

STATE OF ILLINOIS

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ILLINOIS STATE MUSEUM

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REPORT OF INVESTIGATIONS—NO. 5

THE PIASA BIRD: FACT OR FICTION?

WAYNE C. TEMPLE

Reprinted from
Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society
Vol. 49, No. 3 Fall Issue



ILLINOIS STATE MUSEUM

Printed by Authority of the State of Illinois
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS
1956

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THE PIASA BIRD: FACT OR FICTION?

BY WAYNE C. TEMPLE

THE first account of the painting known as the Piasa Bird, said to have been executed by Indians on the bluffs near Alton, Illinois, was recorded by Jacques Marquette in 1673.¹ He and Louis Jolliet discovered the drawing during their explorations of the Mississippi River. Prior to the start of their voyage, the Menominee Indians had warned Marquette, in May, 1673, that he would encounter "horrible monsters, which devoured men and Canoes Together; that there was even a demon, who was heard from a great distance, who barred the way, and swallowed up all who ventured to approach him."² The Indians who told these tales were not only superstitious but they also wished to discourage the French from discovering other tribes with whom they might trade. Much superstition prevailed, too, among Europeans of the Seventeenth Century, and Marquette—after hearing these tales of

¹ Some scholars think that Marquette's account was taken from a copy of Jolliet's Journal, the original of which was lost in a canoe accident. Francis Borgia Steck, "What Became of Jolliet's Journal?" *The Americas*, Vol. V (Oct., 1948), 172-99.

² Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland, 1896-1901), LIX: 97.

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the Menominee—did allow his imagination to run rampant soon after he entered the waters of the Mississippi. In describing a strange water animal he wrote: "we saw on The water a monster with the head of a tiger, a sharp nose Like That of a wildcat, with whiskers and straight, Erect ears; The head was gray and The Neck quite black."³

With his mind full of the Menominee warnings, Marquette next encountered two grotesque figures painted on a Mississippi bluff some distance north of the Missouri River. He wrote:

While Skirting some rocks, which by Their height and Length inspired awe, We saw upon one of them two painted monsters which at first made Us afraid, and upon Which the boldest savages dare not Long rest their eyes. They are as large As a calf; they have Horns on their heads Like those of deer, a horrible look, red eyes, a beard Like a tiger's, a face somewhat like a man's, a body Covered with scales, and so Long A tail that it winds all around the Body, passing above the head and going back between the legs, ending in a Fish's tail. Green, red, and black are the three Colors composing the Picture. Moreover, these 2 monsters are so well painted that we cannot believe that any savage is their author; for good painters in france would find it difficult to paint so well,—and, besides, they are so high up on the rock that it is difficult to reach that place Conveniently to paint them. Here is approximately The shape of these monsters, As we have faithfully Copied It.⁴

The drawing has been lost, but Sieur Robert La Salle saw it and reported in 1680 that:

The monster a sketch of which the Sieur Jolliet brought back is a grotesque [figure] painted by some Indian of the river: no one will avow its origin. It is a day and a half's journey from Crèvecoeur and if the Sieur Jolliet had descended a little farther he would have seen another more frightful still.⁵

Evidently some Indian or trader had reported the existence of a second painting farther down the Mississippi; La Salle

³ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 139-41.

⁵ Theodore Calvin Pease and Raymond C. Werner, eds., *The French Foundations, 1680-1693* (Springfield, Ill., 1934), 4-5.

himself did not journey down the river until 1682. This second drawing presumably was at Cape St. Anthony, a point on the east bank midway between the Ohio and Missouri rivers. But Jolliet and Marquette seem to have traveled as far south as the mouth of the Arkansas, and they made no mention of another Indian painting.

On December 12, 1698, J. F. Buisson St. Cosme, a Missionary priest, reached the second spot mentioned by La Salle and reported that there was a rock 200 feet high which was called Cape St. Anthony. "We saw no figure there as we had been told,"⁶ he wrote, but since his visit was eighteen years after La Salle's report, the figure could have weathered away.

Father Louis Hennepin, a Recollect Missionary, claimed to have observed the painting in 1680, but he published his account in 1697 at Utrecht under the title *Nouvelle Découverte d'un Très Grand Pays*. His first book, written in 1683, makes no mention of the paintings. Actually he obtained his report from one published in 1691 by Father Christian Le Clercq, another Recollect Missionary. Le Clercq's book, *Établissement de la Foi*, contained Father Anastasius Douay's observation of the paintings, but it was suppressed and was unknown to the general public.⁷ Hennepin's paraphrase of Douay stated:

I had quite forgot to relate, that the *Illinois* had told us, that towards the Cape, which I have call'd in my Map *St. Anthony* near the Nation of the *Messorites*, there were some *Tritons*, and other Sea-Monsters painted, which the boldest Men durst not look upon, there being some Enchantment in their Faces. I thought this was a Story; but when we came near the Place they had mention'd, we saw instead of these Monsters, a Horse and some other Beasts painted upon the Rock with red Colours by the Savages. The *Illinois* had told us likewise, that the Rock on which these dreadful Monsters stood, was so steep that no Man could climb up to it; but had we not been afraid of the Savages more than of the Monsters, we had certainly got up

⁶ John Gilmary Shea, ed., *Early Voyages up and down the Mississippi*, by Cavalier, St. Cosme, Le Sueur, Gravier, and Guignas (Albany, 1861), 68-69.

⁷ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America by Father Louis Hennepin* (Chicago, 1903), I: xxxiv. Hennepin's first book, *A Description of Louisiana*, is thought to be reliable.

to them. There is a common Tradition amongst that People, That a great number of *Miami's* were drown'd in that Place, being pursu'd by the Savages of *Matsigamea*; and since that time, the Savages going by the Rock, use to smoak, and offer Tobacco to those Beasts, to appease, as they say, the *Manitou*, that is, in the Language of the *Algonquins* and *Accadians*, an evil Spirit, which the *Iroquese* call *Otkon*; but the Name is the only thing they know of him.⁸

Douay's account was written in 1687 and published four years later by Le Clercq. It has none of the supernatural element with which Marquette's abounds. Although there was a rivalry between the two orders—Douay being a Recollect and Marquette a Jesuit—the former's report appears to be trustworthy. In speaking of Marquette's monsters, Douay said:

I had brought with me the printed book of this pretended discovery, and I remarked all along my route that there was not a word of truth in it. . . . It is said that they saw painted monsters that the boldest would have difficulty to look at, and that there was something supernatural about them. This frightful monster is a horse painted on a rock with matachia, and some other wild beasts made by the Indians. It is said that they can not be reached, and yet I touched them without difficulty. The truth is that the *Miamis*, pursued by the *Matsigamea*, having been drowned in the river, the Indians ever since that time present tobacco to these grotesque figures whenever they pass, in order to appease the *manitou*.⁹

Henri Joutel arrived upon the scene of these paintings in September, 1687—the same year that Douay observed them—and his report seems to confirm Douay's account:

The 2d [of September, 1687], we arriv'd at the Place, where the Figure is of the pretended Monster spoken of by Father *Marquet*. That Monster consists of two scurvy Figures drawn in red, on the flat Side of a Rock, about eight or ten Foot high, which wants very much of the extraordinary Height that Relation mentions. However our *Indians* paid Homage, by offering Sacrifice to that Stone; tho' we endeavour'd to give them to understand, that

⁸ Thwaites, ed., *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, I: 207-208.

⁹ John Gilmary Shea, ed., *Discovery and Exploration of the Mississippi Valley: With the Original Narratives of Marquette, Allouez, Membre, Hennepin, and Anastase Douay* (New York, 1852), 222-23; *First Establishment of the Faith in New France by Father Christian Le Clercq* (New York, 1881), II: 273-74.

the said Rock had no Manner of Virtue, and that we worship'd something above it, pointing up to Heaven; but it was no Purpose, and they made Signs to us, that they should die if they did not perform that Duty.¹⁰

In December, 1698, St. Cosme passed the spot and recorded his observation of the figures: "Three or four leagues [below the Illinois] we found on the left a rock having some figures painted on it, for which, it is said, the Indians have some veneration. They are now almost effaced."¹¹

The important fact in St. Cosme's account is that the effects of weathering had almost obliterated the figures near Alton by 1698; and when he reached Cape St. Anthony a few days later, he found no paintings at all. St. Cosme's report is the last reliable one about the Piasa painting near Alton. François Xavier de Charlevoix, an excellent observer, traveled down the Mississippi in 1721, but he made no mention of any strange paintings on the bluffs,¹² nor have any contemporary records been found which describe them during the Eighteenth Century.

It was not until the period of 1804-1812 that anyone again claimed to have seen the figures. Major Amos Stoddard gave this testimony in his book published in 1812: "What they call *Painted Monsters* on the side of a high perpendicular rock, apparently inaccessible to man, between the Missouri and Illinois, and known to the moderns by the name of *Piesa*, still remain in a good degree of preservation."¹³

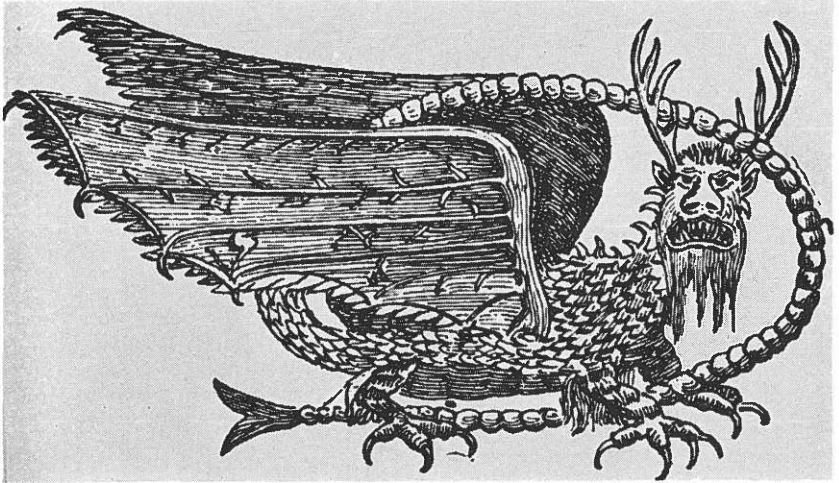
It is difficult to believe that the figures were visible in 1812 if they were nearly effaced in 1698 unless they had been restored by someone. In fact, the Hon. Murray McConnel of Jacksonville, Illinois, observed the rock in 1824 and later reported to John F. Snyder that he had seen nothing but

¹⁰ Henry Reed Stiles, ed., *Joutel's Journal of La Salle's Last Voyage 1684-7* (Albany, 1906), 186-87.

¹¹ Shea, ed., *Early Voyages up and down the Mississippi*, 65-66.

¹² Louise Phelps Kellogg, ed., *Journal of a Voyage to North America* (Chicago, 1923), 2 vols.

¹³ Amos Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana* (Philadelphia, 1812), 17.



Illinois State Museum photo

WILLIAM DENNIS' DRAWING OF THE PIASA BIRD

This is the best-known version and is said to have been made on April 3, 1825.

"blotches of rusty-looking discoloration, such as stained the exposed faces of the cliffs generally."¹⁴ Such coloration may have been caused by the iron oxide which is found in the limestone there.

In 1836 John Russell of Bluffdale, Illinois, who had been a professor at Alton Seminary in 1834, published a legend about the Piasa Bird which persists to the present day:

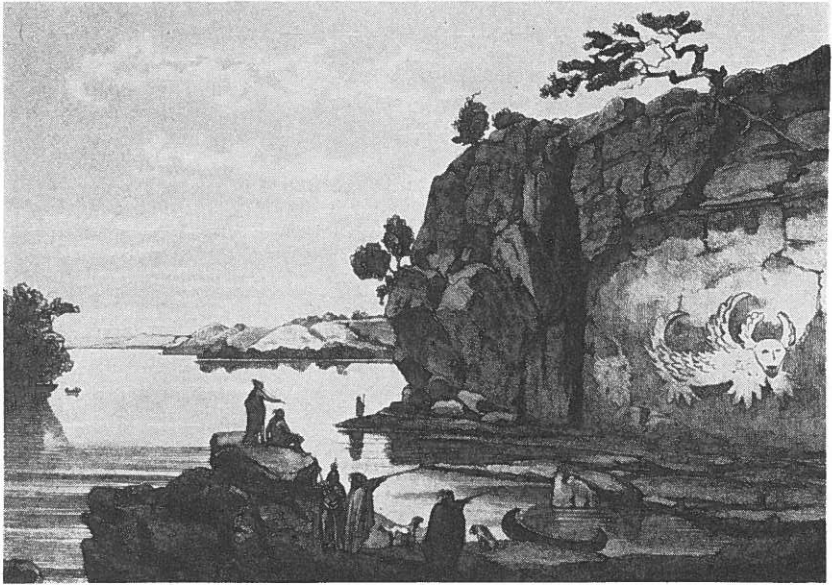
No part of the United States, not even the highlands of the Hudson, can vie, in wild and romantick scenery, with the bluffs of Illinois. On one side of the river, often at the water's edge, a perpendicular wall of rock rises to the height of some hundred feet. Generally on the opposite shore is a level bottom or prairie, of several miles in width, extending to a similar bluff that runs parallel with the river.

One of these ranges commences at Alton, and extends with few intervals for many miles along the left bank of the Illinois. In descending the river to Alton, the traveller will observe between that town and the mouth of the Illinois, a narrow ravine through which a small stream discharges its waters into the Mississippi. That stream is the Piasâ. Its name is Indian, and

¹⁴ John F. Snyder Papers (MSS in the Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield).

signifies in the language of the Illini, "THE BIRD THAT DEVOURS MEN." Near the mouth of that stream, on the smooth and perpendicular face of the bluff, at an elevation which no human art can reach, is cut the figure of an enormous bird, with its wings extended. The bird which this figure represents was called by the Indians, the Piasâ, and from this is derived the name of the stream.

The tradition of the Piasâ is still current among all the tribes of the Upper Mississippi, and those who have inhabited the valley of the Illinois, and is briefly this: "Many thousand moons before the arrival of the pale faces, when the great magalonyx and mastodon, whose bones are now dug up, were still living in this land of the green prairies, there existed a bird of such dimensions that he could easily carry off, in his talons, a full grown deer. Having obtained a taste of human flesh, from that time he would prey upon nothing else. He was artful as he was powerful; would dart suddenly and unexpectedly upon an Indian, bear him off into one of the caves in the bluff, and devour him. Hundreds of warriors attempted for years to destroy him, but without success. Whole villages were nearly depopulated, and consternation spread through all the tribes of the Illini. At length, Ouatojá, a chief, whose fame as a warrior extended even beyond the great lakes, separating himself from the rest of his tribe, fasted in solitude for the space of a whole moon, and prayed to the Great Spirit, the Master of life, that he would protect his children from the Piasâ. On the last night of the fast, the Great Spirit appeared to Ouatojá in a dream, and directed him to select twenty of his warriors, each armed with a bow and a poisoned arrow, and conceal them in a designated spot. Near the place of their concealment, another warrior was to stand in open view, as a victim for the Piasâ, which they must shoot the instant that he pounced upon his prey. When the chief awoke in the morning, he thanked the Great Spirit, and returning to his tribe, told them his dream. The warriors were quickly selected and placed in ambush as directed. Ouatojá offered himself as the victim. He was willing to die for his tribe. Placing himself in open view of the bluff, he soon saw the Piasâ perched on the cliff eyeing his prey. Ouatojá drew up his manly form to its utmost height, and planting his feet firmly upon the earth, began to chant the death-song of a warrior. A moment after, the Piasâ rose into the air and, swift as the thunderbolt, darted down upon the chief. Scarcely had he reached his victim, when every bow was sprung, and every arrow sent, to the feather, into his body. The Piasâ uttered a wild, fearful scream, that resounded far over the opposite side of the river, and expired. Ouatojá was safe. Not an arrow, nor even the talons of the bird, had touched him. The Master of life in admiration of the generous deed of Ouatojá had held over him an invisible shield. In memory of this



From *Das Illustrierte Mississippithal* . . . (Dusseldorf, 1857)

HENRY LEWIS' PIASÂ, PAINTED ABOUT 1846 OR 1847

event, the image of the Piasâ was engraved on the face of the bluff. Such is the Indian tradition. Of course I do not vouch for its truth. This much, however, is certain; the figure of a large bird cut into the solid rock, is still there, and at a height that is perfectly inaccessible. How and for what purpose it was made, I leave for others to determine; even at this day, an Indian never passes that spot in his canoe without firing his gun at the figure of the bird. The marks of balls on the rock are almost innumerable.

Near the close of March of the present year, I was induced to visit the bluffs below the mouth of the Illinois and above that of the Piasâ. My curiosity was principally directed to the examination of a cave connected with the above traditions, as one of those to which the bird had carried its human victims. Preceded by an intelligent guide who carried a spade, I set out on my excursion. The cave was extremely difficult of access, and at one point of our progress I stood at an elevation of more than one hundred and fifty feet on the face of the bluff, with barely room to sustain one foot. The unbroken wall towered above me, while below was the river. After a long and perilous clambering we reached the cave which was about fifty feet above the surface of the river. By the aid of a long pole, placed on the projecting rock and the upper end touching the mouth of the cave, we suc-

ceeded in entering it. Nothing could be more impressive than the view from the entrance of this cavern. The Mississippi was rolling in silent grandeur beneath us: high over our heads a single cedar hung its branches over the cliff, on the blasted top of which was seated a bald eagle. No other sound or sign of life was near us. A sabbath stillness rested upon the scene. Not a cloud was in the heavens; not a breath of air was stirring. The broad Mississippi lay before us, calm and smooth, as a lake. The landscape presented the same wild aspect as it did before it had yet met the eye of the white man.

The roof of the cavern was vaulted, the top of which was hardly less than twenty-five feet in height. The shape of the cave was irregular, but so far as I could judge, the bottom would average twenty by thirty feet. The floor of this cave throughout its whole extent was a mass of human bones. Sculls and other bones were mingled together in the utmost confusion. To what depth they extended I am unable to decide, but we dug to the depth of three or four feet in every quarter of the cavern and still we found only bones. The remains of thousands must have been deposited here: How, and by whom, and for what purpose, it is impossible even to conjecture. J. R.¹⁵

Russell's story is full of the supernatural and its composition shows the flair of a novelist. He certainly never intended for this fanciful tale to be accepted as a historical article, but the reading public did just that. When questioned by William McAdams about the Piasa legend, Russell admitted that his story was "*somewhat illustrated*."¹⁶ And years later, his son, Spencer G. Russell, related to John F. Snyder that his father at one time confessed to him that the legend of the Piasa Bird was the product of imagination coupled with Marquette's account.¹⁷ But with the publication of Russell's article the legend grew and was retold. Writing from Alton on June 10, 1838, A. D. Jones declared:

There it was done, and stained with the fast and fadeless colors, whose

¹⁵ [John Russell], "The Piasa: An Indian Tradition of Illinois," *The Family Magazine; or Monthly Abstract of General Knowledge*, Vol. IV (Aug., 1836), 101-102. This is the Boston edition; the Cincinnati edition carried the story in the Oct., 1836 number. Russell's article was reprinted in the *Alton Telegraph*, Sept. 28, 1836, and in the *Sangamo Journal* (Springfield, Ill.), Oct. 15, 1836. There is no doubt about Russell's being its author; he later reprinted it under his full name.

¹⁶ William McAdams, *Records of Ancient Races in the Mississippi Valley* (St. Louis, 1887), 5.

¹⁷ Snyder Papers.

subtle compounding the Indian only knows, and which remain plainly visible to the present day. . . . That such a monster ever existed, I cannot vouch—that its image is engraven upon the rock I know.¹⁸

Edmund Flagg, on a tour of the western country, claimed that he saw the Piasa Bird, but his account—complete with the description of the cave full of bones—is certainly taken directly from John Russell's story. Flagg concluded:

True or false, the figure of the bird, with expanded wings, graven upon the surface of solid rock, is still to be seen at a height perfectly inaccessible; and to this day no Indian glides beneath the spot in his canoe without discharging at this figure his gun.¹⁹

It is very doubtful that anyone actually saw the figures after 1698. Internal evidence points to the conclusion that they repeated, with their own flourishes, the legend told by John Russell. A similar tale of the Piasa was related by Lewis F. Thomas in 1841.²⁰ About five years later, George B. Douglas, who accompanied Henry Lewis on his painting trips, recorded in German his version of the figure: "Near the mouth of this small stream arises a vertical bluff, on whose flat surface, and at a height seemingly unreachable by human art, the figure of an enormous bird with outstretched wings is carved."²¹ However, the picture painted by Lewis is not that of a bird but of a dragon-like creature! Douglas probably wrote his description from the traditional story of the Piasa since Lewis painted one creature and the head of a second one, and Douglas described only one figure.

In 1844 an unidentified resident of Alton, who signed his article simply "L.," published this observation of the Piasa:

It is well known to all voyagers, on the Mississippi, that, on the face of the towering bluffs, near Alton, are portrayed some striking and unique

¹⁸ A. D. Jones, *Illinois and the West* (Boston, 1838), 58-60.

¹⁹ [Edmund Flagg], *The Far West: Or, a Tour Beyond the Mountains* (New York, 1838), I: 96.

²⁰ Lewis F. Thomas, ed., *The Valley of the Mississippi* (St. Louis, 1841), 71-73.

²¹ The translation is by the author from Henry Lewis, *Das Illustrierte Mississippi-thal, Dargestellt in 80 nach der Natur Angenommenen Ansichten von Wasserfalle zu St. Anthony an bis zum Golf von Mexico* (Dusseldorf, 1857), 273.

representations, seemingly the work of art, though in a rude, and imperfect state. The largest figure of this singular group, is of an oblong form and distorted proportions; and is believed by some to be the picture of a *monster* bird, of which there are no specimens extant, in natural history, nor any account, save in the vague traditions of the Indians.—This portrait has become faded, by exposure to the elements, and its outlines are but faintly perceived, unless closely examined. The color appears to have been of a dark vermillion hue; and its location is somewhat elevated above the now surface of the adjacent bank of the river.

Then "L." denounced John Russell's story of the Piasa Bird as a "gross fable" and proceeded to recount a legend which he claimed originated with the Potawatomi Indians instead of the Illini. The figure, he said, looked more like a hippopotamus with "branching horns" than any winged creature and was originally drawn on the cliff to celebrate the defeat of "an enormous monster, with spreading horns" who inhabited the Mississippi. The heroes of the legend are twins, Peasayah and Onecaw who were born of a virgin maid named Wacoulla. They defeat the monster with metal lances after which Peasayah skins it and traces its outline on the bluff.²² This legend is nearly as fanciful as John Russell's, however the observation of the figure seems to be more in keeping with Marquette's description since there is no mention of wings.

During the month of March, 1847, Rudolph Friederich Kurz, a Swiss artist from Bern, passed the bluffs near Alton and recorded in his journal that there was "an age-old, half-disintegrating hieroglyphic drawing of a colossal eagle" there. Kurz then referred to the traditional story of the Piasa Bird which he probably gleaned from John Russell's legend.²³

To confuse the issue further, Russell told an entirely different legend about the Piasa in 1847. This second account has remained buried in the newspaper which published it:

There is found inscribed on the precipitous face of a cliff, in a side

²² "L.," "The Manitou of the Piasa: An Indian Tradition," *Alton Telegraph & Democratic Review*, April 20, 27, 1844.

²³ J. N. B. Hewitt, ed., *Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz* (Washington, 1937), 15-16.

gulf or gorge, in the Mississippi valley, near Alton, the figure of a gigantic bird, which is supposed to represent the condor. This figure is traced on a part of the cliff inaccessible to man, without resorting to some unusual means to reach such a height; and the wonder is how the simple natives who were ignorant of the use of the ladder, could reach such an eminence. Of this curious device, now obscured by time, the ancient Illinois has the following tradition:

Many years ago and long before the white man came to the continent, a huge and fierce bird lived in the Mississippi Valley. He made his nest on the cliffs of the mountains, and flew down into the plains and valleys, making a loud noise with his wings and carrying off children as well as whole animals, in his enormous claws. There appeared to be but one family of these great birds, but they increased so fast, and spread such terror among the tribes, that the Illinois were at their wits end what to do. But it was the great male or king of the nest, who caused the greatest alarm—every attempt to kill him had failed. He generally came at unexpected times, and flew off with his prey before they could come near enough to draw their arrows on him.

One night Alpeora, who had a child carried away by this terrific bird, dreamed that at such a time, their great enemy would alight on a certain cliff, and that if he prepared his bow and arrow well, he could kill him from the opposite side of the gorge; but if he failed, the dream went on to warn him, that the enraged bird would fly down and eat him up, and all his family. As soon as he awoke, he determined to venture his life on the attempt, and immediately began to prepare for it. He took the longest and heaviest bow he had, and carefully examined and re-adjusted its sinewy string, and prepared an arrow with a long and sharp dart of the choicest flint. He filled his quiver with a supply of other darts; he painted his visage as if for war; he then belted on his forest accoutrements; he took a stone hatchet, pointed at each end, and his heavy war club as if he were going into battle; he ornamented his head with the honored feathers of the war eagle, the proudest trophy of prowess known to the North American tribes. From his shoulder and back descended fringes of dressed deer skin, ornamented with shining plates of mica. His baldric or belt confined various articles essential to the chase. His leggings were trimmed with shells from distant sea-shores; and to the heel of each moccasin, there was attached by a string, the skin of a polecat—an animal, which conscious of its peculiar mode of defence, never runs from its pursuer; and hence is adopted by the tribes as an emblem of bravery.

Thus armed, Alpeora went out at the earliest glimpse of morning; and as he walked towards the defile of the gorge, which had been pictured to

his fancy in his dream, he recited his war song with all the fervor he could have used, had he been marching against a human foe.

While it was yet scarcely light enough to see, he concealed himself in a small clump of bushes, opposite the bald face of the cliff, where his dream told him the bird would alight. He waited with great impatience. He looked around to see that all his implements were in order; then took a small piece of root from his pouch, which is supposed to give courage to warriors, and put it in his mouth. The first dim and soft upshoots of light began to be visible in the east and foretold the rising sun; as he finished chewing the sacred stimulant, he saw the bird passing directly over his head towards the cliff.—He alighted within range of his arrow. For a moment, terror passed over his nerves. A gigantic figure with folded wings, which were ample enough to cover his entire lodge, sat before him. His claws and bills were enormous. His eyes glanced out fire. The very concussion of his wings upon the air, seemed like low pealing thunder.

But Alpeora rallied. In a few moments, he drew up his massive bow, and by the aid of his knee notched the string; and taking his choicest arrow, drew it up with all the strength and energy of a practiced hunter, and aiming it at the bird's heart, uttered the exclamation, *e-ob!* and cast his life on the issue. Success crowned the shot. The stillness and serenity of the air favored the passage of the arrow. A true aim and a desperate strength, united to the comparative shortness of the distance, gave him the victory. The bird fell bleeding and fluttering at the foot of the cliff; but before he would venture within the range of the expiring power, he despatched three additional arrows which completed his triumph. After this, the condor left the Mississippi valley, and has never since reappeared. Alpeora availed himself of the fallen pine and some bark ropes to ascend the face of the cliff, and draw the fig[ure] of his victory on a part of the rock quite out of common reach, so that his exploit might appear to his countrymen, and to all after times, the more wonderful.²⁴

Russell's first account claimed that the figure was still visible on the bluff, but in the second version he admitted that it was "now obscured by time." The Piasa Bird also became a giant "condor," and the hero changed from Ouatogá (who acted as the lure while twenty warriors shot the marauder) to another Illini named Alpeora who killed the bird single-handed. Such discrepancies brand Russell's stories as pure fiction.

²⁴ John Russell, "The Piasa Bird—An Illinois Legend," *Illinois Journal* (Springfield), Oct. 28, 1847.

Then in 1848 John Russell reverted to his original version and reprinted it in the *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* of Utica, New York.²⁵ Somehow the public did not notice the wide difference in his two accounts, and only the first one was copied and retold by countless writers. Perhaps few read his second tale.

Although Spencer G. Russell, the son of John Russell, discredited the legend told by his father, he later claimed that he had seen the Piasa paintings in 1849 while a student at Shurtleff College.²⁶ He did not publish his observations, however, until 1883:

My recollection of it is of a picture cut into the surface of the rock to the depth of half an inch or more—had originally been painted red, black and blue, as portions of these colors were still adhering to the rock. The bird, or beast, . . . had the head of a bear, directly facing the river below; the mouth was open, plainly showing large disproportioned teeth. On its head were the unmistakable horns of an elk. The upper portions of the horns were red, while the lower portions, together with the head, were black. The body was that of a fish confusedly colored with all three colors; it also showed distinctly the marks of scales, resembling in their order those of a fish. The wings were expanded to the right and left of the face, as if in the act of taking flight, extending probably from sixteen to eighteen feet from point to point. The legs were those of a bear, armed with the talons of an eagle. The tail was wrapped three times around the body, twice back of the wings, once forward, terminating in the shape of a spear head. The most prominent features were the wings and head, the latter being covered by a long beard or mane. There was also one other remarkable fact, which has been noticed by all who were familiar with this picture, that at times it could be seen more distinctly than at others. When the atmosphere was damper than usual, the colors came out plainer; hence it may be inferred that as Marquette passed in June (one of our driest months) the wings were not visible.²⁷

Spencer Russell was the first writer to attempt to explain

²⁵ *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, Vol. XIX (July 14, 1848), 224; reprinted in *Manford's Magazine*, Vol. XXXI (Feb., 1887), 75-76.

²⁶ Spencer G. Russell was graduated in 1853. *Semi-Centennial and General Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Shurtleff College for 50 years—1827-77* (Upper Alton, 1877), 24.

²⁷ Quoted in Tom English, "The Piasa Petroglyph: The Devourer from the Bluffs," *Art and Archaeology*, Vol. XIV (Sept., 1922), 152-53.

why Marquette had not seen the wings which somehow became associated with the painted monster. But Marquette reported that the figures were well painted, signifying that he could see the features clearly. It would seem that Spencer Russell was merely searching for an alibi to explain away the error made by the first artist who drew the Piasa, supposedly from Marquette's account. Spencer Russell may never have seen the actual paintings since it is claimed by some writers that the cliff was quarried away in 1846 and 1847.²⁸ Yet an unidentified report dated 1859 purports to give a contemporary description of some paintings along the Mississippi:

Near the mouth of the Piasa Creek, on the bluff, there is a smooth rock in a cavernous cleft, under an overhanging cliff, on whose face, 50 feet from the base, are painted some ancient pictures or hieroglyphics, of great interest to the curious. They are placed in a horizontal line from east to west, representing men, plants and animals. The paintings, though protected from dampness and storms, are in great part destroyed, marred by portions of the rock becoming detached and falling down.²⁹

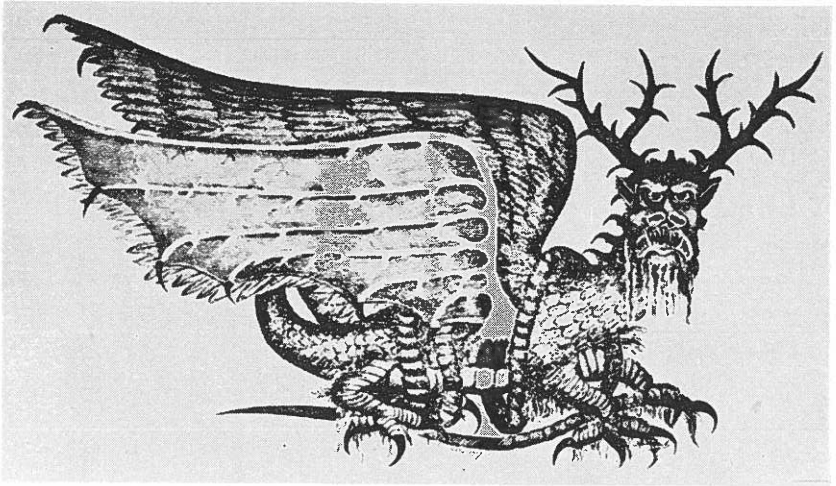
This description could easily have been of another set of Indian paintings near Alton. It is certain that by 1867 there was nothing remaining of the controversial Piasa painting. Francis Parkman, a competent observer and careful historian, passed by the bluff and recorded these facts: "The tradition of their existence remains, though they are entirely effaced by time. In 1867, . . . a part of the rock had been quarried away, and, instead of Marquette's monsters, it bore a huge advertisement of 'Plantation Bitters.'"³⁰

In 1873, Martin Beem reported that there were still many persons living at Alton who "remember traces of the painting of the bird on the cliffs,—which time, the iconoclast, has now wholly destroyed." Beem then recounts his version of the legend which is very similar to the first story published by

²⁸ McAdams, *Records of Ancient Races in the Mississippi Valley*, 9.

²⁹ Alexander Davidson and Bernard Stuvé, *A Complete History of Illinois from 1673 to 1873* (Springfield, 1874), 62n.

³⁰ Francis Parkman, *The Discovery of the Great West* (Boston, 1869), 59n.



THE SPENCER G. RUSSELL VERSION OF THE PIASA

John Russell. According to Beem, "the Ottow-wahs and the Illinois were allies, and Lin-cah-tello, 'the firm oak,' was their chief." "They were all happy," said Beem, "except Lin-cah-tello," who mourned the "mysterious loss of his only daughter, and the death of her lover, who flung himself over the cliffs, in a moment of despair." Then suddenly the Piasa Bird "came among them, and took up its home in a cave in the cliffs." It had the head and wings of an eagle, the tongue of an adder, and the tail of a dragon, "tipped with the sting of a scorpion." The Piasa's four legs were "human to the knees, and eagle the rest" of the way. This monster preyed upon the defenseless Indians until in desperation a council was called to discover a means of killing the beast. Lin-cah-tello said that "some one must be sacrificed, placed in a conspicuous position, and twenty-five warriors, with poisoned arrows, were to be secreted near, and fire at the bird when it came for its prey." On the appointed day, the chief himself stepped forward and announced that he was to be the human victim. As the Piasa swooped down upon the brave chief, the warriors killed the bird and the following day painted his image on

the bluffs, "a short distance above the spot where the distracted lover made his fatal leap."³¹

Beem's account differs from Russell's first legend in only a few points: the name of the chief is changed, the Ottawa are said to be members of the Illini confederacy, the number of warriors is increased, the legend of Lover's Leap is included and a close description of the Piasa is added.

In the Twentieth Century the Piasa Bird at Alton has been reproduced and restored several times. Herbert Forcade, an eighteen-year-old Boy Scout, executed the traditional version of the Piasa on the cliff and his troop presented the painting to the city on October 4, 1924; the formal dedication took place the following day.³² In 1935 I. H. Mawdsley, then a student at Shurtleff College, repainted the image after funds for the enterprise had been secured by John D. McAdams.³³ Again in 1938 Mawdsley restored his painting, using red and green instead of yellow which had predominated in 1935.³⁴ Then on September 12, 1952, Jack Buese and Eldon Grove once more began the task of reproducing the Piasa. Their painting is thirty by eighteen feet and was dedicated on October 12, 1952.³⁵ The legend has become a part of Illinois tradition, but the restorations seem to prove one thing: even with the best paints of modern science, nature soon erodes the figure from the bluff. Therefore, it is doubtful if the original could have been seen clearly after 1698 when St. Cosme observed it and remarked that it was then "almost effaced."

There is little fact to bolster any of the legends concerning the Piasa Bird. Jacob P. Dunn, who was an expert in the language of the Illini, stated that there was no such word as Piasa in their vocabulary and that the legend was not in

³¹ Martin Beem, "The Piasa-Bird: A Legend of the Illinois," *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), June 14, 1873.

³² *East St. Louis (Ill.) Journal*, Oct. 5, 1924; W. D. Armstrong, "Madison County Historical Society," *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society for the Year 1928* (Springfield, 1928), 41.

³³ *Alton (Ill.) Evening Telegraph*, Aug. 27, 1935.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Aug. 25, 1938.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Sept. 13, Oct. 13, 1952.

keeping with Indian folklore. However, there was a Kaskaskia chief named Paessa who was killed while fighting the Iroquois during the winter of 1680-1681.³⁶ Among the Sauk the name was also known; Black Hawk's father was called "Pyesa,"³⁷ and Thomas Hutchins' map of 1778 identifies the area where Alton now stands as "Piasas."

There is little doubt that there were, at one time, painted figures on the bluff at Alton, but Marquette's sketch of them is lost. The other drawings came centuries after Marquette and Jolliet observed the paintings. The best known one was published by William McAdams, who made no claim that it was drawn from the original figures on the bluff.³⁸ Although McAdams stated that it was drawn by William Dennis on April 3, 1825, Georgia McAdams Clifford, his daughter, recalled that her father made the drawing from Marquette's description.³⁹ The drawing made by Spencer G. Russell is merely McAdams' with the tail in a different position and without the fin at its extremity. The painting by Henry Lewis shows not a bird but rather a dragon-like monster. Not until John Russell published his tale of the Piasa Bird in 1836 was there any account of wings on the figure.

There is much confusion in the contemporary reports of the early missionaries who saw the figures; were they all observing the same picture? Since there is a report of another painting near Cape St. Anthony, perhaps some of the early observers were confused as to the site of Marquette's discovery. Regardless of where the figures were located, Marquette's report is certainly exaggerated. It is known that there were Indian paintings along the Mississippi River; in 1817 Major Stephen H. Long discovered a rock on the west bank of the

³⁶ Jacob P. Dunn, "Marquette's Monsters," *Americana*, Vol. XVII (Jan. 1923), 105; Pierre Margry, ed., *Découvertes et Établissements des Français* (Paris, 1879), II: 142.

³⁷ Donald Jackson, ed., *Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak, Black Hawk: An Autobiography* (Urbana, Ill., 1955), 47.

³⁸ McAdams, *Records of Ancient Races in the Mississippi Valley*, 8.

³⁹ Georgia McAdams Clifford, *Indian Legends of the Piasa Country* (St. Louis, 1932), 19.

Mississippi nine miles above Prairie du Chien which had Indian paintings on it. "These figures," Long noted on July 21, "are painted on a cliff nearly perpendicular, at the height of about twenty-five feet from its base. Whenever the Indians pass this cliff they are in the habit of performing certain ceremonies." But according to Long, the paintings were more in the form of hieroglyphics than figures.⁴⁰

If Marquette did give vent to his imagination in describing the painting, the object which he probably had in mind was a figure which the French called "La Grande Goule." The first mention of La Grande Goule is as early as 1466, and this dragon-like creature was used in celebrations of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the three banners of the Sainte-Croix Monastery bore its picture and a statue of the monster was carried in the parades on the third day of Rogation. La Grande Goule was the guardian spirit of the monastery where Sainte-Radegonde had been killed. A wooden model of La Grande Goule, constructed in 1677, is preserved today in the Museum of Poitiers, France. It even has wings although Marquette did not record that the Piasa had wings.⁴¹

There is an element of the supernatural about Marquette's description of the Piasa which is European in character and not typical of the ideas held by American Indians. The qualities of the Piasa are similar to the Sphinx of Egypt or some of the Spanish statues. Marquette's monsters also may have been something similar to the wildcat pictograph or the Winnebago medicine animal.⁴²

If, as Father Douay reported, the figures were those of a horse, the Indians may have been recording their observations of the horses brought into the Southwest by the Spanish.

⁴⁰ Stephen H. Long, "Voyage in a Six-Oared Skiff to the Falls of Saint Anthony in 1817," *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul, 1889), II: 51.

⁴¹ Henri Dontenville, *La Mythologie Française* (Paris, 1948), 146n.; *Les Dieux et Récits de Mythologie Française* (Paris, 1950), 130, 135. Many thanks are due to Marc Sandoz, Conservateur of the Musées de Poitiers, for information regarding this subject.

⁴² Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Information Respecting the History . . . of the Indian Tribes of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1852-1853), I: 383; II: 224.

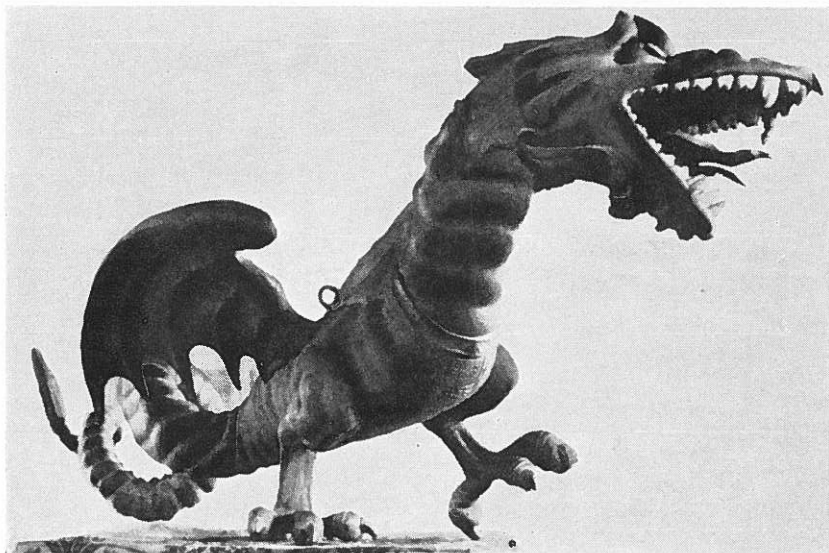


Photo courtesy Museum of Poitiers, France

WOODEN MODEL OF "LA GRANDE GOULE," MADE IN 1677

Or perhaps what Douay took to be a horse was actually a buffalo, deer, or other animal.

There are no other Indian drawings in southern Illinois which in any way correspond to the Piasa Bird.⁴³ Within recent years, however, Mr. Gregory Perino of Belleville discovered an Indian pot fragment which contains the outline of a figure with a forked tail.⁴⁴ This fragment is thought to belong to the Maples Mills corded-design type of pottery which may have been made between 600 and 1500 A. D.⁴⁵ Although the tail does not curve around the body as Marquette described the Piasa, there is a possibility that this is the animal which he observed painted on the cliff. What did Marquette actually see on the Alton bluff in 1673? Certainly it was not the dragon-like figure which has come to be known as the Piasa Bird.

⁴³ Irvin Peithman, "Pictographs and Petroglyphs in Southern Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Archaeological Society*, Vol. II (Apr., 1952), 91-94.

⁴⁴ Virginia S. Eifert, "The Piasa Bird in Pottery," *The Living Museum*, Vol. XV (Sept., 1953), 411 ff.

⁴⁵ Fay-Cooper Cole and Thorne Deuel, *Rediscovering Illinois* (Chicago, 1937), 48.