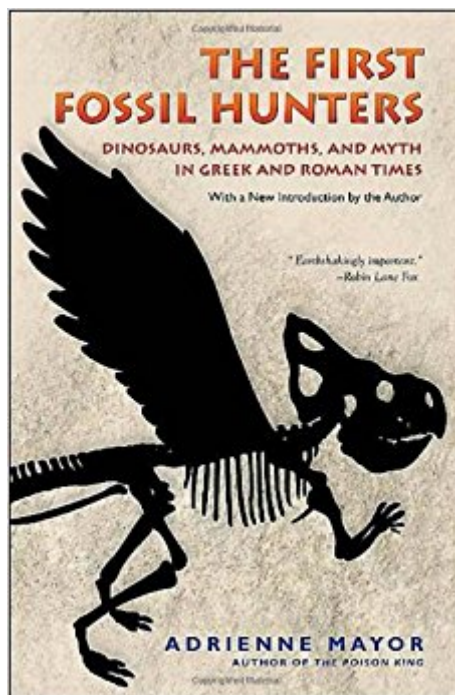




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# The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, And Myth In Greek And Roman Times



## Synopsis

Griffins, Cyclopes, Monsters, 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Adrienne Mayor has . . . done some digging deep into the past and found literary and artistic clues--and not a few huge fossils--that seem to explain the inspiration for many of the giants, monsters, and other strange creatures in the mythology of antiquity. -- John Noble Wilford, *The New York Times*[Mayor] has done an admirable job . . . [she] easily persuades us that these early writers indeed recorded a palaeontological bonanza centuries before the first dinosaur remains were recognised by modern science. -- Richard Fortey, *London Review of Books*Refreshing. . . . Mayor presents her case with an engaging zeal. . . . By the end of the book, you will find yourself filled with enthusiasm for following Mayor's lead in breaking down interdisciplinary boundaries and thus enriching your understanding of the human experience. -- Kate A. Robson Brown, *Natural History*A historical and scientific detective story of first rank. . . . Her results are as striking as they are entertaining. . . . The book will engage specialists with its serious purpose and extensive documentation and will please all readers with its profusion of maps, photographs, and drawings. -- Mott T. Greene, *Science*The First Fossil Hunters brings together mythology, art geology and paleontology in a convincing matter. . . . In times long past, others had the same fascination we do today with the sight, feel and sense of something once living and now extinct. -- Tim Tokaryk, *American Scientist*Merging the fields of paleontology, archaeology and classical literature, Mayor's research has uncovered striking correlations between modern fossil finds and many of the myths and folklore that sprang up in early Western civilization. -- Bryn Nelson, *Newsday*Mayor [combines] the skills of the literary scholar with those of a dinosaur hunter . . . [A]lthough readers will learn a good deal here about the remains of mammoths and protoceratops, they will learn much more about human imagination, that fertile source of science, of legend and of fraud. -- BooklistA surprising account of material overlooked or misunderstood by both historians of science and interpreters of Greek myth . . . [T]his is clear, readable, and convincing. -- Kirkus ReviewsMayor presents her case with an engaging zeal, describing her sleuthing efforts at length . . . By the end of the book, you will find yourself filled with enthusiasm for following Mayor's lead in breaking down interdisciplinary boundaries and thus enriching your understanding of the human experience. -- Kate A. Robson Brown, *Natural History*The First Fossil Hunters brings together mythology, art, geology, and paleontology in a convincing manner. . . . Mayor's chronicles do more than entertain; as she contends, they also show that people of Greek and Roman times had a broad understanding of

fossils as organic remains of extinct organisms . . . -- Tim Tokary, American Scientist

Mayor tells a fascinating story of ancient encounters with fossils, setting modern palaeontology beside ancient art and literature . . . -- Helen King, Times Literary Supplement

In many ways, this book resembles a detective story. When the author gets on the track of something, she follows it wherever it leads. . . . The First Fossil Hunters will be a revelation to anyone interested in ancient history. For me, it is one of the best books of recent years. -- Walter Friedrich, Times Higher Education Supplement

After reading Mayor's The First Fossil Hunters one thing is certain. You'll never look at classical mythology--or at the history of paleontology--the same way again. -- Steve Voynick, Rock and Gem

In her introduction Adrienne Mayor takes palaeontologists and historians of palaeontology to task. At best there has been accidental ignorance and at worst wilful avoidance and misrepresentation of how much the Greeks and Romans knew about fossils . . . Mayor proceeds to make her case with detailed 'chapter and verse' from the ancients. It is indeed impressive and generally very convincing -- Douglas Palmer, Geological Magazine

This book is a pleasure to read. . . . The insight into human behavior is enough to attract anthropologists and laypeople to read this fascinating account of paleontology in ancient times. -- Deborah Ruscillo, American Journal of Archaeology

Adrienne Mayor's thought-provoking book will mark a watershed in the approach to griffins and giants. . . . For both its innovative method and its results, this well-balanced and vividly written book belongs on the bookshelf of every historian of natural sciences. -- Liliane Bodson, Isis

Marshaling the array of evidence available from scholarly and popular works, and contributing her own research, Mayor shows that far from ignoring fossils, many Native American groups took great notice of them and developed elaborate myths to explain their origin. . . . Though Mayor is careful not to homogenize native myths, she does note that virtually all of them exhibit a sense of "deep time," as geologists call it: an awareness that the world has existed for far longer than humans have walked it. -- Eric A. Powell, Archaeology

"In this wonderful book, Adrienne Mayor successfully convinces us that some of our most treasured mythical creatures really were based on the skeletons of extinct animals. It is the best account ever concerning the real meaning of mythical creatures. And Mayor has succeeded in setting the history of paleontology on its ear: the art of skeletal restoration was not invented in the western world."--Jack Horner, Museum of the Rockies, author of Dinosaur Lives

Adrienne Mayor's sometimes provocative and always fascinating blend of history, mythology, and science offers a uniquely enriched dimension to the quest for fossils."--Michael Novacek, American Museum of Natural History

The Greeks were not the only peoples of antiquity to exploit the past in the interests

of devising myth and history, but they were among the most ingenious about it, and recorded their views. Adrienne Mayor has uncovered a barely noticed source for many of the myths of the Old World, and for the first time has assembled in an orderly way the evidence for early man's discovery of and explanations for fossil remains. This is a skillful blend of science, history and imagination which adds a chapter to the history of man's ingenuity, from Central Asia to Greece, to Egypt. Many texts, sites, and pictures will never seem quite the same again, after this very thorough and very lively scholarly excursion into a disregarded source of myth-making."--John Boardman, Oxford University

"A brilliant book, full of new insights into the myths and past of the ancient Greeks. Earthshakingly important."--Robin Lane Fox, author of *Alexander the Great*

"An enthralling book. . . . A fascinating account of ancient Greek responses to fossils of extinct mammal species."--David Sedley, author of *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity*

"Mayor catches one's attention with her first sentence and doesn't let go until the end. . . . In addition to being lively and intelligent, the writing is honest and persuasive. Bringing together classics, archaeology, and paleontology in an original synthesis, Mayor exemplifies in her own research her plea that these fields should profitably confer with one another much more than they do."--William Hansen, Indiana University, Bloomington

Whether your passion is classical archaeology, paleontology, folklore, ancient literature, ancient history or the history of science, or if you just enjoy seeing a brilliant piece of interdisciplinary scholarship convincingly argued, this book is a MUST. Mayor has connected the dots between disciplines that do not communicate with each other nearly enough, to find the origins of mythical griffins, giants and monsters in the fossil records of Asia, Greece, and Egypt. Our early ancestors were far more observant and curious than we sometimes give them credit for being; they could see the same fossils that modern paleontologists have seen of *Protoceratops Andrewsii* in the Gobi desert. And they could create imaginative reconstructions of the living animals, just as we do in natural history museums today. Nomadic gold prospectors of central Asia intuited the connection between dinosaurs and birds long before modern paleontology did, and for all we know, *Protoceratops* may well have had feathers rather than scales. In Greece and Egypt, dinosaur fossils are unknown but finds of prehistoric mammal bones are fairly common -- in fact, one extinct mammal, the *Samotherium*, bears the name of the Greek island where its bones were first identified. Ancient historians frequently mention remarkable discoveries of enormous bones, usually identified by the finders as the relics of giants or ancient heroes. These discoveries correspond closely with the locations of fossil deposits. Mayor has done profound, exhaustive research in a variety of fields, and presents meticulously documented evidence for her theories, but the book reads as

entertainingly as a good detective novel, and is just as accessible to the layman as to her fellow scholars. At the same time, Mayor never talks down to the reader or oversimplifies a complex subject. This is an exemplary work of interdisciplinary scholarship, written the way most scholars only wish we could write.

I read and reread this book several times several years ago, but decided to add it to my Kindle collection, and read it again. This is an extremely important book for it documents and goes on to explain many of the myths told by ancient peoples. Moreover it clarifies many questions which have plagued researchers in the field. Adrienne Mayor is a truly fine writer, who keeps the reader on the edge of the chair as she reveals more and more about our mythical and evolutionary past. I have read every one of her books and thoroughly enjoyed every one. She is logical, a clear thinker and a wonderful writer. I cannot commend this book too highly. Nate Lerner

If ever I read a book that was more meticulously researched than this one, I don't recall it. Adrienne Mayor does an incredible 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, or leaving the reader in esoteric limbo. 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. However, those who prefer to be entertained by childish monster stories, or prefer to look for the reality in myths, or cling to the foolish idea that there are living dinosaurs may find Mayor's book tediously disagreeable. Much of the book covers ancient interest in fossils with the overlying message shining a bright light on a complete misunderstanding by the early finders of what those fossils truly represented. Prehistoric dinosaur bones became griffins, and mammoths became giants and heroes. Other bones were deceitfully arranged to create tritons, nereirdes, and centaurs to dupe the willing believers. A few modern day hoaxes are mentioned for comparison, as well as to support Mayor's findings. Mayor's book subliminally touches on common sense and gullibility as it speculates and expounds on the whos, whats, whys, and wherefores of paleomythology. One can compare much of what she presents in her findings to modern day attitudes and interpretations. Though Mayor states that her findings and sources are far from exhaustive, the reader would swear that she left no stone unturned. I felt she covered the subject with impressive

thoroughness. I highly recommend this book, and look forward to reading Mayor's companion book about early fossil hunters in the Americas. In short, this book was fantastic.

Dr. Mayor takes a refreshing look at an old topic, fossils. Her case for the ancients believing in Griffins is very well stated and researched. It is easy to see how ancient people came across fossils that gave belief to this animal, an animal that never existed. I especially admire that she often says that ancient people were not stupid. They were not making up fanciful stories, but filling in holes in the evidence they saw. Since the fossils they came across were often in areas where gold existed, the belief arose that they guarded the gold. It always amazes me that we greatly admire so much about the ancients, their engineering feats, their philosophy, the creation of civilization, and yet believe they were fools who believed all kind of children's stories. A very intriguing book.

Great book for those who geek out on the Earth Sciences.

The book arrived in pristine condition. I've already read it and loved it. I already bought two other books from the author and look forward to reading them.

I am currently writing, for my own amusement, a non-fiction "History of Geology" I needed an expert on BCE lore and this was perfect for the job. Well researched and well written. I recommend it to anyone. You do not need to be a scientist to enjoy Adrienne's writing.

Also, it sheds light on the distant origins of so much of our popular culture. An archaeological tour-de-force.

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