

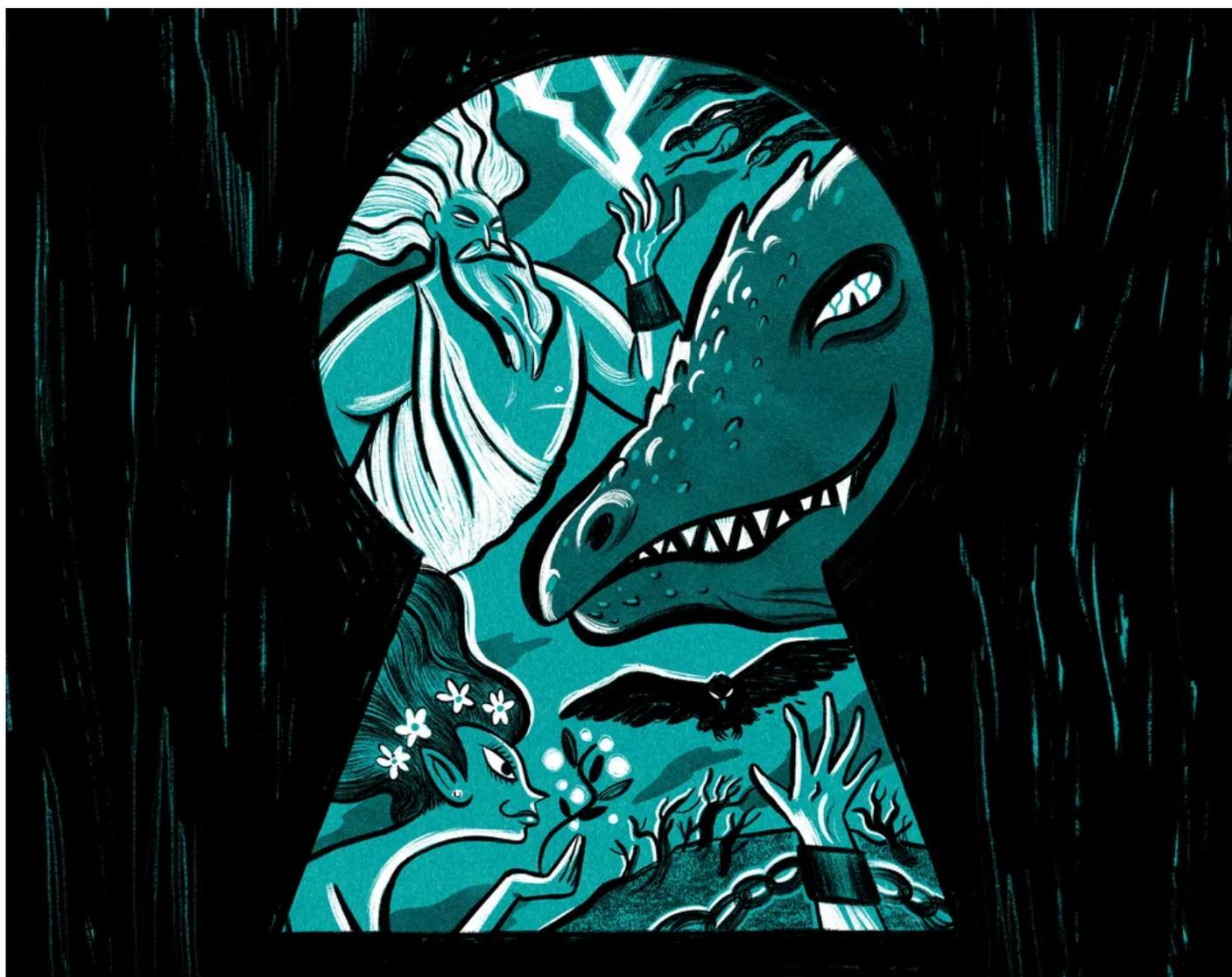
A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE HUNT FOR THE WORLD'S OLDEST STORY

From thunder gods to serpent slayers, scholars are reconstructing myths that vanished millennia ago. How much further can we go—and what might we find?

By Manvir Singh

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The quest to unlock mythology's origins reveals recurring patterns that stretch back thousands of years and continue to shadow the stories we tell today. Illustration by Shane Cluskey

 Save this story

I read George Eliot's "Middlemarch," sometimes hailed as the greatest British novel, in a rain forest in western Indonesia. I was there as a graduate student, spending my days slogging through mud and interviewing locals about gods and pig thieves for my dissertation. Each evening, after darkness fell, my research assistant and I would call it a night, switch off the veranda's lone bulb, and retreat to our separate rooms. Alone at last, I snapped on my headlamp, rigged up my mosquito net like a kid building a pillow fort, and read.

Those were good hours, although, honestly, little of the novel has stuck with me—except for Casaubon. The Reverend Edward Casaubon is Eliot's grand study in futility: an aging, self-important, faintly ridiculous clergyman who has dedicated his life to an audacious quest. Casaubon is convinced that every mythic system is a decayed remnant of a single original revelation—a claim he plans to substantiate in his magnum opus, "The Key to All Mythologies." He means to chart the world's myths, trace their similarities, and produce a codex that, as Eliot puts it, would make "the vast field of mythical constructions . . . intelligible, nay, luminous with the reflected light of correspondences."

The ill-fated project founders between the unruly diversity of cultural traditions and the fantasy of a single source, between the expanse of his material and the impossibility of ever mastering it, between the need for theory and the distortions it introduces. These failures are deepened by Casaubon's limitations—his pedantic love of minutiae (he "dreams footnotes") and his refusal to engage with scholarship in languages he doesn't know (if only he'd learned German).

Casaubon's quest stands as both an indictment of overreach and a warning about the senselessness of such sweeping comparisons. But is this entirely fair? The patterns are out there. Floods, tricksters, battles with monsters, creation and apocalypse—sometimes the resemblances are uncanny. The people I worked with in Indonesia, the Mentawai, would occasionally point out affinities between Jesus and their own legendary hero, Pageta Sabau, who was also said to have been born without a father and resurrected from the dead.

Casaubon's "Key to All Mythologies" lingered with me less as a cautionary tale than as a temptation. Like Dorothea Brooke—Casaubon's much younger, idealistic wife and the novel's protagonist—I found his vision thrilling. As an aspiring anthropologist, I understood the seduction: the promise that somewhere, beneath the confusion of

gods, ghosts, and rituals, there might be a hidden order. Of course, my method was different. I was mud-caked and by myself on a remote island, chasing a crocodile spirit; Casaubon was at his desk, trying to map out myths he barely knew. But, amid all the pedantry, I recognized a kind of kinship.

I'm hardly alone in feeling the pull. However much "Middlemarch" mocks Casaubon's obsession, the urge to find patterns in myth runs deep and wide. In the Victorian era, scholars like Max Müller and, later, James Frazer tried to systematize the world's myths. Frazer's "The Golden Bough" (1890), a sprawling, scandalous synthesis, plotted cultures on a trajectory from magic to religion and then to science, and argued that many myths and rites—including the pillars of Christianity—were the residue of primitive fertility cults and sacrificial kingship. It left its mark on everyone from William Butler Yeats to Jim Morrison, though its absence of rigor has not aged well. Decades later, Robert Graves's "The White Goddess" (1948) enchanted a generation of poets and novelists with its vision of mythic unity; Joseph Campbell's "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" (1949), a meandering treatise on the universality of the hero's journey, inspired "Star Wars." Meanwhile, Freudians and evolutionary psychologists trawled folktales for evidence to shore up their theories. "Stereotypical stories stay at home, archetypal stories travel," Robert McKee declares in "Story" (1997), his classic screenwriting guide, keeping alive the hope that mythic comparison can be commercially, as well as intellectually, rewarding.

The key that Casaubon craved is particularly alluring. He wasn't just tracing similarities; he was hunting for a primordial mythology, a long-lost ancestor dimly visible in its descendants. He happened to believe this original tradition was Christian truth, but set aside the apologetics and there's still something intoxicating about the quest for a key: the notion that, by sifting through myth, we might retrieve the imaginative worlds of the earliest storytellers. Nor is the quest just a scholarly game; it's an attempt to prove, against all odds, that our wild, warring species shares something irreducible at its core.

Nowadays, we can unearth bones, extract DNA, even map ancient migrations, but only in myths can we glimpse the inner lives of our forebears—their fears and longings, their sense of wonder and dread. Linguists have reconstructed dead languages. Why not try to do the same for lost stories? And, if we can, how far back can we go? Could we finally recover the legends of our earliest common ancestors—the ur-myths that Casaubon so desperately pursued?

If any field lends credibility to the dream of a Casaubonian key, it's Indo-European studies. Where Frazer's method was freewheeling, Indo-Europeanists are exacting. The discipline is usually said to have begun in 1786, when Sir William Jones, a colonial judge stationed in Bengal, addressed the Asiatic Society. Years of studying Sanskrit had convinced him that it closely resembled Greek and Latin—"indeed," Jones said, "no philologist could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists." He suggested that Germanic and Celtic languages, as well as ancient Persian, might belong to this same lost family. Others had glimpsed such affinities before, but Jones did more than notice; he set off a scholarly chase, and a popular fascination, that has yet to run its course.

Today, it's broadly accepted that languages as different as English, Welsh, Spanish, Armenian, Greek, Russian, Hindi, and Bengali descend from a single ancestor: Proto-Indo-European. Linguists have mapped how words spoken five thousand years ago have branched into the webs of vocabulary we know now. My first name, Manvir, for example, fuses two Sanskrit roots with clear European cousins: "man," meaning "thought" or "soul"—related to "mental" and "mind"—and "vir," meaning "heroic" or "brave," as in "virtue" and "virile."

But reconstruction didn't end with nouns and verbs. Gods dance on our tongues, and, as scholars compared Indo-European languages, they found striking mythological congruences, too. The British journalist Laura Spinney, in her recent book, *Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global*, begins with a paternal sky god. Sanskrit speakers worshipped Dyaus Pitr, or Sky Father. In Greek myth, Zeus Pater ruled the gods. North of the Alps, Proto-Italic speakers likely revered Djous Pater. Among the tribes that settled near Rome, this name became the Latin Jupiter. With further analogues in Scythian, Latvian, and Hittite, many researchers now think that the early Indo-Europeans prayed to a sky father known as something like Dyeus Puhter.

Spinney brings in other elements of Indo-European mythology, though the most comprehensive treatment in English is still M. L. West's "Indo-European Poetry and Myth" (2007). German readers, meanwhile, can turn to the new "Indogermanische Religion," by Norbert Oettinger and Peter Jackson Rova. Both works build on a method championed by Calvert Watkins, whose "How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics" (1995) set the standard for the field.

Watkins himself was something of a mythic figure. Casaubonian in his learning and drive but without the tragic vanity, he was born in Pittsburgh in 1933 and raised in New York, inheriting from his Texan parents a pride in the Lone Star State, along with a lingering twang. He arrived at Harvard with the class of 1954, and then stayed, first for his Ph.D., and then as a faculty member in linguistics and classics until his retirement, in 2003. His intellectual range was prodigious. By fifteen, he was immersed in Indo-European studies; his knack for languages was so uncanny that people joked he could board a train at one end of a country and disembark at the other fluent in its national tongue. He forgot nothing, and his eye for hidden connections bordered on supernatural. In 1984, reading a fragmentary Luwian text—a cousin to Hittite—he picked out the phrase “steep Wilusa,” a twin to the Greek “lofty Troy [Ilios],” and speculated that it pointed to an epic tradition about Troy that predated Homer. The discovery landed on the front page of the *Times*.

“How to Kill a Dragon” showed that ancient mythology could be reconstructed not just from scattered names or motifs but from shared poetic formulas—bits of old myth embedded in texts like slabs of pagan altars lodged in the foundations of later temples. Watkins’s prime example was the phrase “he/you slew the serpent,” a formula that crops up everywhere: in Vedic hymns, Greek poetry, Hittite myth, Iranian scriptures, Celtic and Germanic saga, Armenian epics, even spells for healing or harm. “There can be no doubt that the formula is the vehicle of the central theme of a proto-text,” he wrote—a core symbol in Proto-Indo-European culture. His approach made the reconstruction of myth seem less like a guessing game and more like real historical work.

The serpent-slaying formula likely traces back to an old Indo-European myth. A storm god—brawny, bearded, full of thunder—defeats a snake that hoards something precious: cows, women, or the waters of life. This god, maybe called Perkwunos, rode a goat-drawn cart and wielded a weapon of stone or metal. In India, he became Indra; among the Hittites, Tarhunna; in Old Church Slavonic, Perún; in Lithuanian, Perkūnas; in the Norse world, Thor. In Greece, the job of storm god passed to Zeus, though Perkwunos’ name persisted, half disguised, in Zeus’ thunderbolt, Keraunos.

The slaying of the serpent was a mythological superspreader, mutating and proliferating across the Indo-European world and beyond. According to books like Ola Wikander’s *“Unburning Fame”* (2017), the story may even have spread to Semitic-speaking peoples—Yahweh’s fight with Leviathan echoes Indra and Vritra,

Apollo and Python, Beowulf and his dragon.

Evolutionary thinkers have long argued that humans evolved to notice snakes, which might explain why these creatures slither into a vast number of mythologies, from Quetzalcoatl in Mexico and Damballa in West Africa to celestial dragons in China. But the classic dragon—reptilian, treasure-hoarding, and doomed to be slain—feels distinctly Indo-European. Siegfried versus Fafnir, Bilbo versus Smaug, Harry versus the Basilisk: they all recycle the designs of the earliest Indo-European poets.

Indo-European mythology is about more than a sky father and a snake. There's Sky Father's consort, Mother Earth; his daughter, Dawn; and his sons, the Divine Twins. There's a cosmogony in which the world is fashioned from the corpse of a slain giant or a protohuman, and another in which a hero, Prometheus-style, steals fire from the gods and gives it to mortals. Nymphs and river goddesses abound, along with an all-seeing Sun God, who, once the spoked wheel was invented, traverses the sky in a horse-drawn chariot.

The richness of this reconstructed realm raises a bigger question: If we can piece together such a detailed mythoscape from five or six thousand years ago, why not go back further? The Proto-Indo-Europeans are recent arrivals in our species' story; the Ice Age ended twelve thousand years ago, the out-of-Africa migration took place around sixty thousand years ago, and *Homo sapiens* emerged about three hundred thousand years ago. Do we still carry stories from those far earlier times?

Some scholars say yes. They're Casaubon's heirs, but with better tools, better German, and, sometimes, better judgment. The earliest myth is their holy grail. One of the boldest attempts was undertaken by Michael Witzel, a comparative mythologist at Harvard. In "The Origins of the World's Mythologies" (2012), Witzel proposed that the world's myths fall into two superfamilies. One, Laurasian, stretches from Europe and much of Asia to Polynesia and the Americas; it supposedly preserves a story line, at least twenty thousand years old, that runs from creation to apocalypse. The other, Gondwanan, found mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, New Guinea, and Australia, is older still, but less coherent; it has a heavenly High God, trickster low gods, and the creation of humans from trees or clay, but lacks a unifying plot.

Witzel, a celebrated Indologist and the founder of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, seemed poised to deliver the key to all mythologies. Yet his

theory leans on outdated models of deep history. He believed, wrongly, that New Guineans and Aboriginal Australians split off in a separate early exodus from Africa; genetic evidence shows otherwise. The framework also carries uncomfortable racial overtones: darker-skinned peoples are said to have more archaic, less structured mythologies. The ambition is tremendous, but the result feels mostly like a dead end.

A rival approach puts its faith in data. Yuri Berezkin, a professor at European University at St. Petersburg, has spent nearly sixty years reading some eighty thousand myths and folktales, coding each one for motifs—anything from a crocodile without a tongue to a butterfly stealing fire. The result is a database of unprecedented reach; no earlier folklorist has worked with so many texts from such a range of societies. For Berezkin, patience is everything. When I e-mailed him in 2018 to ask if his summaries could be mined for patterns in heroic tales, he replied, “I think, No. Everything that is easy and quick can hardly be good.”

Berezkin’s project has its limitations. Coding motifs is a subjective business, and, with so much of the work done by a single person, it’s hard to rule out bias. Still, two recent studies—one from a team led by European geneticists, another from researchers affiliated with the Santa Fe Institute—suggest that his mythemes track real signals: patterns in his database align with genetic data and migrations stretching back tens of thousands of years. If true, it’s evidence that stories preserve a surprisingly durable cultural inheritance.

Yet the hunt for the world’s oldest stories is not exactly triumphant. The European study identified eight motifs whose global spread indicates that they could date to more than sixty thousand years ago, before humans left Africa. If so, this would be a find about ten times older than Proto-Indo-European, and well past the limits of what linguists think language can preserve. But most of these motifs—rainbows linked with snakes, a woman entering the house of a dangerous creature—are so broad and intuitive that it’s just as plausible that they were invented independently, again and again.

Similarly, the Santa Fe team identified three “keystone motifs,” stories that are globally popular, widely elaborated upon, and possibly relics from before the out-of-Africa migration. But these motifs—doglike tricksters, a figure visible on the moon, a man who performs difficult tasks to win a bride—are all frustratingly generic. Do they really descend from tales told by our distant ancestors, or are they merely the sort of

stories any species with minds and bodies like ours would keep inventing? The question remains open.

This is the core problem for seekers of ur-myths: they lack the names, formulas, and fossilized phrases that make Indo-European studies persuasive. People across continents might link rainbows with snakes, or see rabbits on the moon, or cast foxes, jackals, and coyotes as tricksters. But without recurring lines of verse, without epithets worn smooth by generations, the search for a universal key risks a Casaubonian fate: grand in vision, romantic in intent, and ultimately thwarted by the bounds of what can be known.

Among critics of “Middlemarch,” there’s a long-running debate about Casaubon’s “Key to All Mythologies.” Was the project doomed by Casaubon’s foibles and limitations, or was it an impossible mission from the start? Was Casaubon too small, or was the job too big? A century and a half later, the evidence leans toward the latter. If the key is taken to be some primordial tradition, echoing faintly across world literature after tens of millennia, any effort to pin it down looks hopeless. Over such spans, change overwhelms continuity; too much simply disappears. Casaubon’s “mythical fragments” may be out there, but we don’t have the tools to identify them with any confidence. Dorothea, Casaubon’s wife and eventual widow, comes to recognize this. She sees that Casaubon’s bold claims “floated among flexible conjectures.” His mistake wasn’t so much searching for a key, though, as it was imagining that he had the methods to find it.

Return to the fact that striking parallels do exist. Books about tricksters and hero’s journeys may sound tired or reductive, but they point to genuine regularities. Annie Baker’s 2017 play “The Antipodes,” set in a TV writers’ room, includes a memorable scene in which the characters debate how many kinds of stories there are. “There are seven types of stories in the world,” one says, listing those from Christopher Booker’s “The Seven Basic Plots.” “There are thirty-six types of stories in the world,” another insists, rattling templates from Georges Polti’s “The Thirty-six Dramatic Situations.” The exchange mocks our urge to impose order on the messiness of narrative. Yet the categories—Rags to Riches, Overcoming the Monster, Crime Pursued by Vengeance, All Sacrificed for Passion—still ring true to anyone who’s dipped into folklore or chilled with Netflix.

Spurred by Casaubon’s failed ambition, I set out on my own hunt for patterns after

returning from Indonesia. With a colleague, I began building a new database and delved into a century's worth of comparative analyses. Of the many patterns I found, my favorite was the triumphant orphan, a figure who shows up everywhere: in Eurasian folktales (Cinderella, Snow White), Victorian novels (Pip, Jane Eyre), Disney movies (Simba, Elsa), modern fantasy (Harry Potter, Jon Snow), and in stories from the Igbo of Nigeria to the Karen of Myanmar.

Such patterns persist only because they strike a chord. At bottom, stories are cognitive technologies: they must arouse curiosity and suspense, tap into our fears and hopes, and offer something that repays the time we spend with them. Robert McKee, in "Story," writes that a successful composition "triggers a global and perpetual chain reaction of pleasure that carries it from cinema to cinema, generation to generation." The basic thought here explains why certain motifs—triumphant orphans, lunar silhouettes—appear in Berezkin's database and beyond. Whether they originate in some ancient tradition or arise wherever humans tell stories, they thrive because they work.

These motifs are archetypes, then, but not in the strict Jungian sense; they're not latent forms waiting to surface in dream or art. Rather, everything that shapes our attention and emotion—the architecture of our minds, the forms of our societies, the worlds we move through—primes us to respond to them. We feel for orphans because we instinctively pity those who suffer early losses; we see faces on the moon because primates like us are wired to search for faces and agents, and are awed by that glowing, glorious orb in the sky.

Today's mythographers have access to sources and tools that Casaubon could never have imagined—vast digital archives, instant machine translation, pattern-finding algorithms that would have sounded like science fiction a decade ago. Yet what they keep unearthing is not so much some hidden code or lost ur-myth as the ubiquitous contours of human experience. If there's a key to all mythologies, it isn't buried in vanished languages or ancient ruins; it lies in the basic patterns of how we think, feel, and tell stories.

We are living proof of narrative's power to reach across time and space. We hear stories from distant lands and discover that they're not altogether unfamiliar. We read about snake killers and thunder gods and find ourselves enthralled. That is the mythographer's true accomplishment: tracing the social, cognitive, and emotional lines

of force that continue to bind us to one another—and to our most ancient tales. It's what makes the mythographer's job both daunting and vital. Forget Casaubon's footnotes or his ignorance of German. His real mistake was to treat myths as dead fossils rather than as living instruments—still moving minds, still shaping worlds. ♦

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