Leone.

But I must leave this question to be settled by philologists and travellers; and I should hardly have dwelt so long upon it except for the curious part played by this word '*Pongo*' in the later history of the man-like Apes.

The generation which succeeded Battell saw the first of the

Homo Sylvestris.
Orang Outang.

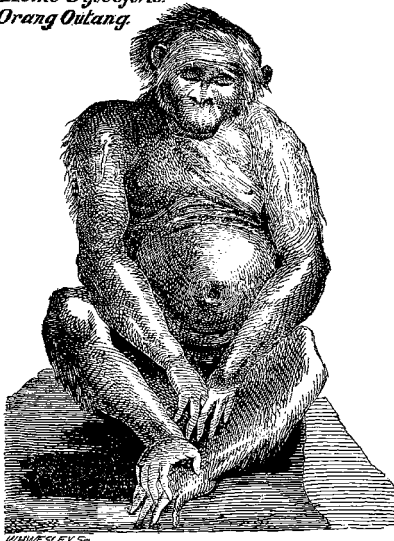


FIG. 2.—The Orang of Tulpius, 1641.

man-like Apes which was ever brought to Europe, or, at any rate, whose visit found a historian. In the third book of Tulpius' "Observationes Medicæ," published in 1641, the 56th chapter or section is devoted to what he calls *Satyrus indicus*, "called by the Indians Orang-autang, or Man-of-the Woods, and by the Africans Quoias Morrou." He gives a very good figure, evidently from the life, of the specimen of this animal,

"nostra memoria ex Angolâ delatum," presented to Frederick

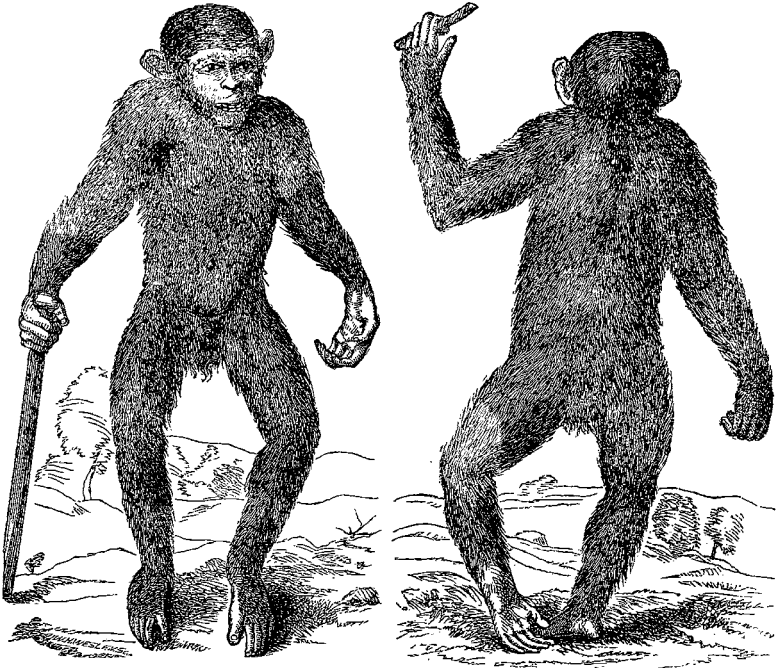
Henry Prince of Orange. Tulpius says it was as big as a child of three years old, and as stout as one of six years: and that its back was covered with black hair. It is plainly a young Chimpanzee.

In the meanwhile, the existence of other, Asiatic, man-like Apes became known, but at first in a very mythical fashion. Thus Bontius (1658) gives an altogether fabulous and ridiculous account and figure of an animal which he calls "Orang-outang"; and though he says, "vidi Ego cujus effigiem hic exhibeo," the said effigies (see fig. 6 for Hoppius' copy of it) is nothing but a very hairy woman of rather comely aspect, and with proportions and feet wholly human. The judicious English anatomist, Tyson, was justified in saying of this description by Bontius, "I confess I do mistrust the whole representation."

It is to the last mentioned writer, and his coadjutor Cowper, that we owe the first account of a man-like ape which has any pretensions to scientific accuracy and completeness. The treatise entitled, "*Orang-outang, sive Homo Sylvestris; or the Anatomy of a Pygmie compared with that of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man,*" published by the Royal Society in 1699, is, indeed, a work of remarkable merit, and has, in some respects, served as a model to subsequent inquirers. This "Pygmie," Tyson tells us, "was brought from Angola, in Africa; but was first taken a great deal higher up the country;" its hair "was of a coal-black colour, and strait," and "when it went as a quadruped on all four, 'twas awkwardly; not placing the palm of the hand flat to the ground, but it walk'd upon its knuckles, as I observed it to do when weak and had not strength enough to support its body."—"From the top of the head to the heel of the foot, in a strait line, it measured twenty-six inches."

These characters, even without Tyson's good figures (figs. 3 and 4), would have been sufficient to prove his "Pygmie" to be a young Chimpanzee. But the opportunity of examining the skeleton of the very animal Tyson anatomised

having most unexpectedly presented itself to me, I am able to bear independent testimony to its being a veritable *Trog-*



FIGS. 3 & 4.—The 'Pygmie' reduced from Tyson's figures 1 and 2, 1699.

lodytes niger,* though still very young. Although fully appreciating the resemblances between his Pygmie and Man, Tyson by no means overlooked the differences between the two, and he concludes his memoir by summing up first, the points in which "the Ourang-outang or Pygmie more resembled a Man than Apes and Monkeys do," under forty-seven distinct heads; and then giving, in thirty-four similar brief paragraphs, the respects in which "the Ourang-outang or

* I am indebted to Dr. Wright, of Cheltenham, whose palaeontological labours are so well known, for bringing this interesting relic to my knowledge. Tyson's granddaughter, it appears, married Dr. Allardyce, a physician of repute in Cheltenham, and brought, as part of her dowry, the skeleton of the 'Pygmie.' Dr. Allardyce presented it to the Cheltenham Museum, and, through the good offices of my friend Dr. Wright, the authorities of the Museum have permitted me to borrow, what is, perhaps, its most remarkable ornament.

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Pygmie differ'd from a Man and resembled more the Ape and Monkey kind.”

After a careful survey of the literature of the subject extant in his time, our author arrives at the conclusion that his “Pygmie” is identical neither with the Orangs of Tulpius and Bontius, nor with the Quoias Morrou of Dapper (or rather of Tulpius), the Barris of d’Arcos, nor with the Pongo of Battell; but that it is a species of ape probably identical with the Pygmies of the Ancients, and, says Tyson, though it “does so much resemble *a Man* in many of its parts, more than any of the ape kind, or any other *animal* in the world, that I know of: yet by no means do I look upon it as the product of a *mixt* generation—’tis a *Brute-Animal sui generis*, and a particular *species of Ape*.”

The name of “Chimpanzee,” by which one of the African Apes is now so well known, appears to have come into use in the first half of the eighteenth century, but the only important addition made, in that period, to our acquaintance with the man-like apes of Africa is contained in “A New Voyage to Guinea,” by William Smith, which bears the date 1744.

In describing the animals of Sierra Leone, p. 51, this writer says:—

“I shall next describe a strange sort of animal, called by the white men in this country Mandrill,* but why it is so called I know not, nor did I ever hear the name before, neither can those who call them so tell, except it be for their near resemblance of a human creature, though nothing at all

* “Mandrill” seems to signify a “man-like ape,” the word “Drill” or “Dril” having been anciently employed in England to denote an Ape or Baboon. Thus in the fifth edition of Blount’s “Glossographia, or a Dictionary interpreting the hard words of whatsoever language now used in our refined English tongue . . . very useful for all such as desire to understand what they read,” published in 1681, I find, “Dril—a stone-cutter’s tool wherewith he bores little holes in marble, &c. Also a large overgrown Ape and Baboon, so called.” “Drill” is used in the same sense in Charleton’s “Onomasticon Zoicon,” 1668. The singular etymology of the word given by Buffon seems hardly a probable one.