

Fossils as the origin of monster lore

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Old Japanese texts occasionally record accounts of mysterious creatures. These beings have been passed down to the present day as imaginary animals, such as the “bones of giant serpents,” “tengu bones,” or “dragon bones.” In many cases, however, the descriptions appear to have been carefully recorded based on actual observations, even though their true nature was not understood at the time. Within such records, traces of vertebrate fossils can sometimes be identified. By reexamining well-known local legends and regional chronicles from an interdisciplinary perspective, this study seeks to uncover evidence of fossil discoveries in Japan prior to the Meiji period that have remained largely unrecognized.

For example, although it is now widely understood that certain inland mountainous regions were marine environments until about ten million years ago, this level of comprehension is a product of modern geology. Even in periods when the concept of geological time did not exist, fossils would have been frequently encountered in marine sedimentary layers distributed far inland. During activities such as cultivating fields, constructing roads, or following landslides, the sudden appearance of enormous vertebrate fossils must have been an overwhelming and perplexing experience for those who encountered them.

In this presentation, examples of monsters described in old documents are introduced, and their possible connections to paleontology are explored.

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