

His sources, graded

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Gould cites across three thousand years and four traditions, in one tone. This list sorts what he uses in these three chapters into four kinds and says what weight each carries. It is not a bibliography; it is a reader's guide to how much to believe a given paragraph. The rule of thumb: he is reliable about what his sources say, and unreliable about what their saying it proves.

The Chinese classics

Genuinely old, and honestly used. Gould's quotations check out and he argues about dates rather than treating everything Chinese as equally ancient. This is the best evidence in the book and the reason the volume is worth printing. One qualification. Gould reads these texts in translation and through intermediaries, and where a rendering is contested he generally says so — but he cannot check a translator against the Chinese, and neither could most of his readers. Take his account of what a passage says as reliable; take his account of what the passage proves as his own.

Shan Hai King (the Classic of Mountains and Seas) — a compendium of geography and strange creatures, assembled over centuries and Gould's single most-used Chinese source. He distinguishes what he takes to be an original *Shan King* from later additions, and notes that dragons are *infrequent* in the older part. · *Yih King* (the Book of Changes) — the divination classic, whose hexagram texts mention the dragon in figures Gould reads more literally than they will bear. · *Rh Ya* — the oldest surviving Chinese dictionary, cited for definitions. · *Pân Tsao Kang Mu* — the great Ming materia medica, cited for the medical uses of dragon parts, which tells you what apothecaries sold rather than what existed. · *Yuen Kien Léi Han* — a Qing encyclopaedia, i.e. a compilation of compilations.

The classical authors

Repeating travellers' tales, and Gould knows it. He quotes them as evidence of what was believed rather than of what was seen — mostly. Where he slips from one to the other, the Register of Claims marks it. The classical chain is shorter than it looks. Strip out the authors who are quoting each other and you are left with a small number of reports, mostly about India, Africa and Arabia — that is, about the edge of the known world, which is where every culture keeps its monsters.

Pliny the Elder, on the serpents of India and Africa · Aristotle · Diodorus Siculus · Ammianus Marcellinus · Herodotus's *Neuri* and the winged serpents of Arabia and Egypt. None of these men saw a dragon; each is reporting what he was told, usually at two removes and usually about somewhere far away.

The Renaissance naturalists

Compiling from the classical authors, with pictures. Useful for the history of the idea, worthless as evidence of the animal. Their real value to a modern reader is as evidence of how long the belief lasted among people who were doing serious natural history. That the fakes existed, and were exhibited, is itself the most telling fact in the group, and Gould prints it.

Gesner and Aldrovandus, whose works print figures of dragons — and, as the *Encyclopædia Britannica* passage Gould opens with notes, specimens were exhibited that had been made up out of parts of different animals. Gould reports the fakery honestly.

Victorian newspapers

Not evidence, and the weakest thing in the book. Colonial newspapers printing sighting stories are a genre with an appetite and no verification. Gould sets them beside Han commentaries as comparable testimony. They are not comparable, and any paragraph resting on one can be set aside without loss. If you want a single test for a weak paragraph in this book, look for a date in the 1870s or 1880s and a place name in the Straits or the treaty ports. That paragraph is a newspaper cutting.

North China Herald · *North China Daily News* · *Straits Times* · assorted correspondence and voyage narratives of the same period.