

Indiana Jones is finally cut down to size

By Michael Cecire

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If I were to tell you where I received my baccalaureate degree - a Bachelor of Science in Anthropology from Virginia Commonwealth University - I know well enough not to expect "Oohs" and "Aaahs".

Make no mistake, I have nothing but good things to say for the education I received, but I am quite aware that VCU isn't Oxford or Cambridge.

Still, it was enough to get me a nice assignment in the Peace Corps, and minor fame in the Republic of Georgia. Actually, the technical term for Georgia is just Georgia, but since the Peach State happens to be infinitely more recognisable, I have a habit of including "Republic of" and "Par Avion" so as not to confuse those oh-so-clever postal workers back in the States.

advertisement Here in Georgia (republic), where I am currently serving, the same VCU degree that may not get me farther than the welcome desk at a third-rate museum gives me the undeserved reputation as an expert in things I know next to nothing about.

A few weeks ago, the television station with whom I am partnered was told of the discovery nearby of skeletal remains of what was being referred to as a "flying reptile". Call me a pessimist, but I had doubts that my luck was such that I would be one of the first to witness the first fossilised remains of dinosaurs found in Georgia.

The trip up to the village only took 15 minutes or so, and bumping along in a late-80s model Lada on Georgian roads is always an adventure itself (let's just say the quality of driving here justifies the locals' intense religiosity), and when we arrived we were greeted by a growing crowd of curious neighbours.

In typical Georgian fashion, food and drink had been brought out to accommodate the swelling assembly, and people took turns chatting by the excavation and sitting down to eat on the porch of the nearby house.

From the cluster of men smoking, mumbling and nodding downwards at the giant pit in the ground, one emerged and approached my group. If he meant to ask who we were, since we were clearly not his neighbours, a quick look at the tripod slung over my shoulder and the cameras in my associates' hands satisfied his curiosity.

Presumably the owner of the property, he spoke quietly and quickly to my colleagues, occasionally stealing a glance at me, the obvious foreigner.



The 'fossil' remains, which turned out to be of somewhat more domestic origin

"He says that he found the lizard yesterday while digging for a well," my friend Giorgi began to translate, "and that after only a little bit of digging he started finding bones." I had understood only about 10 per cent of that; I clearly needed to work on my Georgian. I nodded and asked if I could take a look. "*Tu shedzleba, minda shekhedva?*"

I was sure it wasn't quite correct, but he understood well enough, nodded, and began asking my colleagues where they had found a Japanese-Italian American who could muster at least a few words of the native tongue.

The bones were large and in terrific shape; I looked at the skull, trying to think of what sort of animal it could be. I immediately ruled out anything flying - the skeleton was clearly not suited for flying. I was enjoying pretending I knew something. Giorgi ambled over and knelt down beside me as we studied the remains in silence.

"Well it's definitely not anything I've ever seen - certainly not a cow," I muttered, my eyes fixed to the brownish bones, "and not like any dinosaur I'd ever seen." I knew I was really pushing it here, since most of my experience with dinosaurs goes back to a childhood fascination that fizzled

when I discovered the American Civil War.

"The bones are only about a metre down," Giorgi observed. Why didn't I notice that? But I just nodded. Bones so close to the surface couldn't possibly be dinosaur bones . . . unless . . .

"Giorgi, has there been any seismic activity here recently? Maybe in the past 10-15 years?" I was having a wonderful time. I was even starting to believe that I knew something. Giorgi shrugged. I smiled. The bones must have been moved higher by seismic activity.

After a brief interview with the owner and taking a number of photographs, we rode back down to the television station to prepare a report. My conclusions? Probably not any contemporary animal, but probably not a dinosaur. I suggested one of the early mammals.

To get some scientific backing for my hypothesis I decided to email some pictures along with my observations to an expert at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris.

It had now become a race against a competing news team who had arrived shortly after we did and were certainly conducting their own independent investigation. We needed new, juicy information. And fast.

However, somehow it had got around up at the excavation site that I, an American, had a degree in anthropology, which became somehow misconstrued to mean that a qualified American anthropologist had joined the television crew to examine the evidence. Never mind that anthropology is the study of man. Never mind that I studied cultural anthropology. Never mind that I only held a bachelor's degree.

I had only just sent off the email when my supervisor walked into my office with a huge grin on his face, asking me to do an interview.

"For what?" I asked. Apparently one of the larger television stations had found out about the visiting American anthropologist, and wanted to speak to me – a 21-year-old and pretty much clueless. It was fun playing the palaeontologist when no one actually cares, but when you're saying things on national television, it's another matter.

"And they're offering 500 Lari for the interview," Giorgi translated. 500 Lari. Almost two months' salary. I could barely contain my laughter and waved him away.

"Tell him I have no expertise!" I laughed, "and that whatever I say will probably be wrong!"

We all had a good laugh about it all afterwards. On the other hand, it could have been a wicked performance – I was wearing my best Indiana Jones-type outfit: olive-coloured pants, a khaki shirt and dark shoes, together with my South African watch.

And the final verdict? I got an email from France the following day telling me that it was "some kind of bovid," and "probably a cow".

So, while in beautiful Georgia, beware of talking up your Western degree, you'd be surprised at how highly it's regarded. While it's a nice thing to have, the downside is that they may expect a bit more than you can deliver.

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