

Six claims, and what is actually known

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Six assertions carry this book. Each is set out here in three parts: what Gould claims, what is actually established, and what this edition takes the difference to mean. Nothing in his text has been altered; this is a reader's instrument, not a correction. The distinction matters because Gould's prose is equally confident whether he is reporting a text, reporting a fact, or drawing a conclusion, and he does not mark the transitions.

1. Chapters VI, VII, VIII

Gould claims. Dragons were real animals — large reptiles that lived alongside early humans and became extinct within historical memory.

What is established. No. The large reptiles of the fossil record died out roughly sixty-six million years before any human existed. No overlap of any kind is possible, and none has ever been found. This is Gould's conclusion, not his evidence, and it is the only part of the book that has to be discarded whole. Everything he assembles remains interesting once it is detached from it. Gould could not have known this. The interval between the last of the great reptiles and the first human was not a number anyone could put on it in 1886; the geological timescale was known to be enormous and was not yet calibrated. He is reasoning carefully into a hole in the evidence, which is a different failure from carelessness and a more instructive one.

2. Chapters VI, VII

Gould claims. The independent occurrence of dragon traditions in Europe, the Near East, India, China and Japan is best explained by a common original animal.

What is established. The traditions are genuinely independent and genuinely similar. The explanation is not a shared animal: large snakes are feared everywhere, floods and storms are described everywhere in similar imagery, and a composite serpent is an obvious symbol for a paramount ruler.

Gould's observation is sound and his inference is not. Convergence is the interesting fact; descent is the wrong reading of it. It is worth being precise about what convergence does show. It shows that human beings in unconnected places respond to the same things — flood, storm, big snakes, the need for a beast that stands for a king — in similar ways. That is a fact about people, and it is the fact modern comparative work is built on. Gould has hold of the right observation by the wrong end.

3. Chapters VI

Gould claims. The genus *Draco* — eighteen small winged lizards of India and the Malay archipelago — shows that a winged reptile is not absurd.

What is established. *Draco* is real and is accurately described. It is a hand-sized lizard that glides on extended ribs rather than wings, and it is not related to anything in the dragon traditions.

A true fact doing false work. This is the clearest single example in the book of a correct premise carrying an inference it cannot bear. Watch the move

happen: *Draco* exists, therefore winged reptiles are possible, therefore a large winged reptile is not absurd, therefore the traditions may describe one. Each arrow looks small. The first is true, the second is a definition, the third is a change of subject, and the fourth is the conclusion smuggled in as a possibility.

4. Chapters VI

Gould claims. Pythons and boas exceptionally attain forty feet in length or more.

What is established. The largest reliably measured snakes are reticulated pythons at about ten metres — roughly thirty feet. Forty-foot claims recur constantly and none has survived measurement.

Gould says these accounts *demand belief*. They are the same class of report as the newspaper sightings, and they fail for the same reason: nobody produced the snake. The forty-foot snake is the book in miniature. There are many reports, they are old and widespread and independent, the people making them are not lying, and the animal is not there. What settles it is not argument but measurement, and measurement is the thing none of the reports ever include.

5. Chapters VII

Gould claims. The Chinese classics — the *Shan Hai King*, the *Yih King*, the *'Rh Ya* — record the dragon as an animal among other animals, and their antiquity gives that record weight.

What is established. The texts are genuinely ancient and Gould's quotations from them are broadly sound. What they record is a creature already fully mythological in the earliest layer available.

His strongest chapter, and the one where he argues honestly against himself: he notes that in the more credible portion of the *Shan King*, dragons are *infrequent*. A reader should notice how much that admission costs his case. This row is the reason to publish the book. Gould reports a fact that damages his own case and reports it plainly, in a chapter he wants to be his strongest. Very few authors of popular science in any period do that, and it is the clearest evidence that he was arguing rather than advocating.

6. Chapters VI, VII

Gould claims. Nineteenth-century newspaper reports of sightings support the case.

What is established. They support nothing. The *North China Herald* and the *Straits Times* are colonial newspapers printing sighting stories, a genre with a well-documented appetite and no verification.

The weakest evidence in the book, presented in the same tone as the strongest. Where a paragraph rests on a newspaper, it can be set aside without loss. There is a period detail worth noticing here. These papers were read by the same colonial community Gould belonged to, and a sighting report in the *Straits Times* would have felt like local news rather than like folklore. Proximity is not verification, but it is a good explanation of why a careful man treated it as though it were.