



Monster's mate in sorrow. Girvan, 1953

Description

Introduction

The Scottish town of Girvan is situated on the southwest coast in the Firth of Clyde, an Inlet of the Atlantic Ocean. While originally a fishing port, it turned into a seaside resort and became the "gateway to Ailsa Craig" (an island about 16 kilometers west of Girvan). In August 1953 two "sea monster"s have been reported from Girvan. The first monster washed up near the town, caused a media and touristic storm, was identified as basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*) and finally burnt due to its smell. Its history will be examined from newspaper-articles and reports of contemporary witnesses, while its identity will be explained from photography and "for the first time since 1953 published within this article" a cine film. The second monster, reportedly in deep sorrow for its dead and washed up mate, is only known from reports of local fisherman. As there is no further evidence it therefore only will be briefly mentioned.

Literature

While discussing the taphonomical processes how a basking shark carcass becomes a "pseudo-plesiosaur", author Dr Bernard Heuvelmans (1968) briefly mentioned that "fishermen at Girvan in Ayrshire found the carcass of a sea-monster about 30 feet long with a giraffe's neck, a camel's head, a tail 12 feet long and entirely covered with bristles, experts in London declared that it was a large whale" and journalists that the Loch Ness monster had risen again, on the grounds that a similar animal had recently been seen in the mouth of the Clyde". Also Tim Dinsdale (1966), in context to described "antennae" in the similar Deepdale Holm case of 1941, pointed to characteristic "rib-like appendages, which branch back from the snout", the "dorso-rostral" cartilages [?] of *Elasmobranchi* (sharks, skates and rays)". Harrison (2001) first acknowledged that the "story of the Girvan sighting is similar to that of the Stronsa carcass of 1808 with public disbelief that a basking shark could take the form of a plesiosaur-type creature, although we know from experience that they can" but then stepped back undecided as "whether the Girvan carcass is just another such case, or whether it was a genuine stranding of a sea serpent, we cannot be certain". Lastly Glen Vaudrey (2012) returned to the basking shark identity.



Fig. 1. The seaweed factory north of Girvan at Dipple (Mary and Angus Hogg, 2008.
<http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/912219>. Used under license [cc-by-sa/2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)).

Away from book records, many newspaper-articles give a vast bundle of information with numerous aspects in summary:

The remains are said to be found near Dipple (Sea â??monsterâ? ashore, 1953; Dinsdale, 1966; Smith, 2013), while the Ayrshire Post reported that it was â??removed to Dipple Bankâ? (Girvanâ??s mystery monster, 1953). Said Dipple itself consists of few houses and a dominating industry building (Fig. 1), in 1953 the seaweed-preserving factory of â??Alginate Industries Ltdâ?. Workers of the factory have been said to be the discoverers of the badly decomposed carcass at or around August 6 (Girvanâ??s mystery monster, 1953; Sea â??monsterâ? ashore, 1953). The nearly 30 feet (occasionally 35 feet) long creature with a 12 foot tail was described as having â??greyish-colouredâ?, â??coarse â? or â??horse-likeâ? hair, four (stumpy) legs, a four foot long â??giraffe-likeâ? neck and a head which resembled a â??horseâ? or â??camelâ? in shape with eyes â??shielded by a bony structureâ? or abbreviated â??shields covering its eyesâ?. Few days later the local people, which the Ayrshire Post identified as workers and cottagers near the seaweed-preserving factory, poured oil on it and burned it due to the stench. (Sea â??monsterâ? ashore, 1953; Sea monster washed up on Scottish beach, 1953; Sea monster found in Scotland, 1953; 4-legged monster arrives from the sea, 1953; The Scots â??seeâ? a sea monster but British expert cries â??phonyâ?, 1953; Mate dead, Girvan monster in misery, 1953; â??Monsterâ? turns out to be basking shark, 1953; Girvanâ??s mystery monster, 1953).

Unnamed â??local authoritiesâ? connected the monster to plesiosaurs and the Gulf Stream which may have carried the beast from â??far-away hauntsâ? to Girvan (The Scots â??seeâ? a sea monster, 1953). More cautious Dr H. W. Parker of the Department of Zoology at the British Museum thought that â??the whole thing sounds like a nightmare to me. There is something phony about the description â?? it resembles nothing I have ever heard of. It seems like the original shaggy dogâ? (The Scots â??seeâ? a sea monster, 1953; Monster sorrows for its mate, 1953). Unknown experts from Edinburgh (no name was given and maybe a confusion with the scientists of Glasgow University happened) have been said rushing to Girvan, but had been too late and so only photographs have been shown to them: â??the thwarted experts decided Girvanâ??s â??missing linkâ? was a basking-shark that had died a natural death in the sea, but had been battered by rocks and half eaten by other sea creaturesâ?. Despite this verdict

Professor Julian Huxley *“could not dismiss the affair so lightly. “It was a grave mistake to destroy the creature. The long neck, tail and legs were most unusual”*• (New sea *“monster”*• comes to Scotland, 1953). However, J. B. Cowey from Glasgow University’s Zoology Department already identified the carcass as badly decomposed remains of a basking shark (*“Sea monster”*• a shark, 1953) and this maybe at place as member of the examination team: *“Then came experts from Glasgow University, led by young Professor James Parry, Lecturer in Zoology. They took away specimens of the creature. [“!”] It was nothing more exciting than a basking shark. “We get them in these parts,” Professor Parry told “The Sunday Herald.” “This one was probably a baby, no more than 15 feet long “ certainly not 35 ft “ that’s utterly ridiculous”*•. The Curator of fishes at the Museum of Sydney, Mr G. Whitley, stated from photographs too, that *“after about three seconds [“!”] without any hesitation, on the evidence of this photograph alone, I can say confident that these are the remains of a basking shark”*• (A village loved its monster, 1953).



Fig. 2. Girvan’s sea monster at Dipple. (Prehistoric Reminder. (1953, September 28). The Vernon Daily Record. Used according to § 51 Urheberrechtsgesetz as photo-citation in (popular-)scientific work).

Some Girvan people had their own views, while *“most of us [residents of Girvan] at the time regarded it as a bit of nonsense exaggeration greatly stirred up by the popular press putting ideas into people’s mouths”*•, but *“there were plenty of characters in Girvan prepared to go along with the fun”*• (Nigel Smith, personal communication, April 23, 2018). Nameless Fishermen reported to have sighted a *“strange looking sea animal”*• beyond Ailsa Craig before (Sea *“monster”*• ashore, 1953; Sea monster washed up on Scottish beach, 1953; Sea monster found in Scotland, 1953; 4-legged monster arrives from the sea, 1953) and after the identification as basking shark, they claimed that *“they are as expert in distinguishing a basking shark as any professor and that “it was nae shark”*•. Some reported about a *“strange creature swimming in the sea of Turnberry Point and of Ailsa Craig”*• before the carcass was found. Skipper Carson of Girvan and his crew, hadn’t talked about their sighting before because of the strangeness of the creature, but now claimed to have seen it rearing its *“long neck and small head out of the water”*• with round, staring eyes. It leaved a foaming wake and made off with great speed (*“Sea “monster” is not a basking shark”*•, 1953). While those reports also could have referred to the then dead

creature, it turned to reports of a *grief-stricken* second monster, a *mate hovering nearby in the Clyde* (*Sea monster is not a basking shark*, 1953; *Mate dead, Girvan monster in misery*, 1953; *Girvan's mystery monster*, 1953). 62-years old Skipper William (in one instance: Alex) Sloan, nicknamed *Geisha*, had seen the carcass and claimed to have sighted a monster six or seven weeks before on returning from Ailsa Craig with his 18-ton fishing vessel *Amethyst*. On August 28 press wrote that he saw it between Ailsa Craig and Girvan one week before: *I was off the island of Ailsa Craig when the monster surged past about 20 yards away. I could see its head rearing out of the water and its coarse hair was glistening in the spray*. (*Mate dead, Girvan monster in misery*, 1953; *Sea monster is not a basking shark*, 1953; *The Scots see a sea monster but British expert cries phony*, 1953; *Girvan's mystery monster*, 1953; *Monster sorrows for its mate*, 1953). Sloan also reported that John Middlemass, the lighthouse keeper, had seen it rolling around in the surf near the rocks at the foot of the lighthouse. Senior bailie Mr McCulloch stated that they returned from fishing (two weeks after the carcass washed up) and saw it *fairly galloping through the water alongside us. Our boat was nearly 20ft. long, but the monster was longer than that, with its long neck rippling above the wave-tops*. (*Fishing Fleet hunts the monster's mate*, 1953). Lookouts on the harbor wall and hills searched for the next appearance of the monster's mate, was reported, while the village had become a *trippers' paradise* with *thousands [which] are booked to go there by train and road, a local manufacturer is turning out women's scarves with a monster pattern, and outsize potatoes are being sold as other Girvan monsters*. Sloan was said to run hourly hunts for the monster on his ship with *12 passengers at 10/ each*. (*New Sea Monster comes to Scotland*, 1953). A man named William Kerr had a concrete idea where to search: *Lighthouse keepers told me that two nights ago the dead monster's mate was seen carrying the carcass of a wild sheep into an unexplored cave on Ailsa Craig. [â?] Despite the danger, I am prepared to lead an armed expedition to the lair in an attempt to bring the thing back alive*. (*Monster turns out to be basking shark*, 1953).

Meanwhile the search for the vanished head of the carcass had begun. Tall and bearded *local recluse* Tony McTaggart (60), said to be formerly a liaison officer with General de Gaulle in WW2, was known to have left the cottage of his aunt at Pinwherry with a parcel under his arm. Before, he was seen removing part of the head and putting it into a sack. Therefore Provost Derek Smith, Ex-Provost A. H. Todd, town clerk Scott Valentine and others set on his track in Pinwherry only to hear he had gone to Glasgow. Valentine said, that they thought if they could trace the jawbone, they could show it to an expert in addition to the backbone Provost Smith already had sent to London (*Girvan's mystery monster*, 1953; *New sea monster comes to Scotland*, 1953). Tony McTaggart instead believed the 17-pound skull he found was that of a new-type sea monster (Tony McTaggart, 1954) and richly described it to press (Smith, 2013). The story ends curiously with Callum MacLeod (personal communication, February 10, 2018) remembering a quiz-show of that time, with one person whose claim to fame was that he had stolen the head of the Girvan monster.

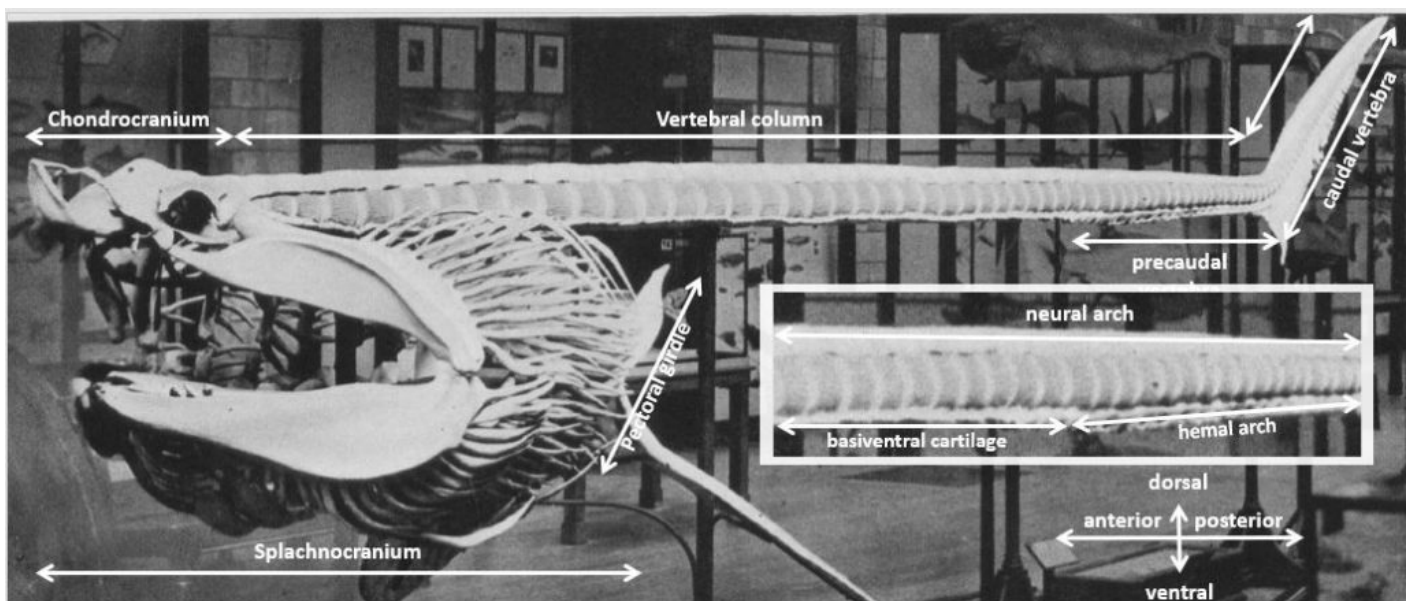


Fig. 3. Wax-model of a basking shark in British Museum with added anatomical terminology used in text (*Canadian monster*, 1934. Courtesy of the Mary Evans Picture Library).

Photographic evidence

The overall scene of Fig. 2 shows a heavily decomposed animal carcass on a beach, surrounded from roundish stones of various sizes. The picture was taken from the anterior end, so the posterior end of the carcass can't be acknowledged in detail. The body is positioned in bow-form, partially free from tissue with blank bones visible. Anteriorly there's a small head with a long neck followed by a bulky middle part, which posteriorly tapers to the tail. No extremities like fins can be acknowledged.

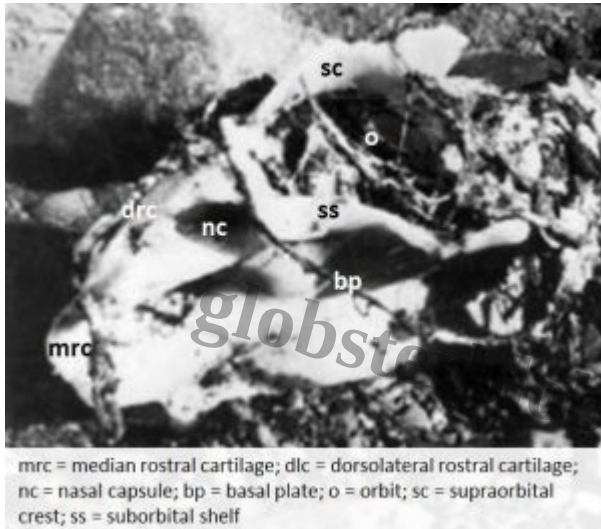


Fig. 4. Chondrocranium of the Girvan monster with added anatomical details used in text. (Bettmann, 1953. Used according to § 51 Urheberrechtsgesetz as photo-citation in (popular-)scientific work).

Chondrocranium

The somewhat rectangular head with a tapering rostral part of the creature is actually the exposed chondrocranium (Fig. 4). Laying in right lateral position it displays the basal plate of the ventral cranium. In the ethmoidal region (rostrum and paired nasal capsules) the last remaining part of the median rostral cartilage forms the inversely u-shaped tip of the rostrum. The left dorsolateral rostral cartilage, which arises in front of the nasal capsule, is vanished and only a "dark point" is left. The ventral opening of the left nasal capsule, which directly follows posterior, is clearly acknowledgeable. The orbit and its frame of supraorbital crest (dorsal) and suborbital shelf (ventral), the described "shields covering its eyes", are evident the latter was thought from Dinsdale (1966) to be the "dorso-rostral cartilages".

Vertebrae and vertebral column:

The long "giraffe-like" neck is part of the vertebral column which, in nearly the complete length, is still covered largely from tissue. The rounded shape of the vertebral column, in relation to the exposed chondrocranium, demonstrates that no transvers- or spinal processes like in vertebrates exist: in general shark vertebra constitute of the vertebral centra, a cone-shaped disk with growth rings, to which the basidorsal cartilage of the neural arch (housing the spinal nerve) above and paired basiventral cartilage below the centrum is attached. Connected with interdorsal and ventral cartilage between basidorsal and ventral cartilage as well as notochordal sheath between each vertebral centra, they form the vertebral column running from the chondrocranium into the upper dorsal lobe of the caudal fin.

Splachnocranium, fins etc.:

The angle of the photograph as well as the state of decomposition in general doesn't allow pointing to much more details regarding the rest of the body. However, obvious are the vanished parts of the splachnocranium (mandibular arch, hyoid arch, branchial archs and rays), in result leaving the chondrocranium and the vertebral column up to the pectoral girdle.

Video evidence

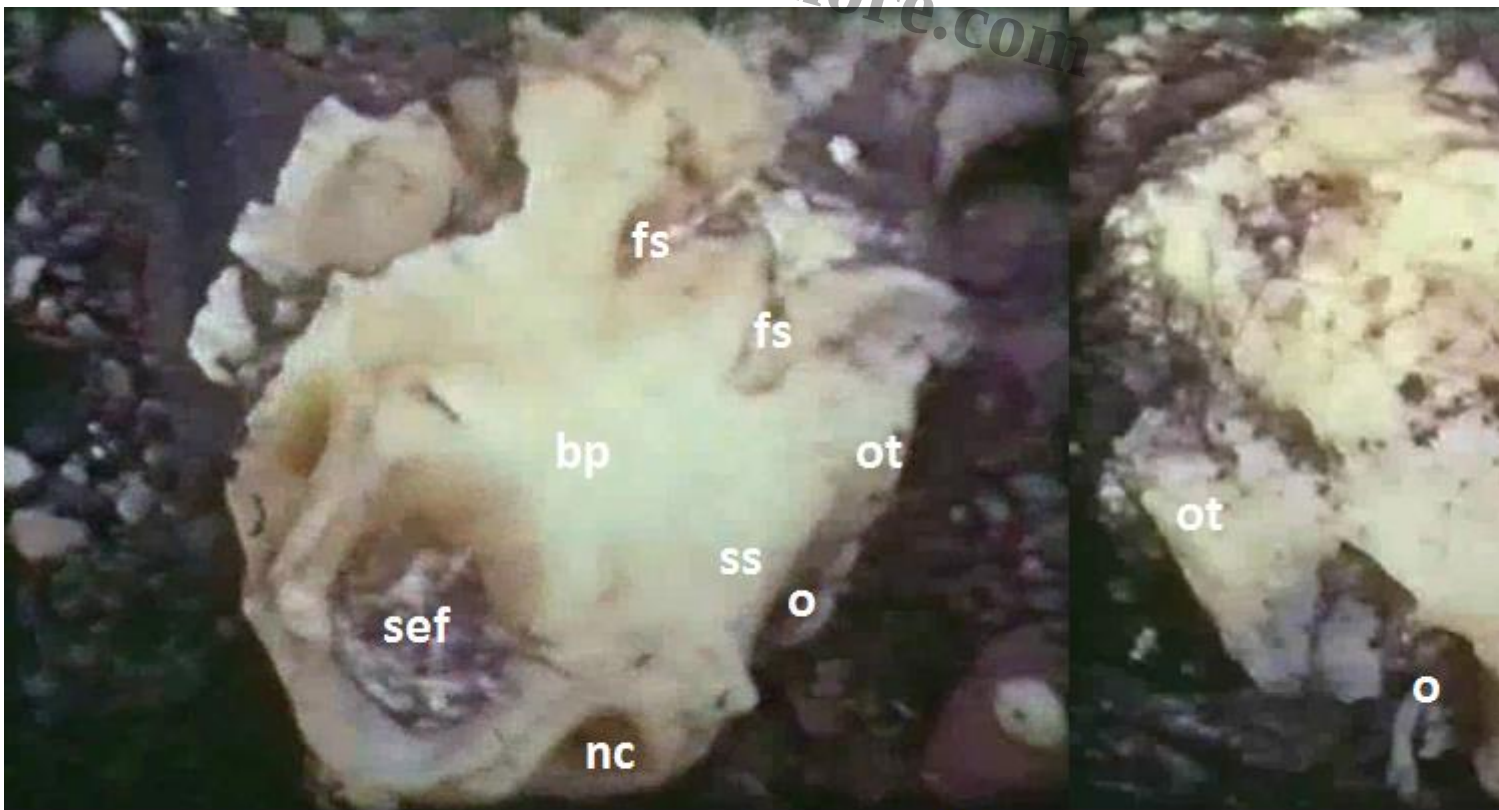
During August 1953, Ms Beryl MacLeod and her family spent their holidays in Girvan. In course of a walk on the beach she took a 01:16 minutes long cine film in 8mm format of the carcass, which years later her sons Callum and Neil recorded from screen into a digital format (Fig. 5). Ms MacLeod wrote in her diary: "Aug 8. Left Girvan. Filmed Girvan monster. 16-18 feet long". Her film shows the animal carcass on the beach as in Fig. 2, albeit in a much higher degree of decomposition and devastation. The first scenes (00:03 to 00:24) follow the course of the body from its anterior to the posterior end, followed by shoots of various parts like tail, skull and body (00:24 to 01:13). Finally an impression of the complete carcass is given (01:13 to 01:15).

1. [GirvanSeaMonster_x264](#)

Chondrocranium:

The chondrocranium is shown ventrally from 00:03 to 00:07 and dorsally from 00:28 to 00:31, 00:46 to 00:48 and 01:14 to 01:15 again.

On the ventral side of the chondrocranium in Fig. 6, from the ethmoidal region the opening of the left nasal capsule is still present, while the median rostral cartilage nearly disappeared and therefore the cavity of the subethmoid fossa is fully exposed. Also most of the frame of the supraorbital crest and suborbital shelf nearly vanished, while the orbit is acknowledgeable though. Following directly behind, the otic capsule now can be seen noticeably, while also the paired stapedial fenestra between can be located on the basal plate.



bp = basal plate; epf = epiphysial foramen; fs = stapedial fenestra; mrc = median rostral cartilage; orbit; sef = subethmoid fossa; ss = suborbital shelf

Chondrocranium of the Girvan monster from ventral and dorsal side (Beryl MacLeod, 1953)

In Fig. 7, the chondrocranium was turned around to display the dorsal and right side, with the rest of the median dorsolateral cartilage, the right nasal capsule and the orbit. The otic capsule now is very prominent due to the loss of

the supraorbital crest of the orbit. Most striking feature is the anteriorly directed epiphyseal foramen leading to the pineal gland, located in a turrent-like rising in the median line between the supraorbital crests.

Vertebrae of the caudal fin

From 00:06 to 00:10, 00:31, 00:47 to 00:49 and 01:13 the "neck" is shown. However, as in Fig. 2 the vertebrae and the vertebral column are still covered largely from tissue and don't allow to acknowledge details. From 00:22 to 00:27 and 01:01 to 01:04 the tail region of the vertebral column is shown.



er = epichordal rays; hr = hypochordal rays

Caudal fin vertebral column of the Girvan monster (MacLeod, 1953)

Beginning with the precaudal vertebra the paired basiventral cartilage below the centrum form a hemal arch in which the hemal canal provides space for blood vessels from and to the tail. With the caudal fin the neural arches change to epichordal rays while the hemal arch change into elongated hypochordal rays to support the fin. Two hypochordal and several epichordal rays are evident in the film.

The presented evidence in summary identifies the Girvan monster definitively as basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*). The cine film, with the possibility for comparison between the length of the carcass in relation to the MacLeod family members, shows that the reports about a length of 30 feet (occasionally 35 feet) are exaggerated and the estimation of 15 to 18 feet from Professor Parry and Beryl MacLeod is correct.

Acknowledgments

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