

Indonesian elephant fossil opens window to past

23 June 2009, By NINIEK KARMINI , Associated Press Writer



Scientists arrange the bones of an estimated 200,000 year-old giant elephant at Geology Museum in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, Thursday, June 18, 2009.

Indonesian scientists are reconstructing the largest, most complete skeleton of an ancient elephant ever found in the tropics, a finding that may offer new clues into the largely mysterious origins of its modern Asian cousin. Based on the fossil, the ancient elephant stood four meters (13-feet) tall, was five meters (16-feet) long and weighed more than 10 tons, considerably larger than the great Asian mammals now on Earth. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)

(AP) -- Indonesian scientists are reconstructing the largest, most complete skeleton of a prehistoric giant elephant ever found in the tropics, a finding that may offer new clues into the largely mysterious origins of its modern Asian cousin.

The prehistoric elephant is believed to have been submerged in quicksand shortly after dying on a riverbed in Java around 200,000 years ago. Its bones - almost perfectly preserved - were discovered by chance in March when an old sand quarry collapsed during monsoon rains.

The animal stood four meters (13-feet) tall, five meters (16-feet) long and weighed more than 10 tons - closer in size to the woolly mammoth of the same period than to the great Asian mammals now on Earth.

Animal fossils are rare in the humid, hot climate of the equator because decomposition occurs extremely quickly.

Following a monthlong excavation, a team of seven paleontologists from the [Geology](#) Museum in Bandung, West Java, set the bones in plaster for the trip back to their office where they will be laboriously pieced back together.

"We believe from the shape of its teeth that it was a very primitive elephant," but little else has been verified, said paleontologist Fachroel Aziz, who is heading a 12-strong skeletal reconstruction team.

Scientists agree it is the first time an entire prehistoric elephant [skeleton](#) has been unearthed since vertebrate [fossil](#) findings began to be recorded in Indonesia in 1863.

"It is very uncommon to discover a fossil like this in a tropical region like Indonesia," said Edi Sunardi, an independent expert at Indonesia's Pajajaran University in Bandung, West Java. "It apparently was covered by volcanic sediment that protected it from high temperatures, erosion and decay."

The next challenge will be removing the delicate bones from their molds and joining them into a stable, upright structure, a process that experts said is already being hampered by a lack of funding, inadequate tools and poor expertise.

Indonesia, an emerging and impoverished democracy of 235 million people, cannot afford to allocate more than a token sum to its aging museums, even for projects that have the potential to advance knowledge about the origin of key native species.

Gert van den Berg, a researcher at Australia's Wollongong University who helped dig up the skeleton, said tests are under way to determine its precise age and species, and that they will help

provide details "about when the modern [elephants](#) evolved into what they are now."

About 2,000 old elephant remains have been found across the island nation over the past 150 years, but never in such good condition, Aziz said.

"We want to exhibit it publicly because this is a spectacular discovery," he said.

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