

*Gold-Digging Ants' Mystery Seems Solved, After Bugging Scholars for Centuries*

By MARLISE SIMONS, New York Times: Nov 25, 1996.

PARIS -- The fabulous tale of the giant "ants" that dug up gold in a far-off El Dorado and enriched the Persian Empire, has circulated for some 2,500 years. Historians have variously recorded it as fact, mocked it as extravagant, or just passed it along the ancient grapevine.

It was popular in Athens and Rome, and Alexander the Great, on his way to India, is said to have known about the tale. Scholars and fortune hunters have tried to explain the enigma for centuries.

Now a team of explorers says it has solved the puzzle. The explorers believe they have pinpointed the land of the legendary gold-digging ants and the people who profited in one of the most inaccessible regions of the Himalayas along the upper Indus River.

They say the outsize furry "ants," first described by Herodotus in the fifth century B.C., are in fact big marmots. These creatures -- Herodotus calls them "bigger than a fox, though not so big as a dog" -- are still throwing up gold-bearing soil from deep underground as they dig their burrows. Most important, the explorers say they have found indigenous people on the same high plateau who say that for generations they have collected gold dust from the marmots' work.

"I think this confirms the legend that has fascinated so many people," said Michel Peissel, a French ethnologist, who has just returned here from a monthlong journey in the western Himalayas of northern Pakistan. "I think it vindicates Herodotus, who has often been called a liar."

Other explorers have suggested that the furry "ants" of antiquity were marmots, but until now there were no known reports of the site where indigenous people actually collected and sifted sand to get the marmots' gold.

That place, Peissel said, is the Dansar plain, a high plateau overlooking the Indus River near the tense cease-fire line between India and Pakistan. It is an isolated region where the Indus comes roaring through deep gorges on its way south. On both sides of the river, Peissel said, are small settlements of Minaro tribal people, an ancient remnant who have remained so isolated in the high valleys that they still preserve some stone-age customs.

Up in those barren highlands, Peissel said, he first went to study the Minaro 14 years ago on the Indian side of the border, traveling in disguise because the military zone was off-limits to outsiders.

"That's where I first heard the startling news that the villagers used to collect the earth from the marmot burrows because it contained much gold dust," said Peissel, who speaks Tibetan, like the Minaro.

But the Dansar plain, where the old people used to get the gold dust, the locals said, was five miles away on the other side of the Indus, now the Pakistani side. It took 14 years for Peissel and a British photographer, Sebastian Guinness, to get permits to visit the Minaro on the Pakistani side, also a strategic zone.

In Pakistan, he said, the Minaro villagers told the same stories. "We went out to the Dansar plain, overlooking the Indus, at an altitude of some 10,000 feet," he said. "It was astonishing. There were the marmots and the burrows and the piles of sand they threw up." Moreover, he said, a landslide had exposed the darker, gold-bearing soil that was three feet below the surface. That was the same soil the marmots brought up from under the sand.

Specialists have long argued about why Herodotus and other ancient writers described the furry gold-digging creatures as ants. Herodotus wrote in his "Histories" (Book Three, 102–105) that some were even kept at the palace of the Persian king, who ruled the region at the time.

Peissel, author of a book called "The Ants' Gold," says that his favored explanation is that confusion set in because in Persian the word for marmot is equivalent to "mountain ant."

Marmots, a type of rodent, are unusually large in the Himalayas, with bushy fur and a large fox-like tail, he said. They have razor-sharp teeth and claws. "They can be ferocious if one tampers with their burrows, which is just what the gold-seekers did," he said.

Stephanie West, a Herodotus scholar at Oxford University in Britain, said that Herodotus was not known to speak Persian, although the Persians invaded Halicarnassus, the Greek city where he lived from around 480 B.C.

"He traveled to Egypt but not to India," Ms. West said. "He could have got it wrong. His information came from talking to travelers and reading what there was to be read."

Ms. West disagreed with the view of some scholars that Herodotus, who wrote the first major prose work of that time, fabricated tall stories or set out to deceive readers.

"He probably took the liberties a historical novelist takes, rather than writing strictly as a historian," she said.

Many references to the story of the gold-digging ants can be found in ancient literature, she said.

"It's such a marvelous notion, but once you think of them as marmots, it's less bizarre," she said. She added that she was familiar with Peissel's research, saying: "I think he has made a substantial contribution to understanding that episode."

The marmots digging on the Dansar plain may or may not settle the issue. Peissel said he would prefer to test his findings with further studies.

"Ideally, we should make a full archeological and geological survey in the area," he said. "But it's right in the line of fire of both sides. There was gunfire when we were there. The locals tell us that the marmots are dwindling. The Indian soldiers are constantly taking potshots at them."