

The Anthropology of Paleontology

A Quick Look at Native American
Depictions of the Fossil Record

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The Maastricht Monster



Stolen by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1794, interpreted at the time as the fossilized skull of a monster (or a dragon). It was later identified as a mosasaur, a late-Cretaceous aquatic carnivore. The fossil is now a prized centerpiece in the Museum of Natural History in Paris.



That last point is always the defining one:

- Science is the officialized and legitimizing process of perspective
- Everything else comes second to that
- In the case of traditional cultural knowledge, often a distant second



Indigenous people articulate closely with the landscape.

They would have noticed that fossils were different from other rocks. They made tools out of rocks, after all.

The first evidence we have of ancient people curating and appreciating more-ancient fossils comes from a cave near Yonne, France, where a trilobite pendant was discovered in the 1880s.

In the United States, fossil hunters found abundant trilobites in western Utah in the 1860s.

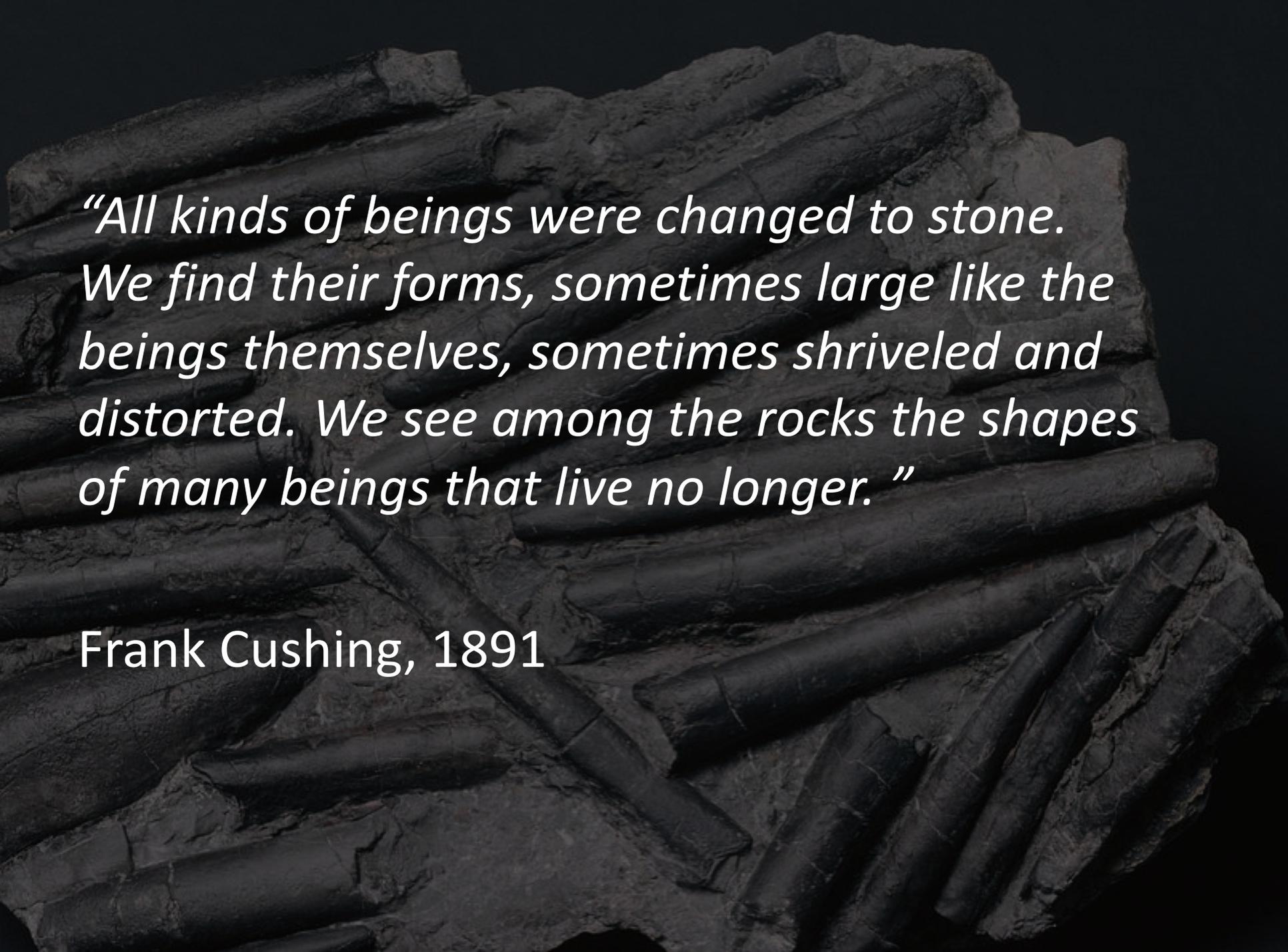
In 1931, Frank Beckwith discovered that the Utes had known about them all along, depicting them in rock art and making necklaces out of them.

The Ute name translated to “little water bug in stone,” and they were a protective against disease and bullets.

This is where the fields of anthropology and paleontology interdigitate...





The background of the image is a dark, textured rock surface containing numerous fossilized wood specimens. These fossils appear as elongated, cylindrical shapes with distinct concentric growth rings, some showing signs of decay or distortion. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of both the rock and the fossilized wood.

“All kinds of beings were changed to stone. We find their forms, sometimes large like the beings themselves, sometimes shriveled and distorted. We see among the rocks the shapes of many beings that live no longer.”

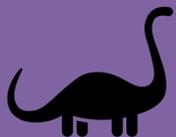
Frank Cushing, 1891



In the Zuni creation story, the new earth was flooded and wracked by earthquakes. Bizarre monsters ruled this dark, watery world, while small proto-humans with clammy skin, goggle eyes, bat ears, tails, and webbed feet crept along like salamanders, barely surviving in muddy island caves.



To keep these “unfinished” humans from succumbing to the great monsters of the deep, the Twin Children of the Sun realized that the world needed to be dried out and solidified. With a magical rain-bow and cosmic lightning arrows, the Twin Heroes set tremendous conflagration over the face of the earth, scorching it dry and hardening the ground. Proto-humans emerged into the sunlight and began to become “finished” human beings.



But now, on dry land, huge predators with powerful claws and teeth multiplied and devoured the still-weak human beings. The Twin Heroes stalked across the world, blasting with lightning all the monsters—gigantic bears, enormous lions, and other immense creatures. Instantly immolated, the dangerous beasts shriveled and became stone.

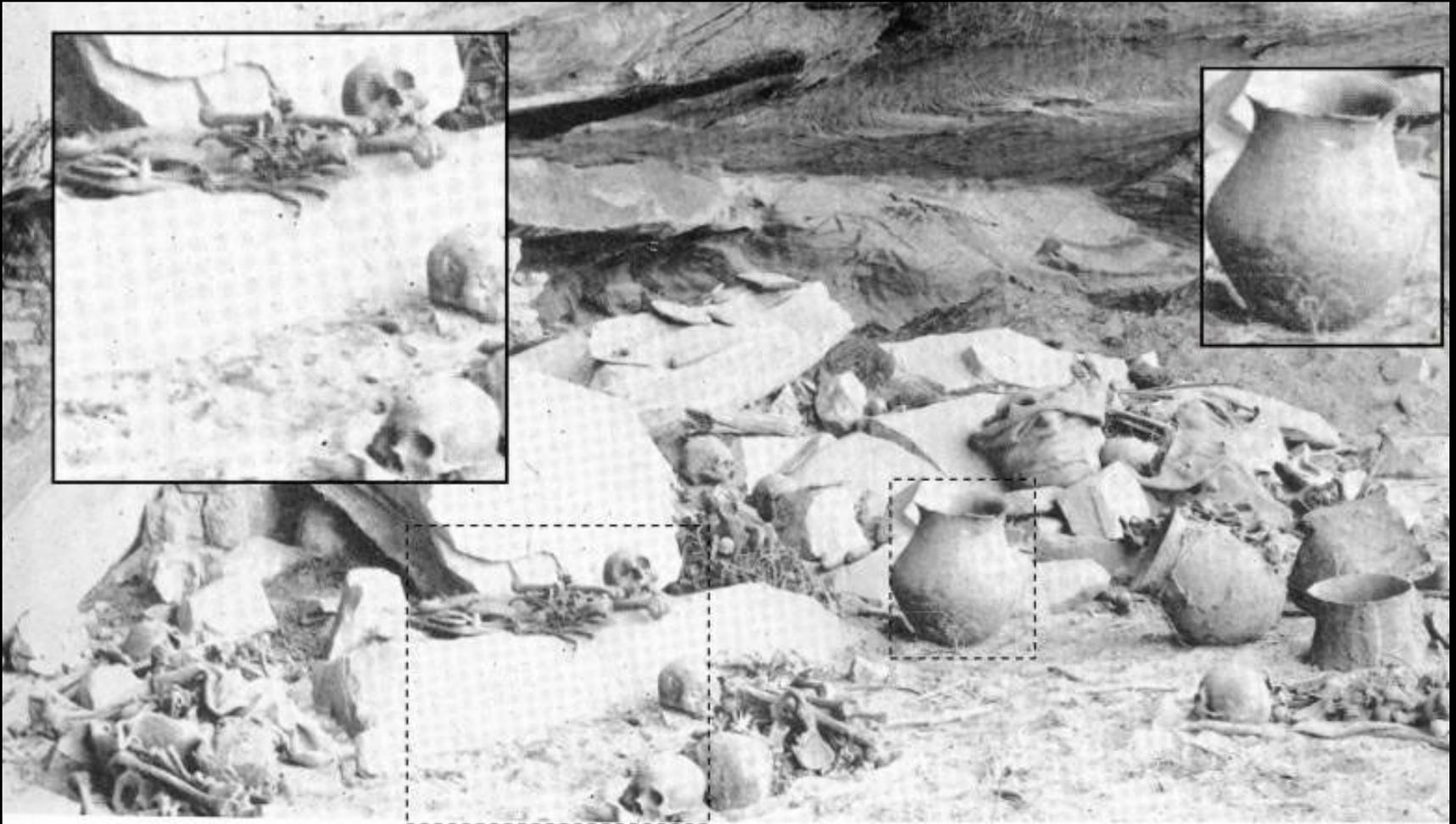
Case 1: A Very Old Horn

Case 2: Extremely Old Footprints



Some of the earliest archaeologists were basically looters....





Their excavated materials wound up in various museums all over the country.

Enter the Cedar Mesa Perishables Project



A very old horn....



This was discovered in a Basketmaker assemblage by Richard Wetherill in the 1890s, and was identified by Chuck LaRue as that of a Harrington's Mountain Goat.

Oreamnos harringtoni





Split Twigs and
Old Bones

Split-twig figurines in Bears Ears



They didn't fail to notice the ancientest things of all...







In a brief paper in the *Journal of Paleontology* in 1935, paleontologist Edward M. Kindle suggested that Native Americans should be credited with at least a handful of scientifically significant fossil discoveries. His suggestion was strenuously rejected by the AMNH paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson because they were “casual finds without scientific sequel.”

In other words: see Slide 3



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