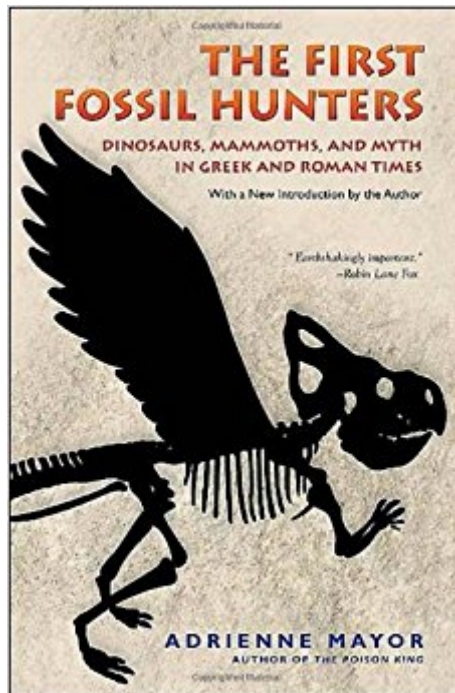


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The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, And Myth In Greek And Roman Times



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

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, nereides, 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.

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