

# Gods on earth: When rocks take human form

From the "Lost Wife" to the "Praying Monk," many natural formations have curious likenesses to the human form

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*"Men hang out their signs indicative of their respective trades; shoemakers hang out a gigantic shoe; jewelers a monster watch, and the dentist hangs out a gold tooth; but in the mountains of New Hampshire, God Almighty has hung out a sign to show that there He makes men." —Daniel Webster (1782–1852), American Statesman*

According to ancient Chinese tradition, the gods of heaven didn't exist entirely on a separate plane of reality—they also had a material correspondence on Earth. The ancients believed that large rocks, mountains, or capricious land reliefs were part of a cycle of movement through which the gods lived and were nourished. So every time one of those images fell, it meant that the life-cycle for that god had ended.

Beyond the myths or truths of the fate of the universe, these visual wonders of nature can be found throughout the planet—and even beyond. While our current culture doesn't offer such splendid explanations for natural stone structures, these unusual formations still capture our imaginations, often becoming treasured centerpieces in parks and nature preserves.

## The badlands guardian

Located in southeastern Alberta, Canada, this great geological wonder can only be seen from high above the ground. Nevertheless, its humanoid details are stunning when one considers that human hands did not take part in shaping this large mass of rock. Interpreted by many as a human head donning both a native headdress and an iPod, the profile was formed by the erosion of rainwater on layers of clay-rich soil.

The headphones' wires are formed by a dirt road, and the earpiece is formed by an oil well where the road ends. However, these additional manmade details only add an interesting touch; they are not absolutely necessary to give identity to the figure.

In fact, they give a modern air to this face that seems out of place with the native style of the origi-

nal form. Other names given to the "Guardian" during its course of popularity are "Super Granny," "Cliff," "Hickox's Head," "In Plains View," "The Listening Rock," and "Napi."

## The old man of the mountain

New Hampshire's portrait of stone was once a grand sight to behold. From chin to forehead, it is estimated that the profile of the "Old Man of the Mountain" measured about 40 feet high and 25 feet wide.

It is believed that glaciers and a succession of several geological phenomena unleashed some 200 million years ago first began to shape this naturally occurring sculpture. It has been admired for decades by tourists as a noble symbol of New Hampshire.

Although legends from the natives of the region told how following the course of the Merrimack River would show the way to the mountain with a stone face, the first written account detailing the "Old Man of the Mountain" dates back to 1805.

Over the past hundred years, many devices were employed to prevent the granite monument from falling. Just a few years before its demise, the use of cables and epoxy were utilized, but eventually the mythic head succumbed to the very forces of nature that created it. Strong winds combined with heavy rains and successive freezing led to the collapse of the gigantic face early one morning on May 3, 2003.

## Martian face

Beyond the world-renowned "Old Man of the Mountain" and "Super Granny," many desolate corners of Earth can also boast of their own suggestive natural sculptures. "The Seven Sisters," "The Praying Monk," or Romania's "Sphinx" are just a few of the thousands of naturally occurring monoliths that can be found in nearly every country in the world. Presumably, many of these natural sculptures are still silently waiting to be discovered.

But Earth isn't the only planet with such capricious formations.

When photos of the notorious Martian citadel, Cydonia Mensae, were released in 1976 it unleashed a flood of controversy. Im-



**MARTIAN FACE:** The notorious "Face on Mars" located in the planet's Cydonia Region. NASA/JPL

ages of these supposed formations fed the fantasies of thousands who harbored hope that intelligent beings with an advanced technology might inhabit the red planet.

While NASA officials insist that the initial images of the "Face on Mars" (also part of Cydonia) were merely produced by a chance illusion of light and shadow, others are convinced that these photos reveal a startling untold history of our red neighbor.

Perhaps the most outspoken of these individuals is controversial researcher Richard C. Hoagland. Because the location of these curious Martian structures bears a remarkable parallel to the Earth's Egyptian pyramids, Hoagland offers a bold theory that seeks to establish relationships between the creators of the famous Egyptian Sphinx and this enigmatic Martian face.

For many, the more recent satellite images of the "Face on Mars" taken in 2006 discounted the Face's reputation as either an engineering marvel or a miraculous natural formation. However, in 2008 the Martian landscape re-



**SUPER GRANNY:** The Badlands Guardian of Alberta, Canada. PUBLIC DOMAIN

vealed another photographic mystery: the appearance of a seated figure among the rocks. The photo was captured by the Martian probe Spirit, and like the earlier "Face on Mars," this picture has convinced a number of researchers that Mars might not be so uninhabitable after all. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t4K-fMok4U0>

Whether or not Martian technology and culture really do exist, no one can deny that these structures, like the ones found on Earth, have succeeded in capturing our imaginations. Humankind has long been moved at witnessing its own image carved in stone. However, when these sculptures are found chiseled by the hand of Mother Nature herself, the rock becomes imbued with an even greater air of mystery.

In these moments, nature appears to offer up a reflection of ourselves. The natural world produces a face we can easily relate

**OLD MAN:** New Hampshire's very own "rock portrait" crumbled away in 2003, but this image shows how the noble profile once appeared. ROB GALLAGHER/PUBLIC DOMAIN



# Scientists discover smallest exoplanet

LONDON (Reuters)—French scientists have discovered the smallest planet yet located out of our solar system, a celestial find less than twice the size of Earth and which orbits a sun-like star.

The so-called exoplanet may be rocky like Earth but its temperature is so high it could be covered in lava or water vapor, according to findings from a mission led by the French Space Agency.

This discovery is a very important step on the road to understanding the formation and evolution of our planet. Malcolm Fridlund of the European Space Agency, which is participating in

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—Malcolm Fridlund, European Space Agency

the mission, said.

For the first time, we have unambiguously detected a planet that is rocky in the same sense as our

own Earth. About 330 exoplanets have been found orbiting other stars besides the Earth's sun, most of which are gas giants with characteristics similar to Jupiter and Neptune.

The new find called COROT-Exo-7b is different. It orbits closely around its star once every 20 hours, with a high temperature between 1,800 and 2,700 Fahrenheit.

Astronomers using an orbiting telescope made the discovery when the planet passed its sun, dimming the light from the star as it moved in front of it, the team said.

Scientists say the discovery is important because recent meas-

urements have indicated the existence of planets of small masses but their sizes remained undetermined until now.

Most exoplanets have been spotted by using indirect measurements, mostly looking at their effects on the gravitational fields of their suns.

In this case, the researchers said they were able to directly measure the size of the surface of the planet, which may be rocky like Earth and covered in liquid lava.

It may also belong to a class of planets thought to be made up of water and rock in almost equal amounts, they said.

# How moms pass on experience without even trying

WASHINGTON (Reuters)—Mothers can pass along their experiences to their children without even trying, researchers reported in a surprising study that showed baby mice could inherit the benefits of "education" that their mothers received before they became pregnant.

The study shows that inheritance can go far beyond the classic genetic theories, researchers report in The Journal of Neuroscience.

They found that young mice raised in an enriched environment—with toys and other stimulation—passed along the learning benefits to pups they had after they grew up.

The stimulated mothers did not simply have better parenting skills, because the researchers showed pups swapped at birth still learned better if their biological mothers—but not their foster parents—had been raised with the extra toys.

"You inherit to some degree some aspects of your parent's experience," Larry Feig, a professor of biochemistry at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, said in a telephone interview.

"This is a protective mechanism a mother passes on to her offspring," said Feig, who helped lead the study, added. "The mother is changed for months. Her brain is changed so that when she is old enough to get pregnant, the effect is still there."

Feig and colleagues raised mice, some in plain cages with wood chips and others in "enriched" cages with boxes, a running wheel, toys, and constant rearrangements of nesting material.

They tested learning with an unpleasant "shock chamber" to condition the mice to be afraid.

Mice born to mothers raised in the "enriched" cages learned much more quickly that the shock cham-

ber was a scary place, Feig's team found. This was true even when the mothers did not become pregnant until weeks after they lived in the special cages.

## Brains of mice

When the researchers looked at the brains of the mice, they found clear changes in what is called long-term potentiation—a measure of how well nerve cells communicate with one another. These changes were inherited by the pups, even if the pups themselves never saw a toy or running wheel.

Feig said what is being changed is a mystery.

"It is probably some hormonal effect," he said.

Learning and stimulation may raise levels of hormones—he does not know which ones—and these levels may stay high for part of an animal's lifetime and affect the de-

veloping fetus.

"There is a lot of evidence that during embryonic development the offspring are greatly sensitive to things the mother is exposed to," Feig said—including food, chemicals, and perhaps hormones.

Dean Hartley, a neuroscience researcher at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago who worked on the study, said this could work in two ways. "Does that mean an un-enriched environment could have a detrimental effect?" he asked.

"Because the environment can affect us in both ways—good and bad—we need to be cautious about the environmental exposures pre-pregnancy."

The changes only lasted one generation, indicating the DNA was not permanently changed. Researchers are learning that DNA function can be altered without changing the genetic code itself.

# Ancient snake was as long as Tyrannosaurus

WASHINGTON (Reuters)—It was the all-time titan of snakes—a monster as long as a Tyrannosaurus rex that stalked a steamy South American rain forest after the demise of the dinosaurs and ate crocodiles for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

An international team of scientists announced the discovery in northern Colombia of fossil remains of the largest snake ever known to have lived. It is named Titanoboa cerrejonensis, meaning titanic boa from Cerrejon, the open-pit coal mine where its fossils were found.

**'This thing is a crocodile eater, catching and eating them in the water.'**

—Jason Head, paleontologist at the University of Toronto

Titanoboa was at least 43 feet long, weighed 2,500 pounds, and its massive body was at least 3 feet wide, they wrote in the journal Nature.

It lived 58 million to 60 million years ago, when Earth's animal kingdom was still recovering from the mass extinction that doomed the dinosaurs and many other creatures 65 million years ago when an asteroid hit near the Yucatan coast of Mexico. It may have been the largest non-ocean vertebrate then on Earth.

"It is a mind-bogglingly big snake," paleontologist Jason Head

of the University of Toronto Mississauga, one of the scientists, said in a telephone interview.

Paleontologist Jonathan Bloch of the University of Florida's Florida Museum of Natural History said, "When people think of Tyrannosaurus rex and how huge that thing was, this really is in the order of magnitude of Tyrannosaurus rex, in terms of length and in terms of caliber of gigantic."

Titanoboa was the largest inhabitant of a hot, lush, tropical rain forest and probably hunted forms of crocodiles, large fish, and big freshwater turtles. It was not venomous and likely lived a lifestyle akin to the large river-dwelling anacondas of today, wrapping around its unfortunate prey.

"This thing is a crocodile eater, catching and eating them in the water," Head said. "It was a bad day for the crocs."

Its ecosystem was similar to today's Amazon rain forest but hotter. The researchers estimated a snake of its size would have needed an average annual temperature in equatorial South America of 86 to 93 degrees Fahrenheit to survive.

Of modern snakes, Titanoboa is most closely related to boa constrictors, except that it was the length of a school bus.

The scientists recovered fossil vertebrae and ribs, but no skull or teeth, from 28 different individuals. They think the largest Titanoboa may have been 49 feet or longer.

Previously, the largest known snake was Gigantophis, which lived about 39 million years ago in Egypt and was at least 33 feet long. The longest of today's snakes is the reticulated python, measuring perhaps 30 feet.