Fantastical Creatures of Greco-Roman Mythology: The Myrmekes Indikoi (Indian Ant)

For the seventh instalment of this series on lesser known creatures and monsters of Greco-Roman mythology, we’re going to look at something really obscure. So obscure, in fact, that there are only three known ancient Greek references to this creature. Some historians have theorized that this creature didn’t actually originate with the Greeks, but was a borrowed piece of legend from the Mahabharata, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India.

And as a word of warning? If you’re squeamish about insects, you may want to skip this month’s article.

The Myrmekes Indikoi, or the Ancestors of THEM

First, let’s translate: Myrmekes Indikoi are Indian ants. But not just any Indian ants! These particular creatures of mythology are giant Indian ants.

The Myrmekes Indikoi were said to have been giant ants about the size of dogs, living in the Indian deserts and guarding giant piles of gold. The sources are very particular about the size, claiming that the ants weren’t smaller than a fox, but not quite as large as a big dog.

How to Steal from Gold-Hoarding Ants

According to Herodotus—a historian from ancient Greece, who is the main source of information about these monsters—the tribes living in Northern India at this time knew about the giant ants and benefited from their existence...very carefully, that is.
Herodotus’ account of the Myrmekes Indikoi explains how the tribes living in Northern India were more warlike than the country’s other inhabitants, and so they were the ones brave enough to journey into the desert to steal the ants’ gold—gold which originated underground, but was brought to the surface as the ants dug holes in the sand.

Each member of the traveling party would harness together three camels: two males, with one female camel in the center. The female had to have recently produced offspring that was still young enough to rely on her for survival. The rider would then travel on the female camel. Once the traveling party had reached the ants’ burrow, they would wait until the hottest part of the day—when the Myrmekes Indikoi hid underground—before making their move. Oddly enough, Herodotus claimed that the morning was the hottest part of the day in the Indian deserts—“much hotter than Hellas at noon”—and that at midday the heat lessened to the same degree as anywhere else, becoming cooler and cooler until reaching the coldest part of the day at sunset.

In the morning, these men on camel-back would sprinkle water on themselves to cool off as they rode toward the ant-hills… whereupon they’d spring off the camels and race to fill their sacks with sand from around the Myrmekes Indikoi burrow, as much as they could carry, before leaping back onto the camels and racing away as fast as possible.

Why “as fast as possible”, if they were on camels? Because these giant ants were apparently terrifying speed demons.

**Outrunning a Giant Ant**

Herodotus explains that there’s plenty of strategy involved in making one’s escape from the Myrmekes Indikoi. When visiting the Persians (whose King had evidently captured some of the monsters and kept them at the palace), Herodotus learned the secret of escaping from giant ants while laden with heavy sacks of gold-flecked sand.
Even though “nothing is equal to [the Myrmekes Indikoi] for speed,” it was the three-camel approach that allowed these Northern Indian warriors to abscond with their treasure. During the frantic escape, inevitably the male camels would begin to tire. They could only run for so long before growing too weary to continue. Once that happened, the warriors would cut the male camels loose, providing a distraction (and sacrifice) to buy time to escape atop the female camel. Remember how the female camel had to be one who’d recently produced offspring? Herodotus explains why: “…the mares never tire, for they remember the young that they have left.” Aww, how sweet...the terrified camel mother just wanted to save her baby!

But if by chance the ants realized what the warriors were doing before they’d had the opportunity for a head start, every single warrior would be overtaken and killed.

Strange and disturbing as that may be, this method of gold acquisition gave the Northern Indians quite the reputation as fierce, brave, (rich!) warriors—particularly with the Persians, who seemed to admire both the Myrmekes Indikoi and the people who outsmarted them.

**Outsmarting a Giant Ant**

There’s one other method that can be used to get away from the Myrmekes Indikoi, and this is mentioned in the second ancient source, *On Animals*, written by Aelian in the 2nd-century A.D. According to Aelian, the ants refused to cross the Campylinus River.

You know, just in case you’re ever in the area and need a quick escape route.

**In Search of Giant Ants**

As monsters for the purpose of fantasy literature, the Myrmekes Indikoi present a number of intriguing possibilities. They’re monsters of the “unknown,” which in this case is deep desert area—quite different from the usual monsters of the deep woods or the sea. Ancient literature is also very specific about how to steal from them and how to defeat them, providing a tailor-made creature with strengths and weaknesses, and the added bonus that very few people remember their existence in classical mythology.
That said, there’s a bit of an anticlimactic ending to the mythos of the giant desert ants. The late French ethnologist Michel Pessel theorized that Herodotus may have made a mistake during his time in Persia. Because it’s unlikely that Herodotus knew another language besides his native Greek tongue, he needed to rely on local translators over the course of his journey throughout the Persian Empire (and elsewhere). Because Herodotus never saw the Myrmekes Indikoi for himself, he may have simply misunderstood the translation—namely, the old Persian word for “marmot” is very similar to the Persian word for “mountain ant”—which then makes the tale of stealing desert gold considerably less exciting.

Still, it makes for a good story; so let’s just stick with the giant ant mythology, shall we?

Title image by Dunadan-from-Bag-End.