

Commentary

## Giants of the British Isles

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Most countries and civilizations have stories about giants in their culture. In Greek and Roman times, Giants were an integral part of history. Ovid documents the story of Giants who once piled mountains up to the stars and were destroyed when Zeus hurled his thunderbolts at them. Homer, in his *Odyssey*, describes many Giants, often the Cyclops, including the cannibal Polyphemus and the Lestrygonians. The Cyclops apparently built the great stone walls of Argos, Tiryns and Mycenae. Several European legends attribute construction of Megalithic remains, including Stonehenge, to Giants so clearly they were very useful. Pliny records that primeval man had greater strength and abilities, and men of the time were but degenerate compared with them.

Geoffrey of Monmouth in his 'History of the Kings of Britain' tells of the exploits of Brutus, the first king who landed on British shores at Totnes in Devon and found the land inhabited by men of no normal stature. The Annual Register of Cornwall for 1761 documents that the tin mine at Tregoney-on-Fal had a stone coffin 11 feet 3 inches long containing a skeleton of a man estimated at 10 feet. Clearly Giants migrated as far as the British Isles fairly early in history.

Angus MacAskill (1825-63), the 'Scottish Giant' born on the island of Berneray, in the Western Isles stood 7ft 9in (236cm) tall. At his memorial museum a life size model illustrates his acromegalic features while documentation alludes to 'another giant' in his ancestry.

In Northern Ireland, we know of course that the Giant's Causeway columns of hexagonal and octagonal basalt could only have been handled by a group of engineering-conscious giants who ran a combined operation with the giants of Scotland to facilitate easier access between the two sister countries. Before it collapsed, the causeway stretched as far as the island of Staffa, which is also famous as the home of another Scottish giant, Fingal, whose cave was remembered by Mendelssohn.

Charles Byrne, another 'Irish Giant' was born in Littlebridge, Northern Ireland in 1761. His father was native to the area but his mother was Scottish. Incidentally, he was supposedly related to the Knipe brothers, the tallest identical twins (at 7ft 2in), born in nearby Magherafelt. He grew rapidly and in his late teens featured in street shows in Ireland, and later in London (on occasion with the Knipe brothers). After his death his skeleton was acquired by the surgeon John Hunter and was eventually deposited in the Hunterian Museum in London. In 1909 Harvey Cushing (a Boston neurosurgeon) and Sir Arthur Keith (the museum curator) documented



Fig 1. Antoine and Baptise Hugo with their five siblings.

that he had an enlarged pituitary fossa, concluding that his gigantism was most likely due to a pituitary adenoma<sup>1</sup>. Recent DNA studies have confirmed that mutations within the Aryl Hydrocarbon Receptor Interacting Protein (AIP) gene cause pituitary tumourigenesis, and are now recognised as a cause of familial pituitary adenomas displaying autosomal dominant inheritance and variable expression. Screening for AIP mutations is now recommended for patients with any type of pituitary adenoma occurring in a familial setting;

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allowing subsequent presymptomatic testing of relatives with the hope that early diagnosis should allow prompt treatment intervention to avoid excessive growth<sup>2</sup>.

The hereditary aspect to pituitary disease is not new. The first recorded patients with isolated familial acromegaly were the Hugo brothers Antoine and Baptise, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their heights were over 2.3 metres and they had five normal siblings although looking at photos, at least one of the sisters is taller than her 'normal' brothers and has an acromegalic jaw and could potentially be an AIP gene carrier (figure 1). The only difference between the terms acromegaly and gigantism is one of timing - gigantism occurring before the fusing of the epiphyseal plates in puberty. Baptise was regularly exhibited in Paris, often for effect with little Adriens, a midget born in 1882 who appeared sometimes with his sister Marguerite.

It is not clear if Finn McCool or the Scottish or Cornish giants were related. Perhaps they were and if excavations ever commence around Staffa and a tooth or bones are recovered, we may get genetic confirmation of some hitherto unknown genetic ancestry of the Giants inhabiting the British Isles.

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