

Lizard

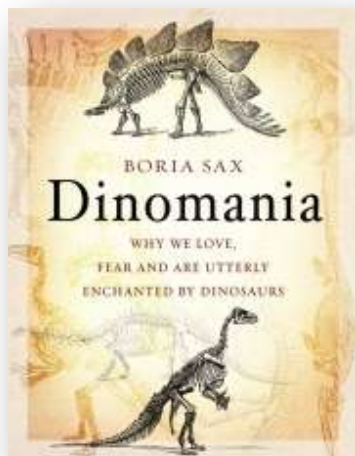
Boria Sax

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Dinomania: Why We Love, Fear and Are Utterly Enchanted by Dinosaurs

Boria Sax

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Lizard (2017) and *Dinomania* (2018) present author/researcher Boria Sax at his multidisciplinary best: mixing and relating biology, botany, paleontology, anthropology, biography, history, mythology, art history, popular culture and more, into coherent wholes. The skillful way he interweaves these various themes reminds this reviewer of the pictures and models of DNA strands as the complexity of the finished product emerges.

Lizard's six chapters start with the question "What Is a Lizard?" and from there he discusses, in separate chapters, the diversity of lizards, lizards and dragons, dinosaurs in art, and lizards today. What this reviewer finds most interesting is how the meanings of lizards to those in their surrounding environment – and those distanced in space and time – changed.

While *Lizards* deals with animals still among us, *Dinomania* concerns animals no humans ever saw, with the exception of what scientists now believe to be their only survivors/descendants: birds. *Dinomania* raises conceptual questions at every turn. Sax notes how the changing nature of those questions (and proposed answers) interact with changing social patterns, issues and concerns.

Sax points out that "about 85 per cent of non-avian dinosaurs have been named just since 1990" [198]. Among the new findings paleontologists have come to believe that dinosaurs lived in social groupings [198]. With the new excavations of fossils with feather imprints, the picture of the giant loner lizard has increasingly become questioned.

Dinomania's eight chapters start with conceptualizing dinosaurs ("Dragon Bones"): for centuries people knew that large, strange bones existed, but could not conceive of dinosaurs—to imagine dinosaurs meant necessarily imagining in terms of deep time, time beyond the creation myths of peoples around the globe; Sax notes that such bones were found in non-Biblical sites, and the people who found them likewise lacked the necessary world-view to understand what they were seeing. In writing about Johann Scheuzer, an early 18th century Swiss scholar, who described a skeleton from a being that existed before the Flood and Noah's Ark:

Scheuzer's depiction could be dismissed as something like science fiction, but the same thing could be said of just about all writing about dinosaurs up through the present. People seem impelled to construct relatively complete images of them, but they must do so on the basis of evidence that, however sophisticated, is extremely incomplete. They can only attempt the task through the relatively uninhibited use of fantasy and intuition. [31]

From bones and other evidence, we humans constructed in our minds what dinosaurs were, how they must have looked, even sounded and acted. Yet how these imagined dinosaurs existed, behaved and interacted with other species itself changed over time, whether in scientific or popular terms.

In "How Dragons Became Dinosaurs," the author discusses how everything changed with the realization of the existence of "deep time"—beyond centuries to millennia, before the first humans existed, geological eons away. In cultures across the globe, big buried bones had been associated with dragons, demons and mythical monsters. Sax writes:

In many respects, dinosaurs became cultural successors to the dragons of legend, but the modern idea of a 'dinosaur' could not even be articulated until the nineteenth century. It required a very intricate organizations of experience, particularly of time, in which dinosaurs could occupy a niche First, time had had to be conceived as more unequivocally linear. Next, it was necessary to divide time into distinct eras. This was done at first with historical time, and then, very gradually, with prehistory. The chronology of the world gradually widened and became more precise, until a segment could eventually be marked off as the 'Age of Dinosaurs'. Finally, it was necessary to recognize that dinosaurs had become extinct. [43-45].

In "Mister Big and Mister Fierce," Sax points out that "as it happened, dinosaurs were discovered in approximately the same historic era when belief in dragons, devils and angels began to fade. Inevitably, dinosaurs stepped into the vacancy they had left, acquiring the symbolism from all three." [76]. Messrs. Fierce and Big refer, respectively, to *Tyrannosaurus rex* and *Triceratops* [82-83]. The famous museum mural of



the two dinosaurs in battle, painted in the 1920s, sprung from the imagination of the artist alone.

Sax takes readers from “cabinets of curiosity” to museums and beyond in the chapter entitled “From the Crystal Palace to Jurassic Park.” Here he talks about problems related to taxonomic classification. That knowledge is contingent by its very nature becomes obvious, as he relates the transformation from Biblical definitions of time and creation to what we now believe (and what others believed between then and now). If eons are macro, then the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel’s work on the arbitrariness of temporal definitions in *The Seven Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week* (1985, 1989) presents a micro version of this problem.

In the chapter “The Totem of Modernity,” the author points out the slippery nature of both concepts: “totems” and “modernity.” Noting that literary scholars place the end of modernity in the late 1960s-1970s, “historians usually date the modern era from 1801 to 1950.” [181]; Sax writes that “... by any system of dating, the modern era ended about a half century ago at least.” [181]. For a differing view, see sociologist/social theorist Anthony Giddens’ *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), where Giddens argues that we presently live in a period of late modernity, setting forth implications of this line of thinking.

Sax manages to introduce readers to all manner of scientific controversies, some still ongoing: cold-blooded or warm-blooded (ectothermic, endothermic or mesothermic), Lamarck vs. Darwin, gradual or accelerated changes, and so forth. The author puts this into the context of historical/social changes, as well as changes in scientific thought, and the historiography of such thought, bringing Thomas Kuhn’s theories about “paradigm shifts” into play.

Boria Sax and Reaktion Books, which published both volumes, receive extremely high marks for the quality of these books: not only good binding, but exemplary reproduction of illustrations in both black and white and color. An editorial choice was made to place illustrations throughout – rather than in special sections – something for which all readers should be grateful. In the movie (*Jurassic Park*) that truly sparked a renewed interest in dinosaurs, the Richard Attenborough character (John Hammond), founder of Jurassic Park and its DNA technology, repeats one line throughout, characterizing his work as well as that of Sax and Reaktion Books: “Spared no expense!” Do yourself a favor: go to your local bookstore or mail-order outlet and get copies of both.

Shelby Shapiro is an Independent Scholar who obtained his Ph.D. in American Studies with a dissertation on the Yiddish press and how various publications of differing political and religious viewpoints sought to construct different identities for Jewish immigrant women. He has written about Jazz, Anarchism, and the labour movement, and presently is Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut*.