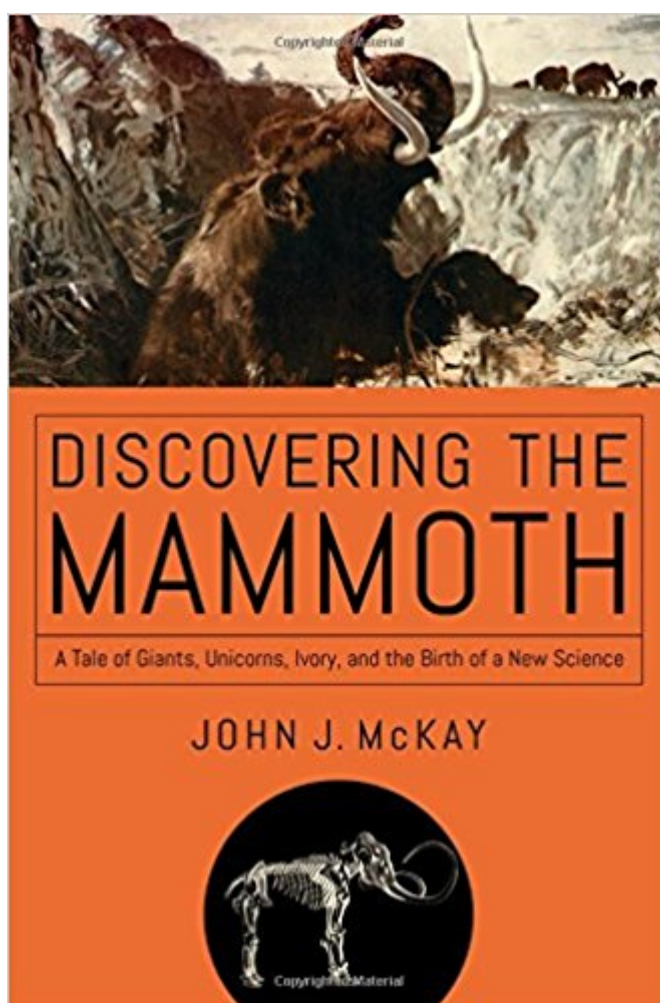


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Discovering The Mammoth: A Tale Of Giants, Unicorns, Ivory, And The Birth Of A New Science



Synopsis

The fascinating saga of solving the mystery of this ancient animal who once roamed the north country and has captivated our collective imagination ever since. Today, we know that a mammoth is an extinct type of elephant that was covered with long fur and lived in the north country during the ice ages. But how do you figure out what a mammoth is if you have no concept of extinction, ice ages, or fossils? Long after the last mammoth died and was no longer part of the human diet, it still played a role in human life. Cultures around the world interpreted the remains of mammoths through the lens of their own worldview and mythology. When the ancient Greeks saw deposits of giant fossils, they knew they had discovered the battle fields where the gods had vanquished the Titans. When the Chinese discovered buried ivory, they knew they had found dragons'™ teeth. But as the Age of Reason dawned, monsters and giants gave way to the scientific method. Yet the mystery of these mighty bones remained. How did Enlightenment thinkers overcome centuries of myth and misunderstanding to reconstruct an unknown animal? The journey to unravel that puzzle begins in the 1690s with the arrival of new type of ivory on the European market bearing the exotic name "mammoth." It ends during the Napoleonic Wars with the first recovery of a frozen mammoth. The path to figuring out the mammoth was traveled by merchants, diplomats, missionaries, cranky doctors, collectors of natural wonders, Swedish POWs, Peter the Great, Ben Franklin, the inventor of hot chocolate, and even one pirate. McKay brings together dozens of original documents and illustrations, some ignored for centuries, to show how this odd assortment of characters solved the mystery of the mammoth and, in doing so, created the science of paleontology. 8 pages of color illustrations

Book Information

Hardcover: 264 pages

Publisher: Pegasus Books; 1 edition (August 8, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1681774240

ISBN-13: 978-1681774244

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 0.9 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #108,529 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #12 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Dinosaurs #22 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences

Customer Reviews

Discovering the Mammoth is one of those books that make you wonder about the author as much as about his topic. Mr. McKay makes the case that, beginning about 1600, mammoths and their mastodon cousins became a focusing problem for a scientific revolution. They were the starting point for sweeping changes in geology and comparative anatomy and in the ways we think about life on Earth. Mr. McKay fills in the European background in admirable detail. Mammoths, elephants and their kin, John McKay suggests, helped make us who we are. - The Wall Street Journal

McKay masterfully weaves an intricate story of the events, politics, people, and scientific development associated with the rediscovery of mammoths. - Booklist

As John McKay vividly relates, the scientific saga [of the mammoth] began in the seventeenth century, when the evocative remains became pivotal to the evolution of vertebrate palaeontology. - Nature

A well-organized history of science. [McKay's] story is not about ancient creatures, but about how humans approach the world's mysteries. - Publishers Weekly

John J. McKay has a Master's in History from the University of Washington. A technical writer by trade, he is the "Mammoth Guy" by vocation, and his remarkable archival research, lively wit and passion for extinct proboscideans is well known to the scientific community. He lives in Anchorage, Alaska, where people appreciate a good mammoth. Visit him at mammothtales.blogspot.com.

A great topic, but the book fails to do it justice. The writing is glib at best, clunky at worst, and nearly every page is marred by multiple typos. More seriously, the author is unable to distinguish significant details from trivia, and large portions of the book read like padding, leading the impatient reader to flip ahead in search of the next step in the story. A nice first draft, I suppose, but a good editor and a better proofreader would have turned this into a book worth reading.

What a fun book! If you're a bit of a science nerd, and interested in how culture influences our ability to perceive truth, you'll love this. The book is about how humans, thousands of years after mammoths went extinct, interpreted the physical evidence of what they were. An amazing variety of explanations emerged, slowly converging to what we understand now, that they are an extinct animal closely related to living elephants. That's a pretty dry description of what is a very interesting and humorous book. This author should write more!

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