

Dinosaur Myths and Legends

Long before we knew anything about dinosaurs, people found their fossilized remains. Many ancient cultures have myths, stories and legends about strange beasts – some of these could be based on the fossilized bones of dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures. Many of these legends and myths persist through regular sightings of aquatic monsters in lakes such as Loch Ness and Okanagan.

Some of the earliest references to dinosaurs can be found in Chinese medical texts. For thousands of years, Chinese people have collected “dragon bones” and used them in medicines. They called them *Long Gu* (dragon’s bones) and *Long Ya* (dragon’s teeth). Bones and teeth could be ground up into a powder and added to tea as a cure for a variety of ailments, including fever, dysentery, convulsions, ulcers, paralysis and illnesses of pregnant women. A fifth-century historian, Lei Hiao, instructed people where to find the bones and how to measure their quality; he also advised practitioners to be careful not to use bones collected by women!

The ancient Greeks may have used fossilized dinosaur bones as the basis for a mythical beast. Some scholars think that Greek historian Herodotus was referring to fossilized dinosaur skeletons and eggs when he described griffins guarding their nests in central Asia in the fifth century B.C. A griffin is a legendary beast that was part eagle and part lion. The remains of lion-sized beaked dinosaurs called Protoceratops found in Mongolia near the ancient gold fields of Central Asia – an important source of gold for the Greeks – may have provided the inspiration for the legendary griffins. The dinosaur’s beak and frilled collar could have been interpreted as the griffin’s eagle-like beak and wings.

The earliest “modern” discovery of a dinosaur fossil was the knee end of a *Megalosaurus* thigh bone found in 1676 in Oxfordshire, England. The man who dug up the bone, Robert Plot, was not a biologist but a chemist, and he thought that the massive femur had once belonged to a giant human. Plot published an illustration of the bone in his book *The Natural History of Oxfordshire* (1677). Despite the incorrect identification, this drawing appears to be the first published record of a dinosaur in the West.



Today, myths and legends of dinosaur-like creatures continue. Sightings of sea and lake monsters are common. Canada’s most famous water monster is Ogopogo, a mysterious beast that many believe haunts the depths of Lake Okanagan in British Columbia’s southern interior. Long before the creature was known as Ogopogo, local First Nations referred to the creature as N’ha-a-itk. Today, organizations like the British Columbia Scientific Cryptozoology Club search for conclusive evidence that Ogopogo and other such beasts exist. It is important to know that scientists have never found any remains of aquatic dinosaurs – ichthyosaurs and elasmosaurs were huge marine reptiles, not dinosaurs.

Dinosaurs have fascinated humans for centuries and continue to do so today. We may never see a living dinosaur, but myths, legends and our imaginations keep dinosaurs alive. The desire to find a living example of a dinosaur, or a creature from the same period, is so great that many believe they might find one if they look in just the right place.