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INTRODUCTION



The Borderlands of Myth, History, and Science

IN MY MEANDERING PATH toward becoming a classical folklorist and historian of ancient science, I've always been drawn to the nooks and crannies and dusty corners of literature, art, and history. Curiosities, mysteries, oddities, outlandish outtakes make my pulse race. When I read classical mythology, it is satyrs, giants, mermaids, witches, nymphs, sea monsters, Amazons, animals, mirages, diverting anecdotes, enigmas, and incongruous details that capture my fancy. I love sifting folklore, myths, legends, and old historical accounts for traces of genuine knowledge embellished with imagination, especially about natural history. Whenever my curiosity is piqued by something that seems out of the ordinary or unaccounted for in ancient writings, I immediately look for explanatory footnotes and commentaries. When they are missing or incomplete, I mark the spot and begin a file, like any other cold-case detective. My battered green and red Loeb volumes of Greek and Latin texts are much scribbled, bristling with Post-it Notes. And my files are unruly thickets of random information that might one day yield worthy patterns—or not.

This kind of work often seems like wandering solo in a landscape shrouded in mist or shadow, along trails rife with forks

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and false starts. Sometimes there are footprints of previous explorers, but other times there are no traces, no blazes, no way-markers. Sometimes the mosaic of burned-over patches is illuminated by sudden shafts of sunlight and understanding. The word that best describes this sort of marginal territory is the medieval *march*, derived from “edge, boundary, forest, impression, trace.” *Marches* are the borderlands or crossroads between realms, deserted or sparsely populated liminal zones on the frontiers of formally recognized centers. In these in-between lands, far from officialdom, different rules apply—or maybe there are no rules at all. In the marcher zones of myth, science, and history, one is free to explore, establish footholds, devise one’s own maps.

Each essay in this bundle of fifty has a unique time and place. Together they may serve as dots for tracing the trajectory of my thinking about the intersections of ancient and modern popular lore, nature, history, and science. Recurrent themes, people, and places are cross-referenced. Some essays are new, while some grew out of one-paragraph contributions to *Wonders and Marvels*, a splendid history of science website that flourished until 2017. Some chapters delve into topics that caught my interest in earlier books and are more deeply investigated here. There are also substantially revised, expanded, and updated versions of pieces that appeared in an array of journals and magazines, from *Military History Quarterly*, *Archaeology*, and *Sea Frontiers* to *London Review of Books* and *Sports Afield*. The time span, covering nearly three decades from my earliest publications to the present, and the variety of venues ensures an eclectic, even eccentric selection of topics. For example, I expect that chapter 30, on the age-old relationship between wine goblets and women’s breasts in high

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and low culture, originally published as “Libation Titillation,” might provoke justifiable outrage. But it is also evidence for how antiquated popular attitudes persisted into the late twentieth century, and how far things have progressed since 1994.

In that same year, I learned from my tattoo artist friend Phoenix & Arabeth that copies of my Griffin article in *Archaeology* magazine were in tattoo parlors from Vancouver to San Diego, as Scythian-style animal designs were becoming a thing among tattooed folk. Tattoos were just becoming hip but not yet ubiquitous; I had to work hard to convince Peter Young, conservative editor in chief of *Archaeology*, that tattooing in antiquity would be a valid topic for the magazine. We had become friends after he had accepted my 1994 Griffin piece and several other articles. Peter finally published my tattoos article, “People Illustrated,” in 1999 (chapter 44). But instead of illustrating it with the beautiful barbarian tattoos lovingly detailed in ancient Greek vase paintings that I had gathered, the editors commissioned insipid, inexpert sketches. I rarely hold a grudge, but I never forgave *Archaeology*’s inexplicable refusal to accompany the piece with real tattoo images from antiquity. I never submitted another article to the magazine. Peter retired in 2011. Jarrett Lobell, at *Archaeology* magazine since 1999, became editor in chief. In 2013, *Archaeology* finally saw the light. “Ancient Tattoos,” written by Jarrett Lobell and deputy editor Eric Powell, was lavishly illustrated with color photos of ancient ink on Greek vases and other artifacts.

Other essays are personally more revealing, such as my now rather mortifying imaginary letter to a prominent paleontologist (chapter 14). Mixed emotions also arise from the memoir of our ferret years, chapter 12: What in the world were we thinking when we inflicted the presence of polecats

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on the good folk of Princeton? “Sweating Truth in Ancient Carthage,” chapter 40, is a nostalgic return to Gustave Flaubert’s controversial novel of 1862, *Salammbô*. Revisiting that novel now, it was a jolt to realize that, when I first read it at age fourteen, Flaubert’s sensational vision was my first introduction to ancient history. Perhaps this explains a lot.

Some essays call up wonderful memories. While researching and writing about the Grand Tours of eighteenth-century travelers to Greece for *The Athenian*, I felt an affinity with some of the early tourists’ experiences. Throughout the 1980s, my companion Josh (historian and political theorist Josiah Ober, now my husband) and I hiked over traces of ancient roads to massive stone fortresses built after the Peloponnesian War, the subject of Josh’s dissertation. We slept under the stars on the decks of ferryboats and in roofless ruined towers all around the timeless Greek countryside and islands. One summer, after many hot, dry miles on a winding mountain road, we finally reached the isolated, formidable ruins of the fortress of Panakton at dusk, thanks to a lift from a family of *Tsigani* (Romani). We rode in the back of their truck with their dogs, whose collars were heavily encrusted with gold and silver. The family dropped us off at the foot of a rugged peak in the middle of nowhere as night fell, shaking their heads at the crazy foreigners.

We scrambled up the stony slope and marveled at the looming walls of huge limestone blocks that we would measure and draw in the morning. Supper was spartan: one tomato, an onion that had rolled off a passing farm truck, and a pocketful of almonds gathered along the road, cracked with rocks. Brushing aside dry goat droppings, we slept on a flat slab of bedrock—until we were awakened just before dawn

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by a symphony of tinkling bells and robust farts: a herd of goats had arrived. I'll never forget opening my eyes to the dark silhouettes of curious goats and their mystified guardian standing over us. Josh and the shepherd shared a pipe while we watched a glorious sunrise over the Saronic Gulf far below.

Another time we spent the night in one of the towers of the ancient fort at Messene, in southern Greece. The moon was full, and Athena's owl perched above us in one of the catapult windows. The next morning the air was filled with the sound of buzzing bees tumbling in a field of wind flowers and cyclamen. As we arose, a passing goatherd offered us fresh milk from his pail. It is amazing to realize that any of these vignettes could have taken place when the early travelers ventured on Grand Tours to Greece during the Ottoman Empire.

Living in Athens in 1979–80 and summers for the next decade helping Josh with topographical surveys of ancient roads and towers, I spent many happy hours reading and sketching in the Library of the American School of Classical Studies. I became fascinated with ancient descriptions of bones of enormous size and strange shapes identified as “giants” and “monsters.” It occurred to me that the accounts might record discoveries of large vertebrate fossils, if there were any in Greece. I learned about nineteenth-century paleontological excavations not far from Athens at Pikermi from the venerable and kind archaeologist Eugene Vanderpool, who suggested that my intuition was worth pursuing. So I began researching the idea that observations of remarkable remains of extinct species might have played a role in ancient Greek and Roman ideas about some fabulous creatures. What I uncovered led me to pester numerous classicists and archaeologists, trying to convince them that the idea had merit, and that someone

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should investigate. Eventually, I realized that it would be up to me to gather the scattered evidence from ancient literature and art, history, archaeology, and paleontology and make the case for a link between ancient accounts and fossils. Research into this subject proceeded slowly in library stacks and via stamped, typewritten letters, long before email and the Internet.

Meanwhile, I continued to earn a living as a freelance copyeditor. At first, I worked on medical textbooks, but turned to editing literary, scientific, and historical manuscripts for a dozen trade and university presses. Until the publication of my first book in 2000, I thought of myself as a printmaker rather than a writer. My etchings of mythic subjects were sold in galleries in Washington, DC, Ithaca, New York, and Bozeman, Montana. Some of my original illustrations for articles in *The Athenian*, Greece's English-language magazine, appear in this anthology.

"Colossal Fossils," chapter 13, was my first publication in *The Athenian* (October 1983). After typing it on the old manual Corona at the American School, I drew the illustrations with my precision Rotring rapidograph pen, which I used for cartography and archaeological drawings of fortresses, pottery, and coins. Part 2 of "Colossal Fossils," for the February 1984 *Athenian*, recounted ancient Greek reports of finding giant bones around the Aegean. These illustrated articles represent my plunge into the complicated evidence for what I initially thought of as "paleo-cryptozoology," trying to identify unknown creatures in ancient Greek literature and art. My research into ancient Greek and Roman discoveries and interpretations of fossils continued, with preliminary publications in, for example, *Cryptozoology* (1989, 1991), *Folklore* (1993), *Ar-*

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chaecology (1994), and the *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* (2000), culminating in chapter 1 of *The First Fossil Hunters* (2000).

I had become fixated on the Griffin as an ancient cryptid, an unknown creature with four legs and a beak. Each summer in the American School Library I studied thousands of ancient images of bird-headed quadrupeds from Egypt, Crete, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Scythia. The only writings about Griffins were in Greek and Latin literature, however, beginning with fragments of the lost epic by Aristeas in the seventh century BC and culminating with the Roman natural historian Aelian in the third century AD. The texts coincided with an outpouring of artworks depicting Griffins just as they were described by ancient authors. Griffins did not figure in any known Greek myth—instead they were said to be real animals of eastern lands. What might have accounted for a millennium of consistent descriptions and related art? I could come up with only one living four-legged animal with a beak—the turtle. But it occurred to me that some extinct dinosaurs were quadrupeds with beaks.

My obsessive speculation that beaked dinosaur fossils played a role in how Griffins were visualized in classical Greece and Rome began to bug those close to me. Finally, Josh forcefully suggested that I cease talking and write it all down, as a long letter to a paleontologist. Recently settled in Montana, I chose Jack Horner, curator of the new Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, famous for his discovery of dinosaur eggs and the model for the paleontologist in the 1993 movie *Jurassic Park*.

I never sent Jack Horner my feverish, scattershot letter penned in 1989, “Hunting Griffins,” presented here as chapter 14. But a few years later we did meet, thanks to Horner’s scientific illustrator, my friend Kris Ellingsen. I showed him

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ancient Greek vase paintings of Griffins and compared them to the most famous beaked dinosaur in Montana, Mort the Triceratops, mascot of the Museum of the Rockies. Horner nodded, then pointed out my mistaken belief that Triceratops dinosaurs had ever lived in in the Old World. But he encouraged me to forge on with my hypothesis that dinosaurs might be involved. As I left his office, Horner remarked to Kris, “She doesn’t know jackshit about paleontology. But she might be onto something.” That spurred me to do more homework before trying to explain my ideas to scientists.

Not all the mysteries embedded in myth and folklore and other products of imaginative and collective storytelling over the ages are amenable to scientific explanation or historical solution, of course. Keeping in mind how much information has been garbled or lost over millennia, stumbling into culs-de-sac in the marches of history is inevitable, especially at a far remove in time and space. Franz Kafka’s paradox is never far from my mind: “A legend is an attempt to explain the inexplicable. Emerging, as it does, from a basis of truth, it is bound to end in the inexplicable” (“The Rescue Will Begin in Its Own Time,” 1917–24). Several essays—I’m thinking of “The Flying Snakes of Arabia” (chapter 1), “Griffin Claws and a Unicorn Horn” (chapter 4), “The Little Bird with Poison Poop” (chapter 7), and “Cuvier and the Mammoth Foot” (chapter 18)—exemplify the impossibility of reaching certainty.

These articles distill a goodly amount of research. Many of the pieces, written for general audiences, do not include references, although some notes at the back of the book indicate ancient sources and further readings. As a footnote and citation devotee myself, I keenly sympathize with read-

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ers who feel their absence. For the aficionado of footnotes, I recommend my books and scholarly publications, which are jam-packed with documentation and extensive bibliographies. Meanwhile, I hope you find pleasure in browsing this compilation of my souvenirs from the marches, wondrous hunting grounds for the study of human curiosity.

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