

Stingray Interpretation for Kongamato

Dale Drinnon, on a post with many references to non-pterosaurs in Africa, offers an interesting suggestion for the origin of the word “kongamato.” He says that the kongamato was “originally a water-monster that arose from the water and overturned canoes.” He offers this explanation, that a stingray “might be able to upset a small canoe,” meeting the requirement for the literal meaning of “kongamato,” which I believe is something like “he who overturns boats.”

Drinnon then makes a broad statement, declaring that no pterosaur could ever overturn any canoe because no pterosaur would have enough mass. I disagree, submitting the following as more convincing than the reasoning of Drinnon:

Objectiveness and Live Pterosaurs

He believes a large stingray could overturn a boat (“Kongamato” means overturner of boats), declaring that a pterosaur would never have enough mass to overturn a boat. I find a number of serious problems with that pterosaur-impossible assumption, although there may have been some instances of large stingrays being labeled “Kongamato.” The point is twofold: His dismissal of the pterosaur possibility is flawed and the dependence on the label “Kongamato” can cause problems as well as solve them.

How are small boats usually overturned? A human in a small boat makes a wrong move. Put yourself into that small boat and how would you react to an attack by a reported-dangerous flying creature with many teeth? How could you avoid making a wrong move for a small boat? How easy for a terrified human to overturn a boat that was dive-bombed by a Kongamato! What difference does it make if the mass of that flying creature

is insufficient to overturn a boat by only an impact?

The above blog posts also goes into details about how presumptuous it is to assume that no modern pterosaur could be different than those species we know from fossils.

Pterosaurs or Stingrays in Africa

Regardless of what caused natives, long ago, to name this frightening creature, many reports of apparent pterosaurs in Africa involve featherless creatures flying over land, not jumping out of water, as a stingray may do on occasion. Although some modern pterosaurs appear to live close to water (even catching fish on reefs, as is the case with the ropen of Papua New Guinea) the sighting reports themselves, when details are noted, eliminate any reasonable possibility that what was seen was a stingray.

It's not that Drinnon offers the freshwater stingray as an explanation for most sightings of what have been called "kongamato" in Africa. He offers a winged lizard as a better candidate, but I suspect he has taken too narrow a perspective in disregarding living pterosaurs as an explanation.