

**A DESCRIPTION OF THE
SKELETON OF THE
FOSSIL DEER OF IRELAND,
CERVUS MEGACEROS**

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A description of the skeleton of the fossil deer of Ireland, *Cervus megaceros* by John Hart

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JOHN HART

**A DESCRIPTION OF THE
SKELETON OF THE
FOSSIL DEER OF IRELAND,
CERVUS MEGACEROS**

*Printed only for Presents. Given to the Geological
Soc. 1825, by the Rev. Dr. Cotton, Archdeacon of Cashel.*

DESCRIPTION
OF THE
SKELETON
OF THE
FOSSIL DEER OF IRELAND,
CERVUS MEGACEROS;

DRAWN UP AT THE INSTANCE OF THE COMMITTEE OF NATURAL
PHILOSOPHY OF THE

ROYAL DUBLIN SOCIETY.

By JOHN HART,

MEMBER OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS IN IRELAND, &c.

DUBLIN:

R. GRAISBERRY,

PRINTER TO THE ROYAL DUBLIN SOCIETY.

1825.

George Ireland, Adm.

*Description of the SKELETON of the FOSSIL DEER OF
IRELAND, (cervus megaloceros,) in the MUSEUM of the
ROYAL DUBLIN SOCIETY. By JOHN HART, Member
of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, &c.*

TH**ERE** are few sciences for the advancement of which more has been effected within so short a space of time than for that of Comparative Anatomy; and when it is considered that it affords to those devoted to the study of the healing art the means of acquiring more correct ideas of the laws of life, by enlarging their views of the animal economy, there are few which can exert a more direct influence, in that respect, over the welfare of society.

It was little expected, however, that a more extended cultivation of this science would have led to a new train of highly interesting speculations regarding the changes which the surface of our globe may have undergone; speculations resting on the degree of certainty with which it is possible to ascertain that the fossil remains of particular genera are found exclusively in particular strata of the earth.

This proposition of drawing geological inferences from anatomical facts originated with the Baron Cuvier, who enjoyed opportunities which enabled him to cultivate Comparative Anatomy to a greater extent than, perhaps, any other individual living. Some idea of the nature of this great man's researches may be formed

when he avers that, from the examination of what might be considered a mere fragment of a bone, he could determine the genus of the animal to which it had belonged: nay, he has in some instances ventured to delineate what from analogical inferences he considered to have been the external forms of animals, of whose existence, even at some period far remote, we have no other kind of evidence save that derived from the occurrence of their less perishable parts in a fossil state.

From a combination of anatomical and zoological deductions, we may refer the various organic remains which occur in strata of alluvial formation to two divisions, one including those of animals belonging to species still in existence, the other comprising those of species which have long since become altogether extinct. Of this latter division there are none more deserving of our attention, or more calculated to give rise to feelings of surprise and admiration, than those bones and horns of enormous size belonging to an animal of the deer tribe, which are almost daily dug out of the bogs and marl pits of Ireland.

So frequently do these remains occur in most parts of this island, that there are very few of our peasantry who are not, either from personal observation or report, acquainted with them by the familiar name of the horns of "the old deer:" indeed in some parts of the country they have been found so often, that far from being regarded as objects of any extraordinary interest, they have been either thrown aside as useless lumber, or applied to the very commonest of economical uses.*

* In a Report which I made to the Committee of Natural Philosophy of the Royal Dublin Society, and which was printed in their Proceedings of July 8, 1824, I alluded to an instance of a pair of these horns having been used as a field gate near Tipperary. Since that I have learned that

I have made diligent but fruitless search for an account of the particular time when any of these remains were first discovered. As they generally occur in marl, it is most likely that they did not begin to attract attention until the advanced state of agriculture had created an increased demand for that mineral as a manure. We can very easily imagine the astonishment which the appearance of horns so large, and of such strange form, must have excited in the minds of those who discovered them for the first time, and how readily they obtained a place in the hall of some adjoining mansion, where they were deposited as an ornament of great curiosity, from the contrast which they formed with the horns of the species of deer known at present. In this way we may account for the preservation of so many specimens as are found in the possession of the gentry in different parts of this country.

The other bones of the animal, although of a large size, yet to common observers appeared to be on a scale so far beneath that of the horns, that little or no attention was paid to them. This circumstance would appear extraordinary were it not considered that formerly there were in this country very few persons who had applied themselves to the study of Comparative Anatomy, except in a very superficial and general way. Hence they were not competent to form a correct estimate of the size of the animal of which these bones formed a part, much less of the points in which it resembled, or differed from, other animals in its organization.

a pair had been in use for a similar purpose near Newcastle, County of Wicklow, until they were decomposed by the action of the weather; there is also a specimen in Charlemont House, the town residence of the Earl of Charlemont, which is said to have been used for some time as a temporary bridge across a rivulet in the County of Tyrone.

It is gratifying however to observe that the value of this science is now more duly appreciated amongst us, and the study of it is beginning to receive the attention which its high importance, in several points of view, demands.

One of the many causes which have operated in producing this favourable change is the recent commencement of a Museum of Comparative Anatomy by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland,* an institution which, by bringing together, as it were, within the compass of a single view, the various modifications of structure presented by the several organs throughout the whole range of animated beings, affords to the student facilities on the obvious advantages of which it would be superfluous to insist; and which may be hailed as an auspicious omen of the opening of a new and important era in the annals of this science.

The interest excited by these remarkable animal remains increased in proportion as the particular branch of science alluded to was more zealously cultivated; and a complete skeleton of this stupendous animal had become a desideratum of first rate importance with the scientific world. The first tolerably perfect specimen was found in the Isle of Man, and presented to the

* Connected with the mention of this Museum is the recollection of my friend the late Mr. J. Shekelton, its first conservator, who devoted himself to the discharge of the duties of that office with a zeal which called forth exertions far beyond his physical powers, and which so impaired his constitution as to render him susceptible of that formidable febrile affection occasionally ensuing on wounds received in dissection, to which he fell a victim in May 1824. Thus was he cut off in early life, in the midst of his career to that honorable post to which his acquisitions and persevering industry would undoubtedly have advanced him, had Providence been pleased to spare him but for a few years longer.

Museum of the University of Edinburgh by the Duke of Athol a few years since. About the same time a considerable number of the bones of another, found in the county Down, was forwarded to the Museum of Trinity College by the Bishop of Dromore: these, at the request of Doctor Stokes, the learned Professor of Natural History to the University, I connected in the summer of 1823, by placing the several parts as nearly in their natural relations to each other as it was possible, considering that most of the vertebræ and many other bones of importance were deficient. The object I proposed was rather to shew what could be done, with a view to encourage visitors to the Museum to contribute whatever bones opportunity might place at their disposal, than to claim the credit of having given a correct representation of the form of the skeleton from such imperfect materials.

Thus much had been done towards accomplishing this very desirable object, when the following communication was made to the Royal Dublin Society, which I here transcribe from their Proceedings of April 22d, 1824.

"The following letter from Lord Viscount Northland to the Hon. and Rev. John Pomeroy, V. P. together with the extract of a letter from the Archdeacon of Limerick, were read."

"MY DEAR SIR,

"May I beg the favor of you to lay the enclosed paper before the Royal Dublin Society at their first meeting.

"I am, &c.

"NORTHLAND."

"Hon. and Rev. John Pomeroy, V. P. R. D. S.

"Dublin April 9th, 1824."

“ Extract of a letter from the Rev. William Wray Maunsell, Archdeacon of Limerick, to Lord Viscount Northland, dated Limerick April 7th, 1824.

“ In a communication from your Lordship, you intimated your approval of the fossil remains of the non-descript deer, which were found at Rathcannon, being presented to the Dublin Society; and I have, I confess, been induced to defer carrying this object into effect, which accords entirely with my views, in the hope that by discovering another perfect head and antlers I should be able to retain the one I have in my possession for myself; but as our operations in that part of the property in which these wonders were found, have ceased, I must, I believe, act the patriot, and request that your Lordship will intimate to your brother, Mr. George Knox, who is Vice President, that I shall be prepared any time after the 22d of this month to deliver to any one they may be disposed to authorize to receive them, the only skeleton of this extraordinary animal which I believe is to be found in the empire. It will, however, I think be expedient, that some person skilled in anatomy should be selected, as there is such a mass of the component parts of different deer, as would puzzle any but an adept in this science to make a proper selection from. I believe there are a few of the vertebræ of the back wanting, but there is every other bone, even to the bones of the tongue, the knee, the fetlock, and coffin bones of the foot, and all on a great scale; the marrow is also perfect in some of the bones, and though changed into spermaceti, blazes like a candle. I have also a skull of a dog of a large kind, (at least of a carnivorous animal,) which I found lying close to some of the remains, and which I will transmit with the bones of his old acquaintance.