

MAYOR Adrienne, *The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times*. XX + 361 pp., illus., figs., tables, bibl., index. ISBN 0-691-05863-6. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2000. Prix : \$35.

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Griffins and giants are standard figures of the ancient Greek mythology and art. The latter were referred to as early as in Homer's *Odyssey* 7.59. In the original meaning of the Greek word for "giant", they were basically thought as beings of greatest strength, monstrous size and appearance (e.g. Titans, Cyclopes, Centaurs), engendered by the divine personification of primeval powers and eventually defeated by the Olympian gods after a long and dreadful fight (gigantomachy). Subsequently mythic heroes either famous as Theseus, Pelops, Ajax and Orestes or obscure were conceived as gigantic in size. As for griffins, first and suspiciously alluded to by Herodotus (3.119), they were said to be gold mine guardians in far remote North areas later identified as the Altai Mountains and the Gobi desert. They were traditionally depicted as four-feet, crooked-beak and winged creatures. Until recently, the historians of ancient natural science had little, if anything, to do with such fabulous beings noticeably absent from the surviving writings by Aristotle and the other philosophers interested in nature and animals, either before or after him. From now on, Adrienne Mayor's thought-provoking book will mark a watershed in the approach of griffins and giants. As a classical folklorist investigating "the historical and scientific realities embedded in the Greek and Roman myths", to term her in her own words, she expertfully pieced together an impressive array of textual and iconographic evidence on those so-called fancies and crossed it with paleontological findings dating back to the Miocene, Pliocene and Pleistocene epochs in mainland and insular Greece and to the Mesozoic era in Central Asia. Strikingly enough, many of these findings were unearthed from sites where legendary accounts located griffins here and giants there. Through her thorough and penetrating analysis, Mayor convincingly argues that griffins related to Scythian tales inspired by the skeletons of *Protoceratops andrewsi* and other dinosaurs that littered the Gobi desert by the end of the Cretaceous period and (p. 43) "are still continuously revealed by the very same forces of erosion that bring the gold down from the mountain." As to the pre-Olympian Giants and their later heroic counterparts, they would have originated from the early stories weaved to explain the fossilized big bones and tusks embedded in many places around the Aegean and the other parts of the Mediterranean sea and duely collected with time, measured and displayed in temples and museums. In other words, the Classical tradition on giants would convey the ancient Greeks and Romans' curiosity about petrified remains and their intuition of gigantic creatures extinct "long before current human beings appeared on the earth" (p. 8). This original and ingenious insight is understandably speculative to some extent. In places, one might even express reservations regarding some one-sided of the author's views. Except for my omission, no attention is paid to the Oriental origin of or influence on Homer's and Hesiod's narratives about the Titans and other "geomythic" monsters. On the other hand,

translating Greek *drakon* as “dragon” in Philostratus’ *Vita of Apollonius of Tyana* (against Flinterman who translated it as “snake”, see p. 305, n. 27) or in Palaephatus’ *On Unbelievable Tales* sounds as much anachronistic and misleading as the rightly criticized commonplace of Aristotle’s so-called fixity of species (see p. 8, 217-218). Also, map scales would have made the most welcome seven maps even more effective. The cross-reference of p. 136 should read “chapter 4” (correct in n. 29, p. 306) instead of “chapter 5”. Yet, these remarks are nearly trifles when compared with the overall picture. It is as fascinating as persuasive. Adrienne Mayor offers us a key contribution to the understanding of unsuspected aspects of the ancient peoples’ interest in paleontological matters. Furthermore, her sixth and final chapter ends with challenging parallels between ancient and modern paleontological “fictions” and proves to be relevant to the long-range history of mentalities. For both its innovative method and results, her well-balanced and vividly written book should be a must on the bookshelf of every historian of natural sciences, whatever the focused period.

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