

FROZEN FAUNA
OF THE
MAMMOTH STEPPE

The Story of Blue Babe

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London
1990

Woolly Rhinos

The Churapachi rhino mummy, found in 1972 by a villager digging a cellar, is also described in the Selerikan pony volume (Lazarev 1977c). Churapachi is a small village located on the Lena-Amga interfluvium. Lazarev briefly discusses other rhino mummies found in the Soviet Union. In 1771 an entire rhino carcass was found on the Viyuy River, but only the head and two legs were saved. Another carcass was found on the Kahlbuy River, a drainage of the middle Yana River, in 1877. Lazarev does not mention the most famous of all woolly rhino mummies—those found in Starunia (formerly part of Poland and now part of the Soviet Union) in 1907 and 1929. The rhinos at Starunia were not preserved by freezing as were other mummies discussed here. Rather, they were trapped in a petrochemical seep associated with a salt deposit (fig. 1.13); they were pickled by the saline conditions and surrounded by a mineral wax called ozocerite. The original of one rhino is displayed in Krakov, Poland, and a plaster cast is displayed in the British Museum (Natural History).

The Churapachi rhino from Siberia, described by Lazarev, was a female, as deduced from her pelvis and slender horns. And judging from the well-worn molars, she was an old animal. Most of the carcass had rotted away; the lower legs were in fair condition, and yellowish fur was found in mud around the carcass. The skeleton was rather complete, indicating that it had not been heavily scavenged, perhaps not scavenged at all.

Conditions of death and burial of the Churapachi rhino were uncertain. Analysis of gastrointestinal contents in the carcass showed it to be 89% grasses, 4.5% composites, and 2.5% wormwood or sage, with the remainder diverse forb species. Lazarev (1977c) says that this is similar to plant material taken from the teeth of a different woolly rhino fossil by Garut, Metel'tseva, and Tikhomirov (1970). I have also extracted plant fragments from the large infundibula of a Siberian woolly rhino skull in the American Museum of Natural History and found, from analysis of the cuticle fragments, mostly grasses: 96% grasses, 2% moss, and 2% forbes.



Fig. 1.13. One of the Starunia woolly rhinos (*Coelodonta*).

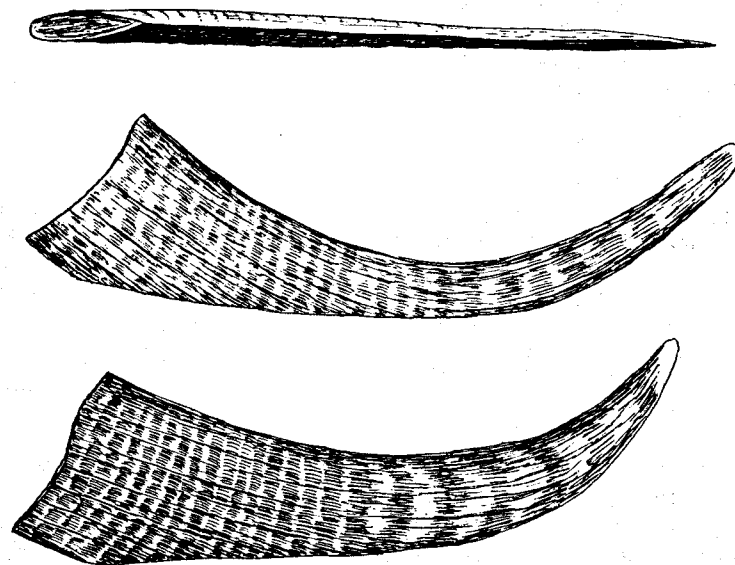


Fig. 1.14. Nasal horns of the woolly rhino (*Coelodonta*). These horns are almost flat in cross section (top). If woolly rhinos were like living rhinos, the nasal horn of the female was longer and more slender, as in the above comparison. (I do not believe the actual sexes of these two specimens are known.) Only six or seven of these horns have been found. One is now in the British Museum of Natural History, one in the Zoological Museum in Helsinki, one in the Natural History Museum in Krakov, Poland (the elongated one shown here, with 28 annuli), and several in the Soviet Union, both in the Zoological Museum in Leningrad and the Paleontological Museum in Moscow. The shorter (bottom) of the two pictured was illustrated by Pfitzenmayer 1926.

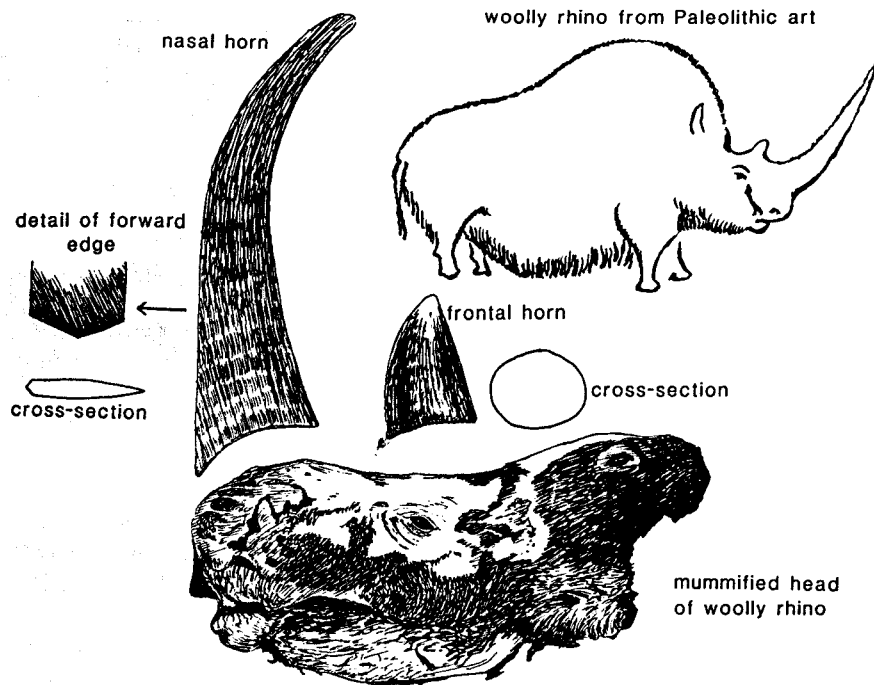


Fig. 1.15. Woolly rhino. This species lived across Eurasia during the latter part of the Pleistocene, but no rhino fossils have been found in Alaska. Woolly rhinos appear in Paleolithic art, and this one is from Rouffignac Cave in France. The anterior edge of the nasal horn was worn into bevels with left-right facets from head-swipe movements on the ground. The function of these movements is unknown. The upper lip was quite wide, indicating a grazing adaptation. The mummified woolly rhino head was found in Siberia and is now at the Zoological Museum in Leningrad.

To my knowledge, the Churapachi specimen is the first woolly rhino mummy in which horns have been found in place. The large anterior nasal horn is flattened laterally and is almost 1,300 mm long (fig. 1.14). In contrast, the frontal horn is short and conical (fig. 1.15). Over half a dozen, long, flat woolly rhino horns have been found, but it was impossible to tell whether these had once been oval and had simply weathered or decomposed on their lateral surfaces or whether they had indeed been rather flat in cross section when the animal was alive. No living rhino has a flattened horn. I think the Churapachi rhino has resolved that issue—the horns were indeed flat-sided.

The woolly rhino species (*Coelodonta antiquitatis*) did not reach Alaska; at least no Alaskan rhino bones have yet been found.

However, they did live in the far north of Eurasia for tens of thousands of years, through the late Pleistocene. Smaller than living rhinos and relatively long legged, the woolly rhino had a long, soft pelt, somewhat like the mammoth. Its upper lip was wide, like the white rhino (*Ceratotherium*) of Africa, and we know, again like the African white rhino, that the woolly rhino was mainly a grazer (fig. 1.15). Enamel patterns on its cheek teeth are very complex, and the teeth are high crowned. Why its range did not extend into Alaska and the Yukon Territory is a puzzle. We know very little about its biology; perhaps some day a well-excavated woolly rhinoceros mummy will supply the critical pieces of information we now lack.

The Alaskan Frozen Mummies

Other Pleistocene mummies have been found in the Soviet Union and Alaska. A large, mature male bison (fig. 1.16) was found in 1952 at Dome Creek, near Fairbanks. A date of 28,000 yr B.P. (L-127) was obtained from this bison. The partial carcass of a female bison (figs. 1.17, 1.18) was found in 1952 on Fairbanks Creek and reported by Flerov (1977). The date on this specimen was 11,950 \pm 135 (ST 1633). Both specimens were excavated using a hydraulic mining monitor, with the loss of much associated information. Like Blue Babe, the Dome Creek bison appears to have been incompletely scavenged; it is now a central part of the Smithsonian Institution's Pleistocene Alaska display.

As best I can discern, only one partial Pleistocene bison mummy has been found in Siberia. This is a young (two-and-a-half-year-old) female found on the Indigirka River (Flerov 1977), dated at 29,500 \pm 1000 (SOAK1007).



Fig. 1.16. Dome Creek mummy. The only other large bull steppe bison mummy found in Alaska came from Dome Creek in 1952.