

## **Fossil Folklore from India: The Siwalik Hills and the *Mahâbhârata***

by Alexandra van der Geer, Michael Dermitzakis and John de Vos

In: Folklore – The Folklore Society, London ([www.folklore-society.com](http://www.folklore-society.com))

### **Abstract**

All over the world, from antiquity to the present, people have often explained fossil discoveries as the proof for the historical value of legends and myths, or used them as a basis for a new legend. Most often, large vertebrate fossils have been explained as bones and teeth of giant humans, dragons and monsters, saints and heroes. Smaller invertebrate fossils were often interpreted as sacred or curious relics based upon their resemblance to familiar or sacred objects. India is no exception to this practice. Fossil ammonites (*salagramas*), for example, are worshipped as the disc (*chakra*) of the Hindu god Vishnu. The Siwalik Hills, below the Himalayas, are strewn with impressive Plio-Pleistocene vertebrate fossils. This paper suggests that the region was seen as the historical stage for the legendary battle as described in the Indian epic *Mahâbhârata*, during which hundreds of mighty and sometimes gigantic heroes, horses and war elephants died. Their remains are seen in the fossil bones, skulls, jaws and tusks of hippopotamuses (*Hexaprotodon*), proboscideans (*Stegodon*, *Archidiskodon*), four-horned giraffes (*Sivatherium*, *Giraffokeryx*), giant tortoises (*Geochelone*), sabre-toothed tigers (*Paramachairodus*), camels (*Camelus*) and other species. Moreover, thousands of ancient bronze javelins and spears are found on the surface after rains in the same region. These archaeological artefacts along with the paleontological remains appear to have influenced the setting and context of the great battle in the Indian epic.