Out of Tibet: Pliocene Woolly Rhino Suggests High-Plateau Origin of Ice Age Megaherbivores

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Much attention has been focused on the extinction of Ice Age giants such as woolly mammoths, woolly rhinos, giant sloths, and sabertooth cats. Much less is known about where these giants came from and how they acquired their adaptations for cold environment.

An international team (including a Mag Lab researcher) recently uncovered a new species of woolly rhino at the foothill of the Himalaya in southwestern Tibetan Plateau. Careful studies of the fossil and associated materials reveal that the new Tibetan rhino, 3.7 million years old (middle Pliocene), is much older and more primitive than its Ice Age (Pleistocene) descendants in Europe and Asia.

The results suggest that the harsh winters of the rising Tibetan Plateau could well have provided the initial step towards cold-adaptation for several subsequently successful members of the late Pleistocene mammoth fauna.

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