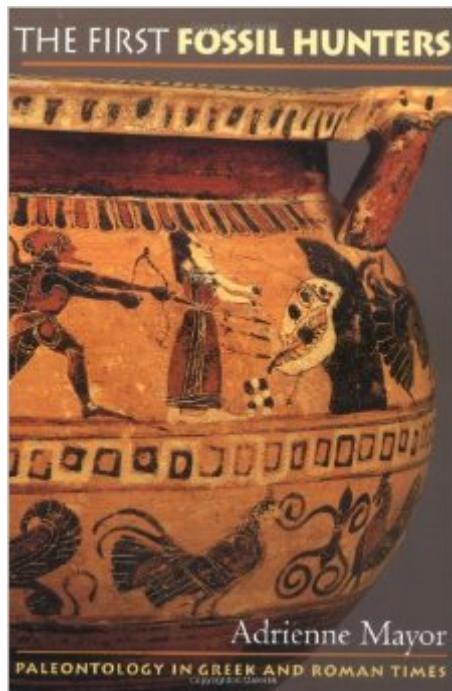


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# The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology In Greek And Roman Times.



## 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

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.

Some of the other reviewers have touched on the same topic - this book has some great ideas and some great scholarship, but the editor(s) for this book should be fired. Writing science for a general

audience can be a delicate undertaking because you can't know how much background the reader has in the topic or how much referencing is required. A lay person doesn't particularly care about how many works you've cited while a student doesn't particularly care about explaining the basics. A great deal of the main portion of the book should have been moved to appendices; there is page after page going over each and (seemingly) every find. The first chapter on griffins is fairly lucid (perhaps due to there being fewer finds to go over) while the chapters dealing with giant heroes in Greece are turgid and monotonous. Not every detail has to be discussed in the main text. A good book for students of mythology, Classical archaeology and palaeontology, but not really suitable for general readers. Her *Greek Fire, Poison Arrows, and Scorpion Bombs* is much more readable and entertaining while still being well enough referenced to be used in scholarly work.

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.

....it shows a Greek vase painted with the image of the monster of Troy. The image, obviously, is that of a dinosaur skull. I have no doubt in my mind that many of the Greek monsters were based on fossilized bones of prehistoric animals. The Griffin based off of *Protoceratops* remains is almost conclusive evidence; and her research should definitely be taken seriously for this matter alone. My problem with the research lies in her conclusions of the 'hero-giants' of antiquity. Mayor obviously attributes Greece as the origin of giant-myths while she neglects the mythology that originates from

every corner of the ancient world. And from every ancient civilization. Of course it's possible that all ancient cultures, at some time, had discovered fossil remains and attributed them to giant humans. But the mythology goes deeper than Mayor allows herself to see (or allows herself to write). Let's not forget that the giants presented in not only Greek, but Hebrew, Norse, Egyptian, Mesoamerican, North American, and South American myths were not only the heroes of old, but had turned wicked and were destroyed collectively. Mayor has only taken a few steps into a larger world. Only by further research and branching out into other mythological cultures can she finally begin to piece EVERYTHING together. I'm convinced that the answers are not just found in Greece.

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