

HIPPOPOTAMUS GORGOPS FROM EL KHERBA (ALGERIA) AND THE CONTEXT OF ITS BIOGEOGRAPHY

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Excavations at the site of El Kherba (El Eulma, northeastern Algeria) have yielded *Hippopotamus* fossils, including a skull assigned to *Hippopotamus gorgops*. This species was already known and documented in the nearby locality of Ain Hanech, which is of the same age as El Kherba.

The Hippopotamidae originated in sub-Saharan Africa, where they reached their major diversity, with five or six coeval species being common during the Plio-Pleistocene. From there they dispersed towards North Africa and Europe, and East into the Indian Subcontinent and South East Asia. The first dispersal into Europe took place during the latest Miocene, about 6 Ma ago, but was short lived. During the Pleistocene, several other dispersals occurred. There is discussion on the systematics of European *Hippopotamus* and the number and timing of the dispersals. The most likely origin of the European *Hippopotamus* is North Africa. The known diversity of hippopotamuses in North Africa is much lower than in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, the North African and European record of *Hippopotamus* will be compared and the possible relationships discussed.

The dispersal of *Hippopotamus* into Europe has often been related to human dispersal. One of the dispersals seems to have been close to the arrival of the first humans there, but no likely causal relationship has ever been identified. Instead, the dispersal of hippos across the Sahara towards North Africa could prove to be related to periods of increased humidity, when lakes and rivers were larger. The same environments, which allowed hippos to disperse northward, may have allowed more intensive faunal exchange, including human northward expansions.

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