



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

*Adrienne Mayor*

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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."

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

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Adrienne Mayor**

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## From Reader Review The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology In Greek And Roman Times for online ebook

### Raphael Rosen says

The basic premise of this book is fascinating.

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### Caroline says

Palaeontology seems like such a modern academic discipline, one that relies very much on advances in modern scientific knowledge. We know now how and why fossils are created, what they are and where they came from - but I suspect many people, like myself, have rarely stopped to think about how our ancestors may have viewed these massive bones and relics. In the modern era we go looking for such things, but hundreds and thousands of years ago people often just stumbled across them, via agriculture, erosion, climatic upheaval. What did they think they were?

Mayor argues that we can in fact determine how the ancient Greeks and Romans incorporated these fossils into their worldview, via their art, literature and mythology. The mythical griffin, for example, she argues, was based on the skeletal remains of protoceratops preserved in the sands of the Gobi Desert. Or the legend of the Cyclops was based on the discovery of prehistoric elephant and mammoth skulls, the large hole in the skull for the trunk mistaken for a single eye socket.

Greek literature and historical records are full of reports of the findings of giants' and heroes' remains, all given the stamp of authenticity through Greek mythology, and often given ceremonial burials. Ajax, Achilles, Theseus, the list goes on. Scholars have traditionally dismissed these reports as the credulity of simpler minds in ages past, but these ancient peoples really did find giant bones. There is ample testimony of fossils found in temples and in sacred sites through Greece, Italy, Persia, Egypt, North Africa. Not having the benefit of our knowledge, they simply developed elaborate myth systems to explain their existence.

If nothing else, this book is a warning against the increasing silo-ization of academic scholarship. How many palaeontologists would be familiar enough with Greek and Roman art and literature to make the connection between their fossils and the ancients' monsters of myth? How many Greek scholars would recognise the physical similarities between a stylised griffin on a bronze bowl and the skeleton of a protoceratops? It's a rare author that can successfully combine Greek and Roman literature, folklore, art and mythology with history, geology, archaeology and palaeontology - but Adrienne Mayor more than succeeds. What a fascinating book this is! I could hardly put it down.

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### Ellana Thornton-Wheybrew says

This is so cool!

Yes the writing is a bit all over the place, but that doesn't detract from what is an awesome book. I've always been slightly curious about whether the ancient peoples found fossils or prehistoric bones, and clearly the answer was yes; this book goes in depth as to why they did, and how they created stories around their

discoveries.

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### **Michele says**

Adrienne Mayor does a great job of piecing together a paleontological puzzle long hidden in mythical obscurity. *The First Fossil Hunters* is an academic marvel that connects ambiguous dots to draw a picture of fossil discoveries that underwent anthropomorphic and monstrous conversions to accommodate mythical belief and hero worship.

Mayor speaks to the average reader without dumbing down the narrative. One never wonders what she's trying to say, and all speculation is clearly defined without being weighed down by insistent presumption. The book is a joy to read, logical and well reasoned throughout.

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### **Cheryl Brandt says**

I have finished the book itself and am working my way through the Appendices and footnotes. This book is very dense - it has only 5 chapters, and the rest of the book is taken up by appendices and footnotes - but it has been not only enjoyable but enlightening. I'm finding the footnotes almost as interesting as the text itself was.

I first read something about the linkage between fossils and folklore/mythology many years ago, and never saw anything further about it - but it always made sense to me as a hypothesis.

To find it now, more fully fleshed out, with classical references, historical images and descriptions, is an exciting find.

To also find that this book has helped create a new field of study that brings together the sciences of archaeology and paleontology and the studies of the Greek and Roman classics, and the mythology and folklore of many different peoples while still being readable and enjoyable is a wonderful find.

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### **Beth Bruner says**

Sometimes repetitive, but fascinating and well-documented. A good merging of scientific and historical disciplines into a very interesting set of theories.

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### **Jennn says**

I love this book. I do, absolutely.

She breaks down Greek myths into scientific explanations involved in paleontology (e.g. the griffin as Gobi desert fossils of the protoceratops). Very well researched and incredibly fascinating.

Also, she replied to my feedback email, granting me some further incite in her studies and her personality.

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## **Karel says**

The First Fossil Hunters is a work that stands out in many ways. It is, first of all, an interesting, highly original take on the history of fossil interpretation. Mayor has done an admirable job in conveying her love for the subject and the joys of hypothesising about the historical record. Occasionally, she does over-assert her wish to be a serious academic. It is clear that Mayor wrote this book when she was neither trained nor employed as a professional scholar, and this is readily apparent, despite the apologetic foreword by an established professor and some bibliographical information at the back.

The lack of a standard academic framework is equally clear from the fact that Adrienne Mayor does not present the reader with the conventional arguments, theoretical assumptions, reference works, transcription methodologies and considerations concerning primary sources from the period under discussion, before she embarks on an exposition of her own findings and views. This is what one would ordinarily expect from a writer interested in such a niche area of expertise. Rather, Mayor prefers to immediately proceed to inculcate, for the lack of a better word, into her readership a rather idiosyncratic reinterpretation of the origin of a certain set of classical folkloric motifs - motifs she believes are more familiar to her readership than is probably the case. Mayor provides an interesting selection of evidence but is nowhere near as logically sound or convincing as her polemical writing style lets on.

Mayor offers some interesting and highly original perspectives. This is possibly the reason why her work has earned a positive critical reception on this site, and it is likely to have been the reason behind her positive reception elsewhere. Mayor's views, however, do appear to have been overly affected by the desire to please a non-academic audience. She is evidently guilty of populism and demonstrates a penchant for distracting rhetorical flourishes from time to time. Unhelpfully, the gravity of both is exacerbated to a degree that merits serious criticism by the fact that Mayor's theoretical framework is not concomitant with the most basic, yet fundamental principles of contemporary folklore studies, manuscript studies, or indeed classical literary studies. The marketing engineers behind this book have chosen to describe Mayor's approach as a novel and a pioneering attempt to widen the emerging field of "geomythology" (a phrase taken from Mayor's personal website, where she is also described as a "Research Scholar", which is not actually a real academic title). Such praise is more sycophantic than it is accurate, for it is equally appropriate to say, if not more so, that Mayor is out of touch with established historical disciplines and that, for this reason, her work reads as a curiously but critically outdated academic publication, rather than a groundbreaking one.

Occasionally, Mayor writes as an author wishing to outwit her readership. She cites most of her sources which she admirably and painstakingly gathered over a long period of time out of context, without providing easily accessible original material, and often paraphrases quotations without allotting them the serious critical attention they deserve. She uses sections from classical works when it suits her argument, but neglects to address even the simplest reservations one might have about her interpretations. To give but one example, in her first chapter Mayor argues that the gryphon was a mysterious mythological creature whose form and character were inspired by contemporary interpretations concerning unearthed Protoceratops fossils. Yet while she manages to build a shaky case for the interrelationships between the geographical discrepancies of the origins of the attested literary accounts and sites of the excavations - these necessarily need to be related in order to underpin an argument concerning the relevancy of the correspondence in the two creatures' physical stature - she seems uninterested in parallel literary traditions that tell of similar fabulous creatures that could have no origin in fossil interpretations: she only momentarily addresses this

issue in a short paragraph at the beginning of the chapter, and dismissively and unpersuasively so.

What is more, Mayor neglects to incorporate the anthropologically well-attested habit of people to employ existing literary topoi known to them to describe newly discovered phenomena into her conceptual framework, which means she leaves unaddressed the possibility that some writers who saw *Protoceratops* skeletons may have felt the need to describe them using existing literary traditions indebted to gryphon descriptions, rather than vice versa. The fact that gryphons have wings, whereas a *Protoceratops* clearly does not, further illustrates a discrepancy in Mayor's reasoning. Should one wish to place classical gryphon motifs against a background of ancient fossil interpretations, then it is evidently necessary to not only compare but also contrast the literary and material evidence, situating both within an appropriate critical framework. Mayor's statement that dinosaurs have a bird like quality is in this instance inadequately compelling and gives us reason to doubt the validity of her overarching claims.

To conclude, it is fair to say that, at her best moments, Mayor is original and refreshing. At her worst moments, however, she is belittling towards her readership, partisan to her own point of view, and, occasionally, overly dismissive of appropriate counter arguments and of the work of fellow scholars. Good scientific writing is, of course, critically oriented towards prior studies, but excellent scientific writing understands that the ceaseless need to find fault in the work of others is not a habit that tends to produce the most pleasantly legible prose. Polemic is acceptable and necessary, but care should be taken to not throw the proverbial baby out with the argumentative bathwater. In the end, Mayor appears, with her oddly critical writing style and unscholarly framework, to have rather needlessly and carelessly devaluated her own scholarship. But, on account of her manifold revisionist and creative ideas, it would still be wiser to read than to neglect her work.

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### **Jessica says**

My second read through...this time an AM read-aloud with the kids, skimmed and shortened some of the repetitive parts for their benefit. They really found much of it quite interesting and were happy to hear almost all the first half word-for-word; the second half, which details numerous bone finds in antiquity, felt repetitive and boring through their eyes, so we skipped and bunch and hit the highlights. Still maintains my original rating of 4 stars--really fascinating discussion of the very earliest "paleontologists" and of how fossils were interpreted in the ancient world.

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### **Randall Smith says**

In 2006, Chinese farmers digging in Chongqing province found a skeleton of a head and long spine. Since they couldn't find any other bones, the locals made the completely rational conclusion that it must have been a dragon. Paleontologists came to the less satisfying conclusion that it was the neck of a dinosaur from 160 million years ago, a dinosaur known for its extremely long neck. If modern Chinese farmers could come upon dinosaur bones, it makes sense that ancient farmers must have made similar discoveries. And if they did, what conclusions would they draw?

While the above is not in **The First Fossil Hunters**, it is an example of the book's premise: ancients were well aware of fossils and made interpretations of them. Most interpreted them as giants and monsters, but there were others who thought of them as part of natural history. This is an idea that seems perfectly

reasonable to me and yet is something that I hadn't imagined. But once the idea is presented, it allows for a new perspective of re-reading Pliny especially, and re-examining Greek myths. My only complaint is that after the initial idea is discussed, the book is a little repetitive.

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### **Susan Pola Staples says**

Fascinated

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### **Nostalgia Reader says**

4.5 stars.

Mayor writes an incredibly easy to read, well-researched, and very convincing thesis in this book. I was already passively interested in this subject, but now that I've read this, I'm very much interested in learning about how other ancient and indigenous cultures interpreted the fossils and other prehistoric evidence.

Greeks and Romans were excavating fossil remains of prehistoric creatures long before archaeology and paleontology as sciences ever existed. However, modern archaeology has discarded or ignored many of these ancient findings because they were framed in an unscientific way--through myths and legends. The fossils of mega-fauna that these people were finding were interpreted as the bones of legendary heroes and monsters from an age before the then-present day. And while this may seem like an absurd conclusion to scientists, the ancient's conclusion was actually quite accurate. At the core, the bones that were uncovered were understood to be those from various creatures that had existed much earlier in time, and had gone extinct before the current race of humans ever existed on Earth.

It can be easy to discard these observations as being shaped by beliefs. But even when that is the case, there must be substantial credit given, as these beliefs helped people to pay attention to the natural world around them and not simply ignore the giant fossils they came across. Rather, they dug them up and displayed them as relics in temples and museums, or gave them ceremonial reburials, treating them as ancient ancestors (or curiosities in the case of "monsters"). Regardless of the context they were displayed in, they were understood to have important significance in the history of human beings. Archaeologists have only recently started paying this much attention to bones and remains of non-humans in sites--for years they ignored these finds or simply wrote them off as waste, rather than recognizing them as important paleontological finds.

I was also excited to read this in hopes it would break down some of the preconceived views that some archaeologists sometimes have of cultures, and it did so perfectly, without bad mouthing the discipline altogether. Rather, Mayor encourages more cross-discipline workings, where archaeologists, paleontologists, and historians and mythographers work to analyze all aspects of a site being excavated or studied. Rather than archaeologists just discarding "useless" fossils and bones and discounting myths, legends, and cultural beliefs, a more varied team could provide more analysis of all aspects of site, and give a better understanding of the science, the history, AND the culture of the site in question, through multiple lenses of focus.

While I had been hoping this focused more on the griffin thesis (this is the first chapter, which is used more as a jumping off thesis for the rest of the book), it's still an excellent read for anyone interested in such a

niche subject, and I'd very highly recommend it.

(Cross posted on my blog.)

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**Jonas Gehrlein says**

Interesting book about what people in Greece and Asia minor believed fossils where and how it fit in their worldview with mammoth bones seen as bones of Giants and dinosaur fossils seen as Griffins

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**Foggygirl says**

a great read for anyone who is interested in science, history and mythology.

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**Kirsten says**

Interesting and insightful! I had never thought about paleontology pre 19th century and this book really opened my eyes to how ancient peoples view fossils and remains!

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