

In search of the golem

WE veterinarians serve a particularly noble calling. We provide invaluable assistance to the lowest members of society. Animals are least able to help themselves, and often have the greatest needs. However, as I watched an old version of *Frankenstein* during my recent cryptozoological studies, I realised that some needs are even greater.

Living at the very fringes of society, so-called “cryptids” – those creatures considered mythical or extinct by mainstream biologists – are furthest removed from medical attention. Attention that, judging by the horrific suture patterns on Frankenstein’s chest, can sometimes be sorely needed.

As I studied the similarities between those sutures and some of our early veterinary school attempts, I came to the realisation that I could no longer stand idly by. I resolved there and then to set forth in search of these unfortunate creatures, to render what aid I could.

The 2nd Annual European Conference for Critical Animal Studies in Prague provided the ideal opportunity. Frankenstein is a subspecies of golem, and the most credible origins for the golem legends persistent within the science fiction and horror genres (the Hulk provides another example) are those concerning the fabled golem of Prague.

As with other civilisations throughout ancient and modern history, the good citizens of Prague needed scapegoats to blame whenever disaster struck their city. As so many others have concluded, by being a little different from the mainstream, the Jewish community provided the ideal target.

Obviously they were to blame. Accordingly, the townsfolk would regularly organise pogroms and

massacre any Jews they could catch. The Jews, meanwhile, took refuge in their synagogue.

In the late 16th century, the Chief Rabbi of Prague apparently created a golem from river clay to defend the Jewish quarter from such anti-Semitic attacks. However, the golem grew increasingly violent, killing gentiles and spreading fear.

The ruling Roman Emperor reportedly begged the Rabbi to

ANDREW KNIGHT continues his series on ‘Continuing education with a difference...’ by recounting the details of a visit to Prague for a conference and his search for unusual creatures



deactivate the golem, promising to stop the persecution of the Jews. The golem’s body was then stored in the synagogue attic, where it could be restored to life again if needed.

In subsequent years, however, it vanished. According to one legend, the body was stolen and entombed in an ancient Prague graveyard. I resolved, therefore, to search for this unfortunate creature without further delay. Wherever he lay I was fairly sure his sutures would probably need removing, after more than 450 years.

My clinical instincts were also excited by the potential offered by modern technologies such as manuka honey dressings and vacuum-assisted closure for wounds previously packed only with river clay. And I hope my DipCrypt assessors might be similarly excited by this interesting addition to my case log.

Mystery of the missing head

First, however, we had to locate our upmarket hostel. This turned out to be almost within the base of a tower at one end of the spectacularly beautiful Charles Bridge.

For centuries this incredible piece of mediaeval architecture formed the only link between the Palace district on the Western side of the River Vltava and the Old City on the Eastern side. Unsurprisingly, therefore, its cobbled stones became violently contested front lines during several battles fought within Prague’s troubled history.

In 1621, 12 Protestant leaders of a failed rebellion were at least provided with the best possible view of this bridge, when their severed heads were suspended from one of the bridge towers for a decade – all but one of them, which went missing.

I hoped the tower was not the one next to our hostel, and that the errant head was not somewhere beneath our floorboards. As I observed to my long-suffering partner, it would certainly be something to ponder in bed at night.

First, however, we were required to check in at our conference, where we were both due to speak the following day. This conference provided a fascinating mix of socio-philosophical presentations, with a small smattering of science thrown in for good measure.

Taking veterinarians to task

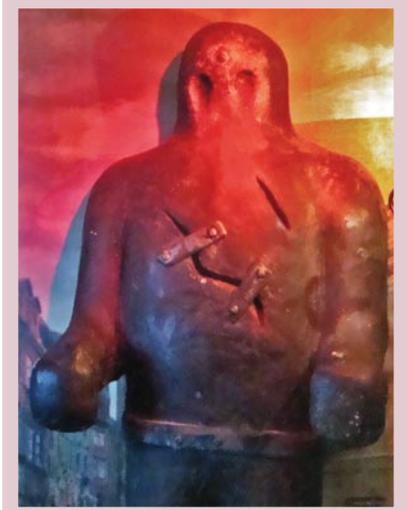
German state government veterinarian Kathrin Herrmann provided a very interesting presentation entitled *The schizophrenia of the veterinary profession*, in which she focused on the contrast veterinarians experience when they uphold the welfare of companion animals, whilst condoning or even supporting intensive or other farming practices that commonly result in poor welfare.

“Why do many veterinarians accept these practices, or even consider them to be necessary?” she asked.

She noted the conflicts that sometimes arise when we attempt simultaneously to serve the interests of our patients and those of our paying clients. Although our ethical codes of conduct require that we choose in favour of our patients when their welfare is threatened, too often we uphold the wishes of the latter instead.

Dr Herrmann called on veterinarians to unite against the systematic exploitation of animals common in industrial or institutionalised settings. Unfortunately, however, as the UK pedigree dogs controversy of 2008 demonstrated, most veterinarians seem to require a critical mass of public support before they dare to speak out on potentially controversial issues – particularly those that might alienate paying clients – even if these comprise only a small proportion of practice clientele.

It is rare, in my view, to find more serious examples of ethical failure and professional cowardice. The public rightly expects veterinarians to lead, rather than follow, on animal welfare issues. However, by clearly advocating for neglected cryptozoological species such as the golem, I hoped that I, at least, would escape Dr Herrmann’s wrath.



Golem statue in a Prague restaurant.

It was time to begin my search for the golem’s final resting place. The social event later that night initially appeared promising, being located in an ancient crypt beneath the Old City streets. Unfortunately, however, the venue appeared to have been unexpectedly taken over by a DJ mixing what I can only assume was some kind of heavy metal.

Finding refuge

I disagreed with a colleague (of indeterminate but presumably not prehistoric age) who asserted it sounded like “screaming dinosaurs”. However, we were all able to agree on the appropriate response – we fled to a pub in the city streets above.

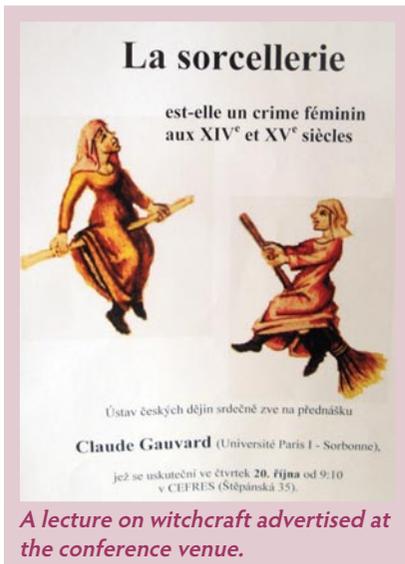
I was excited to find myself soon conversing with some authentic Pragueans! Perhaps the heavy local liquor could prize some golem secrets from their tongues. Unfortunately, however, they were either reluctant to share such secrets with foreigners, or very resistant to beer.

Greater expertise was clearly required. Accordingly, we signed onto a ghost tour. Our haunted-looking guide seemed to know a disturbing amount about the golem and the other unquiet spirits who apparently continue to prowl Prague’s ancient cobblestones. She even took us to the synagogue where the golem was created – and where he was reputed to have met his end.



Our hostel was located by Charles Bridge’s Western Gate – the bridge has 31 gothic statues.

Andrew Knight, PhD, CertAW, MRCVS, hopes to become the first RCVS Recognised Specialist in the medicine and surgery of supposedly mythical animals (DipCrypt). He travels widely, and frequently unsuccessfully, in search of his patients. His adventures are chronicled in Veterinary Practice and at www.AndrewsAdventures.info.



A lecture on witchcraft advertised at the conference venue.

Built in the 13th century, it was Europe's oldest synagogue still in active use. As I studied the attic where the golem was last seen, I noted a set of iron rungs leading down from a hidden door. The drop to the flagstones would have surely broken any normal legs, but possibly not

those magically reinforced with clay.

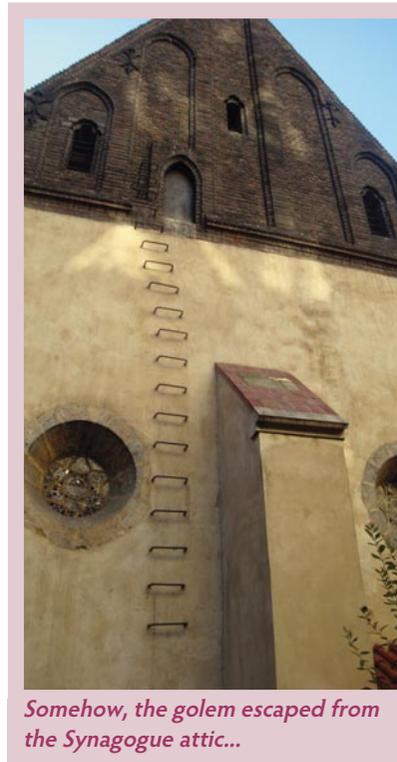
A wide search radius would clearly be required. It seemed prudent to first seek a strategic vantage point above the city, to develop an appropriate survey plan.

Accordingly, we once again braved the sinister stares of the 31 gothic statues on Charles Bridge to cross over to the Palace side, where we climbed the mighty hill upon which Prague Castle towered over the city.

Achieving peak efficiency

On reaching the hilltop we started our survey in a hillside café with a deck offering panoramic views over the city. To ensure our minds were at peak golem-spotting efficiency, we infused our bloodstreams with a gourmet vegan lunch and fine beverages.

Oddly, however, the effect seemed almost, but not quite, sufficient. At least we were able to discern the obvious next move from our vantage point. Higher still, on the far side of



Somehow, the golem escaped from the Synagogue attic...

the castle, lay a vineyard with a wine bar overlooked only by the noble

spires of the castle itself.

It was hard work battling our way through the castle tour groups, so to ensure peak cerebral function we infused our bloodstreams with mixed fluids on arrival, this time in the form of hot mulled wine. Keenly, we then cast our gazes over the city.

The views were indeed beautiful. Not for nothing is Prague known as the "City of a Thousand Towers". A thousand is, however, a very large number, and a proper aerial search would clearly require more wine.

Sadly, the sky soon faded into dusk as we experimented to discern the optimal mulled wine dose, and with it, unfortunately, our time in Prague.

Several promising leads had been spied from the vineyard heights, however, and I left vowing to return someday soon to continue my quest to bring the benefits of modern medicine to a creature unjustly bereft of medical aid for nearly 500 years.

Mixing with owls and deer in the spring

IT is the first Saturday in March. A fine sunny day and the young horse was taken down to the stream to bathe a forehoof, the result of over-reaching. Nothing serious but he likes to splash about in the water and was on a long rein.

This is usually a 20-minute affair with water flying in all directions, but not on this day. After about half a minute he stood rigid and erect, nostrils flared, eyes fixed. He then jumped up the bank and when called to order was somewhat hyped.

A walk of a few hundred yards on the lane brought us to a low piece of road with a raised hedge, holly trees, a fence and then a field. In mid stride the horse adopted a rigid pose and following his eyeline there was some slight movement in the field.

Then, in full view, seven red deer stags were standing some 20 yards away. The horse just waited, erect and tall but not alarmed. The stags slowly moved off, probably without recognising the human presence.

Magnificent beasts in prime condition and if that closeness doesn't make you feel more alive, then I don't know what will. These are not farmed animals and although their hoof marks and trails are evident locally it is rare to see them.



Spurred on by a renewed thirst for nature, the nearby woods were visited a few hours later. Maybe the possibility of another glimpse, but this time, instead of stags, eight red deer females, alarmed by my presence, careered through a shallow bog in line astern and disappeared among the trees.

RICHARD GARD
goes walkabout with his horse and is surprised by the proliferation of both deer and owls - some in view, some hidden

I wonder if the Davy Crockett hat that I had when I was eight, complete with fur tail, is still in the loft! But the deer day was not quite over as three female roe deer, a fairly common sight, came to within a few yards of the stables at dusk. Then the owls started.

In a tree overhead there was continual screeching and carrying on with replies from two others in different trees a hundred yards away. Owls have been sounding off for several weeks at dawn and dusk, but not like this. The only time owls are seen here is from the car. Many times at night the sound appears to arise from exactly that spot; shine a torch and nothing. But what has combined to provide an upmarket nature day?

The news that

night talked about flaming meteors but before accepting extraordinary explanations I talked to the local owl lady.

Many veterinary practices will have an owl lady. Robin and Pru have been caring for injured buzzards and owls for decades and in recent times the "barnies" and "tawnies" have been taken over by Celia about a mile away.

Owlets that have fallen out of nests and retrieved by dog walkers are nurtured and fed while, after surgical repair, broken wings and head cases are given the opportunity to recover.

Cold and wet are the enemies of natural recovery with adults, eggs and owlets, so protection from the elements, in various forms, is provided. Boxes up trees, boxes in barns, recovery aviaries and individual pens offer both short-term and long-term accommodation.

Entertainment

So, why was I entertained by an owl orchestra? Inevitably there were questions. Was it a screech, or a towittt or a towoooo, but I'm not really able to contribute much because I'm not sure that it was any or possibly all.

Knowing the area, Celia advises that the birds would have been Tawny owls or Barn owls and that it is all to do with sex. Barnies are



pairing up at the moment and so I was most likely hearing a vocal mating ritual of some magnitude.

As well as caring for the owls, Celia is an enthusiastic photographer and the two pictures illustrate the realism of my difficulties with owls. Tawnies simply blend in and close their eyes.

No wonder my pathetic attempt with a torch at night has proved fruitless. Barn owls were probably up the tree making all the noise but I have never seen one here, not even in the car headlights. Maybe they are moving in.

The way to see them, I am advised, is to put up owl boxes and have a freezer full of frozen chicks to lob onto the stable roof. Flocks of owls will then descend - well maybe one or two. But is that the best way forward? Allowing rough grass to grow around the edges of fields, to encourage voles, really helps. The surprise meeting with nature, the natural way, has high appeal.

Maybe it will be years before I see the stags again and maybe the owl calls will just be noises off, but as long as they are out there, doing their thing some parts are all right in the firmament.

Oh, I've just seen a mouse pick up a green piece of daffodil leaf and run off with it. Now what is going on there: food, bedding or sex aid?