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Perspectives

# Beyond Geomythology: An Ethnobiology of Fossils

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**Abstract** Ethnopaleontology is the study of the relationship between humans and fossils. So far, this emerging discipline has been dominated by geomythology, a research orientation that seeks to historicize traditional knowledge and narratives as premodern explanations for geological phenomena. I argue that this methodology fails to capture the most pertinent information about human interactions with ancient organisms, and instead primarily subsumes these engagements into an uncritical, ethnocentric narrative about the development of Western science. I propose that ethnopaleontology should be reconfigured as an ethnobiology of mineral life.

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## Introduction

Human interest in fossils is ancient, perhaps embedded in the very origin of symbolic thought. An unmodified fossil cuttlefish (†*Orthoceras*), excavated from an Acheulian site in Morocco, "challenges the hypothesis that pre-Upper Palaeolithic hominids lacked both symbolism and the ability to perceive iconicity" (Bednarik 2002:139). If this specimen was indeed moved to this site by an ancient human ancestor as hypothesized, then cultural engagement with fossils dates back as far as 300,000 years. Such interest, it seems, has never waned: excavations at a first-millennium Roman site in Spain yielded a trilobite (class †Trilobita) mounted as a pendant, perhaps used as an amulet (Fernández-Fernández et al. 2025), to say nothing of cultural currency that extinct reptiles enjoy today.

Though the empirical and ethnographic potential is rich, most inquiry has been focused on investigating speculative fossil origins for myths and folklore. This article critically evaluates this methodology and instead proposes an alternative: ethnopaleontology as ethnobiology. Geomythology is unequipped to provide a sufficiently nuanced study of such varied phenomena.

## Geomythology and Ethnopaleontology

The study of "the dynamic relationship between humans and fossils" has been christened *ethnopaleontology*. Moura and Albuquerque (2012) proposed ethnopaleontology as a "new discipline" based on their study of the medical use of fossils in South America. However, they were preceded by Astudillo-Pombo (2010), who considers it a subdiscipline of cultural paleontology (*paleontología cultural*), which in his usage denotes the study of "non-scientific" (*no científico*) cultural aspects of fossils. Ethnopaleontology *sensu stricto* has been applied to magical amulets in Southeast Asia (Le Loeuff et al. 2012), traditional Siddha medicine (Natarajan, Sathiyarajeswaran, and Kannan 2015), and popular architecture in Monsagro, Salamanca, Spain (Simón-Porcar et al. 2020). *Fossil folklore* is an older term and carries the same stigma as other folk sciences. For now, I will use *ethnopaleontology* heuristically to denote the study of human engagement with fossils more broadly. Defined this way, ethnopaleontology does have a significant history. In 1586, William Camden recorded a superstition (*credulitas*) regarding the ammonites found at Whitby in England (Skeat 1912:54), signaling a nascent bifurcation between an (apparently) unacculturated paleontology and cultural interpretations of fossils.

Its modern character originates in 1968, however, when the geologist Dorothy Vitaliano (1968:5) introduced what she termed *geomythology*:

> I consider it to be the geologic application of euhemerism. The geomythologist seeks to find the real geologic event underlying a myth or legend to which it has given rise; thus he helps convert mythology back into history.

This "rationalistic approach to myth" (Burbery 2021:6) has been applied to a staggering range of cultural phenomena. A major figure in this movement is the classicist Adrienne Mayor, whose work has seen significant and enthusiastic acceptance in popular media, appearing in documentaries, museum exhibits, and even children's books. Indeed, it is Mayor who is the primary champion of this fossil-geomythological approach. Her work is cited authoritatively across studies, even those more closely allied to anthropology (i.e., Fernández-Fernández 2025; Le Loeuff et al. 2012). Moura and Albuquerque, based on the work of Mayor, explicitly place ethnopaleontology under geomythology. Particularly notable is her 1989 hypothesis that the griffin was inspired by †*Protoceratops* fossils in Mongolia, an idea assessed thoroughly (and debunked) by Witton and Hing (2024). Fossils are an obvious and understandable starting point for geomythology – so obvious, in fact, that Mayor originally described her practice as "paleocryptozoology" (Mayor 1989; cf. Witton and Hing 2024:364–365). Geomythologists following Mayor have proposed (e.g.) that giants mentioned in *Beowulf* were inspired by the "medieval discovery of bones possibly belonging to mammoths or other fauna in the vicinity of the Rhine–Meuse delta" (Burbery 2015:333), and that coal seeps preserving the scale-like limbs of fossil trees like †*Lepidodendron* inspired myths about dragons (Poli and Stoneman 2019).

*Geomythology and Ethnocentrism*

Putting aside issues of parsimony and falsifiability, there are significant theoretical problems with geomythology. Perhaps most glaring is whether the concept of a 'fossil' is appropriate to apply to such a wide variety of cultures and periods. While many fossils were recognized as petrified lifeforms in antiquity, especially petrified wood and various marine animals, the vast majority are not easily identified. Moreover, some formations, like septarian nodules or manganese dendrites, closely resemble organic material yet are produced inorganically. It is not surprising, then, that ethnotaxa are rarely coextensive with paleontological classifications.

Nelson (1968:4) notes that "marbles, serpentines, diabases, and basalt porphyries" were all included in the medieval conception of snakestone, along with the commonly cited ammonites (†Ammonoidea). In a survey of Southeast Asian beliefs, Brumm lists stone and bronze axes, invertebrate fossils, ceramic jars, and tektites among objects identified as thunderstones (2018). Swallowstone often encompasses gastropod opercula, orbitoline foraminifera (†Orbitolinidae), and small clasts of agate (Duffin 2013:81). Buffalo stones collected among the Blackfoot may be ammonites, but also nodules of flint, fossil shells, or in fact "[a]ny pebble bearing a special resemblance to an animate object" (Wissler 1912:128). Further, there are often significant shifts and juxtapositions in the identity of these ethnotaxa, which makes modern geological classification nearly impossible. During the colonial period in South America, the European *aetites* (or 'eaglestone') transformed from any stone which rattled when shaken to native Andean rocks, including fossils of †*Neospirifer condor* (d'Orbigny 1842) and other ancient arthropods (Podgorny 2017).

The reduction of these knowledges and their associated practices into mere 'geomyths' obscures the wider cosmology they are embedded in and the relations they reflect. Geomythology privileges modern Western scientific accounts as the canon with which to measure all others. If some phenomenon fails to measure up, it is an "ex post facto" geomyth and does "not properly come under geomythology as defined" (Vitaliano 1968:6). Medicinal dragon bones (龍骨 *lónggǔ*) utilized in Chinese medicine are lauded as part of a "universal geomyth" (Burbery 2021:19–21) because Western paleontologists identify them as the remains of extinct mammals. Medicinal cinnabar, long held in the West as a mixture of dragon and elephant blood (Basile 2023), is not. Yet both substances were found to be important to the practice of medicine in no small part due to their organic origin, whether real or imagined. In Southeast Asia, a "genie boneyard" is perhaps a fossil-bearing bed, or—as the French paleontologist Joshua Hoffet found—it may be a field of limestone boulders "sculpted into bizarre shapes by wind and streams" (Hoffet 1943; in Taquet 1998:148). Were it the former case, it would be of immediate interest to geomythologists. It seems, then, that ethnopaleontology has an ontological problem: the subject matter it presupposes in fact

obscures the cultural structures which produce that data. The fossil, so constructed, can only exist in a sort of anachronistic hindsight.

*Geomythology as Colonial Parallelism*

Though geomythology appears to take a decolonial attitude towards the preservation of Indigenous knowledge—retaining an "implicit 'social justice' element" as it were (Burbery 2021:8)—the underlying schema of excavated geomyths always mirror Western rationality and never unsettle or disturb its ontology. This strategy resembles what Cutcha Risling Baldy (2015:2) calls *colonial parallelism*: "a settler move to innocence" that portrays culturally grounded and situated epistemologies as parallel to, or interchangeable with, Western ideas. According to colonial parallelism, the world can be united through universal experiences—which always happen to reflect Western modes of knowledge.

A succinct example of this is Benoit's widely publicized interpretation of San rock art. Benoit argues that the walrus-like figure at La Belle France, a rock art panel in the fossil-rich Karoo region of South Africa, is a depiction of a dicynodont (†Dicynodontia) based on the downward orientation of the 'tusks'. For Benoit, the question of "what inspired this figure in the first place" is valid and should not be dismissed based on San interpretations: something must have "inspired this figure in the first place," in particular, "*actual* animals and phenomena" that are "directly inspired from their *real-life* environments" or "amalgamation[s] of different *existing* animals" (Benoit 2024:2; emphasis my own).

In a moderated critique of geomythology and its detractors, Chris Ballard argues that neither geomythology nor its critics adequately address "the dynamic, lived experience of oral traditions in Indigenous societies, their enmeshment within other forms of knowledge, and the impetus behind their transmission" (Ballard 2021:574). Oral traditions in Papua and Vanuatu, two areas where geomythologists have been active, are generally unconcerned with the Western focus on absolute dates or chronologies, instead focusing on "questions of priority, sequence, and seniority among chiefs" among other specific, situated concerns (Ballard 2021:582). Ballard's analysis does not concern fossils, but it is clear that similar critique is applicable. Geomythology posits a germ of ahistorical 'scientific' observation inherent in contingent cultural narratives, obscured underneath allegorical and mythological language culminating in the *télos* of modern paleontology—an end-of-history completely divested of cultural baggage. Within geomythology, traditional knowledge with specific, situated concerns is presented within a sort of 'paleontological supercessionism': affirmed as ancient precursors, but overtaken and replaced by a superior and more advanced body. Thus, proxemic and chronological language is used to describe these "fossil legends"—they "anticipate *genuine* discoveries and theorizing in science" (Burbery 2021:8–9, emphasis my own) and contribute to science "[o]nly when correctly interpreted as lithified remains of once-living organisms" (Romano 2024:103). For Spalding and Sarjeant, geomyths illustrate "the development of protoscientific ideas in nonscientific cultures," only a "fanciful explanation [before] the emergence of truly scientific methods and explanations" (Spalding and Sarjeant 2012:18). In this way, geomythology appropriates the trappings of Indigenous knowledge to bolster the image of Western science as an objective, inert, and culturally neutral, rather than historical, contingent, and value-laden.

**Ethnopaleontology as Ethnobiology**

Previously I defined ethnopaleontology heuristically as the study of human engagement with fossils. But it is clear that such a heuristic fails in light of the above critique of 'fossils' as an indeterminate concept. Therefore, I propose a more general restructuring: ethnopaleontology as the investigation of mineral life across cultures, particularly its relation to humans. Here, 'fossil' returns to its root in the Latin *fossilis*: something that is dug (*fodio*) from the earth. Indeed, the notion of "life" as a distinct category of phenomena is not commensurate across cultures. Alfred Irving Hallowell (1960:24) provided an oft-cited anecdote about the animacy of (some) stones among the Ojibwa:

> Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are *all* the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, "No! But *some* are." The qualified answer made a lasting impression on me. And it is thoroughly consistent with other data that indicate that the Ojibwa are not animists in the sense that they dogmatically attribute living souls to inanimate objects such as stones (emphasis in original).

Animacy extended to stones abounds in the historical record as well. Describing the geology given

in the *Book of Minerals* of medieval polymath Albertus Magnus, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes that "stones forge relations, manifesting a queer kind of life"—though Albertus goes to great efforts to deny the notion that stones have a soul, he simultaneously affirms that "motion, mutability, sexual difference, reproduction, expansive worldedness, desire" occur in the lithic (Cohen 2015:229). In his description of snakestone (*draconites*), Albertus Magnus (1943:86–87) describes precisely this sort of vitality. The stone, which must be extracted "while the snake is still quivering," derives its healing power to dispel poison by its association with the serpent:

> For the activity of the soul confers many properties even on residues which are produced in animals; and these undergo a change at death, whether the animals die a natural death by the decay of their bodily humours, or whether they lie dead and decaying after being slain.

The *Lapidary of King Philip*[1], a Middle English translation of a French text from the fourteenth century, describes several enigmatic minerals in association with animals. *Ligure* is found in a lynx's throat, while *allectories* and *celidoyne* are found in the innards of birds—the capon and the swallow, respectively. By their relation to these animals, the stones themselves retain (or obtain[2]) healing power.

Raymond Pierotti sees resonances between modern constructal theory, traditional Aristotelian psychology[3], and Indigenous ways of knowing that "consider bodies of water, air (winds), and even stone to be 'alive'": they all prioritize flows, gradients, and movement in their conceptions of animacy (Pierotti 2015). Similarly, the sympathy between inorganic and organic forms used by early modern philosophers to explain structured forms in stone derives from a similarly rich cosmology: Neoplatonic hylozoism, which "oppose[s] any global vitalistic distinction between living and non-living matter" (Jordan 2016:97). The *Lapidary*, like Albertus Magnus, suggests an extended animacy, in which certain materials inherit the virtues of animals, thereby becoming economically, medically, and often theologically valuable.

These rich cosmologies exceed the narrative of scientific progress assumed and augmented by geomythology. Most importantly, geomythology misses the opportunity to disturb our received notions of animacy and subjecthood—not only in our conceptual analysis of ethnographic data, but in our daily lives, perhaps contributing to a more ethical, and frankly interesting, mode of engagement with the natural world.

*Ethnopaleontology of the Contemporary West*

Geomythology, with its ingrained culture-science dichotomy, cannot analyze the cultural life of paleontology in the contemporary West. This is not unique to geomythology, as indeed "[m]ost cultural studies of scientific thought ignore one culture, the very one that brings us Western science" (Medin and Bang 2014:24). However, it is particularly troubling as global industrial society is dependent on the exploitation of fossil resources, which is perhaps the primary driver of climate change. Poli and Stoneman are frustratingly close to such an analysis, but their discussion of the "human need for fuel and the greed of the industry moguls" is tied inseparably to their hypothesis that "coal may have birthed a mythical animal," that is, the dragon (Poli and Stoneman 2019). As such, their work is stringently foreclosed by geomythology.

Poli and Stoneman thus miss the most relevant and historically apparent connection that coal has to living beings, i.e., timber. The jurist Johann Philipp Bünting, in his *Sylva subterranea* of 1693, describes fossil fuels as a chthonic reflection of above-ground forests, an underground woodland. Rather than a metaphor, it is a literal explanation of its formation: "just as wood permanently grows in above-ground forests that humans may harvest in a sustainable manner, so coals grow in the underground forests" (Sieferle 2001:181–184). Bünting echoes alchemical theories still popular at the end of the seventeenth century, in which inorganic matter, especially metals, could possess "a lifecycle encompassing birth, growth, reproduction, decay, and eventual death," where "founts of liquid bitumen and soil," likened to bodily fluids, could flower with tin, silver, and white gold (Carlotta and Martelli 2023). Whether the move away from this ancient-medieval hylozoism has contributed to ecological destruction is outside the scope of this article, but it is an avenue for future research that geomythology cannot grasp.

More directly, there are communities—especially in the global South but also elsewhere—that economically depend on non-fuel fossil extraction. Over 50,000 people in southern Morocco are dependent on the fossil trade, an industry that generates an estimated $40 million per year (Gutiérrez

-Marco and García-Bellido 2018). How these communities relate with and interpret fossils is, at present, mostly unrecorded—but again, we see geomythology wholly unequipped to investigate such situations, as mythology or folklore is unlikely to be a major factor for industrial workers interfacing with Western paleontology.

**Conclusions**

Ethnopaleontology is situated in the interval between the mineral and organic, between life and nonlife—it warrants a close interrogation of the juxtaposition between these two categories beyond, and often in opposition to, the account given by geomythology. This is doubly unfortunate, because not only are there interesting currents of thought and cultural practice underlying these "myths" that are subsumed into its narrative of scientific progress and thereby lost, but it obscures the immediate relevance ethnopaleontology has to extractive economies reliant on fossil fuels. Unraveling these relationships calls for a more robust methodology, which should be articulated as ethnobiology.

I will close with a short vignette. Among the Cree of northern Manitoba, there is a boulder identified as the "Great Green Turtle's shell that is North America" (Murray 1997). It is the site of sacred figures, both familial and mythological, inscribed in the landscape: it carries footprints, identified as the traces of ancestors, which attest to their primordial presence in this land. The Western geological analysis of this outcropping carries a distant echo of European fossil folklore: it is identified as a serpentinized dunite –that is, a sort of snakestone.

**Notes**

[1]I have used the editions given in Evans and Serjeantson (1960).

[2]It is not always clear whether these minerals are actually produced by the animal or merely collected by them for their own use.

[3]*Psychology* here is used in the older sense of a 'theory of soul' (ψυχή *psukhḗ*).

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