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# The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology In Greek And Roman Times



## Synopsis

Griffins, Centaurs, Cyclopes, and Giants--these fabulous creatures of classical mythology continue to live in the modern imagination through the vivid accounts that have come down to us from the ancient Greeks and Romans. But what if these beings were more than merely fictions? What if monstrous creatures once roamed the earth in the very places where their legends first arose? This is the arresting and original thesis that Adrienne Mayor explores in *The First Fossil Hunters*.

Through careful research and meticulous documentation, she convincingly shows that many of the giants and monsters of myth did have a basis in fact--in the enormous bones of long-extinct species that were once abundant in the lands of the Greeks and Romans. As Mayor shows, the Greeks and Romans were well aware that a different breed of creatures once inhabited their lands. They frequently encountered the fossilized bones of these primeval beings, and they developed sophisticated concepts to explain the fossil evidence, concepts that were expressed in mythological stories. The legend of the gold-guarding griffin, for example, sprang from tales first told by Scythian gold-miners, who, passing through the Gobi Desert at the foot of the Altai Mountains, encountered the skeletons of Protoceratops and other dinosaurs that littered the ground. Like their modern counterparts, the ancient fossil hunters collected and measured impressive petrified remains and displayed them in temples and museums; they attempted to reconstruct the appearance of these prehistoric creatures and to explain their extinction. Long thought to be fantasy, the remarkably detailed and perceptive Greek and Roman accounts of giant bone finds were actually based on solid paleontological facts. By reading these neglected narratives for the first time in the light of modern scientific discoveries, Adrienne Mayor illuminates a lost world of ancient paleontology. As Peter Dodson writes in his Foreword, "Paleontologists, classicists, and historians as well as natural history buffs will read this book with the greatest of delight--surprises abound."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Since fossils have presumably existed for millions of years, why don't we see much paleontological thought from ancient writers? Classics scholar Adrienne Mayor suggests that we can, in fact, learn much about the Greek and Roman attitudes toward fossils if we turn to a surprising source of data and theory: their myths. In *The First Fossil Hunters*, she explores likely connections between the rich fossil beds around the Mediterranean and tales of griffins and giants originating in the classical world. Striking similarities exist between the Protoceratops skeletons of the Gobi Desert and the legends of the gold-hoarding griffin told by nomadic people of the region, and the fossilized remains of giant Miocene mammals could be taken for the heroes and monsters of earlier times. Mayor makes her case well, but, as with all interpretive science, the arguments are inconclusive. Still, her novel reading of ancient myth--and her critique of the modern scientific mythology that seeks to explain the lack of classical paleontological thinking--is compelling and thought-provoking. The final chapter of *The First Fossil Hunters* is an engrossing and occasionally quite funny look at "Paleontological Fictions" dating back several thousand years; the false tritons and centaurs give P.T. Barnum and his successors a much longer genealogy than previously thought. Whether or not you accept Mayor's analysis of Greek and Roman thinking, *The First Fossil Hunters* should open your eyes to new possibilities about our distant past. --Rob Lightner

The history of paleontology, as it is usually seen, starts with the work of French naturalist Georges Cuvier some 200 years ago. Mayor, a classical folklorist, moves the date back to the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans. "The ancients collected, measured, displayed, and pondered the bones of extinct beasts," she writes, "and they recorded their discoveries and imaginative interpretations of the fossil remains in numerous writings that survive today." Among the beasts whose bones they pondered were giant giraffes, mammoths and mastodons. Mayor also proposes that the griffin of classical folklore, described in the legends as having the body of a lion and the beak of an eagle, "was based on illiterate nomads' observations of dinosaur skeletons in the deserts of Central Asia." And she tells of purely imaginary creatures of the classical period, such as the triton and the centaur. But her focus is on what the ancients made of the bones of real animals. Advances in classical studies and paleontology, she says, "now make it possible to restore the

ancient fossil investigations to their rightful place in the history of science." EDITORS OF  
SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

There was a TV documentary based on this book, which I found fascinating. I looked for the book, a textbook admittedly, and was happy to find it here. The author documents ancient references to fossils and includes extensive notes and appendices. These references are especially convincing in support of her ideas. The fun part is that the ancients clearly recognized the bones as having come from a previous time and viewed them as possibly the bones of giants and heroes, quickly rearranging an elephant's bones into the remains of a giant man (with one eye). Voila! a cyclops. Recommended.

Again anything by Adrienne Mayor...Wonderful interpretations of fossils found by ancient Greeks, et al. and how they used them as bases for their mythology.

this book absolutely changed my ideas of ancient myths and legends, merging myths and legends with a basis in reality, ie, fossils

Upfront I must confess that though I am very knowledgeable about history and science, I am neither a paleontologist nor an expert on Classical History. But I was intrigued by this book, and I found it fascinating. The author begins the book with a slam-banger of an idea--The first chapter discusses the idea that the Greek legend of Griffons originated from Greek fossil observations in Asia. The author has very convincing evidence for this, based on how Griffons were described and handled differently by ancient writers, specific details of ancient writing, and fossil evidence still in place in modern times. I found it fascinating. The later chapters are still interesting, though don't have the novel impact of the first chapter. The ancient attitude towards fossils is discussed, including quarrels between city-states over possession of fossils which were thought to be the remains of heroes and demigods. I found the book interesting and convincing, but I cannot help wondering if maybe there is evidence being ignored when it would discredit the author's hypothesis. I lack enough expertise in either field to be sure. I fell for Von Daniken's Chariots of the Gods as a teen-ager, and the experience keeps me suspicious of revolutionary ideas in archeology and ancient history, even to this day!

This book presents the idea that ancients were well aware of fossils, and discusses their

interpretations of them. It shows how different members of society tried to interpret them in different ways (most interpreted them as being signs of giants and monsters, but some took this to show divine origins, and others took it to be part of natural history). The ideas are very interesting, and the history of the importance of different fossilized bones in different cities is quite exciting. My only complaint is that the book seems to be quite repetitive. Not only are the points that the author is trying to make repetitive, but she even repeats some of the stories she tells several times. A good editor could have trimmed out 1/3 of the book. All in all, a good book. Interesting, thorough, and decently referenced. For anyone interested in classics or paleontology, this is a good buy.

At first very excited. Too much repetition and found some appellations peculiar. Would like to have seen some classic scholars consulted. And not one American paleontologist cited - unless I just missed it. Not much talk about migration theories. The ancient Greeks understood even more than she gives them credit for - check out myths as well as legends - there's a reason for myth.

I enjoyed Mayor's theorizing and speculation in "First Fossil Hunters." Examining ancient myths as the way in which ancient peoples gave context to the enormous prehistoric bones and skeletons they encountered is a fascinating concept. The chapters on griffins and on elephants are quite good. These are thought-provoking essays which make a lot of sense. Appendix Two is interesting and useful, with many quotes from ancient historians and story tellers referencing giants and mythological beasts. I hope to read many of the books listed in the "works cited" section of this volume. Like Mayor's book on Native American fossils and legends, this book would benefit from more careful editing. Not too sure why a distinguished press like Princeton University Press would do such a bargain basement job of layout and design, but so be it. "The First Fossil Hunters" is worth reading. Kim Burdick Stanton, Delaware

Today, when a spectacular fossil is unearthed, it ends up in a museum. Our ancestors must have found stone bones, too, but they didn't have museums. So they put them in temples. And spun yarns about them. It should not have been surprising that, once someone thought to ransack the ancient world for evidence, so much of it remains. We have already seen, in other fields, how much can be reconstructed from even the scraps of inscriptions that have been accumulated so assiduously by, for the most part, German philologists. And we already knew that the Greeks, above all other premodern people, asked questions about what they found in the world around them. It is a bit of a surprise, if Adrienne Mayor is correct, that the model of the griffin should be dinosaur fossils found

as far away as Central Asia. That was a very, very long way from Greece. Less surprising, perhaps, that fake fossils were also in evidence. Probably none of the fossils collected so long ago remains, but Adrienne Mayor finds a few representations of them. The most convincing is a skull painted on a vase. Her treatment is very complete, with an appendix of apparent references to fossils in old texts, such as a passing reference in Cicero to theft of fossils from a temple. There is room for much speculation in this scrappy material, and Mayor makes the most of it. Altogether, 'The First Fossil Hunters' is a clever, entertaining, imaginative and curious book.

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