

Glimpses of a Lost World

a proposed series of sourcebooks on mythological motifs

[Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs](#)

Trade publishers and academic publishers alike have not shown the slightest interest in this proposal – and I have contacted many. Yet there is no doubt in my mind that these books will be valuable, inspiring and popular. I would dearly love to produce them and the materials are ready, but to go it alone will require some **funding**. Please contact me at **marinus@mythopedia.info**. More information is at **<https://mythopedia.info/funding.htm>**.

key points:

- each book dedicated to a different motif;
- a focus on cosmology (origin and structure of the world);
- most motifs barely documented elsewhere;
- exclusive use of primary sources;
- sources drawn from the widest possible range of periods and places, in multiple languages;
- original narrators credited when known;
- up-to-date names of cultures and places;
- theory-free.

premise: a new type of book on myth

The idea is to produce one or more collections of primary sources, each illustrating a specific mythological motif. Most books on myth are organised by culture or alphabetical order. For example, an entire book is dedicated to Greek or Indonesian mythology or an encyclopaedia gives an A to Z of gods and goddesses. Often, the myths are not given in their original wording, but selectively retold, and the original sources are rarely named. In this project I intend to do something very different: each monograph will focus on a single motif, providing examples from a wide range of periods and cultures in a roughly geographical order.

Most people are aware that the world is rich in creation myths and that variations on the theme of a universal flood are found in almost every culture. Far less well known is that there are scores of other motifs with a more or less global distribution. Many of these tie into each other and are of a cosmological nature, that is to say, they deal with the origin and structure of the sky, the earth and everything in them. One reason why so few people, including scholars, are familiar with these ubiquitous motifs is the absence of sourcebooks in which the relevant data are conveniently collected. The examples for most motifs are scattered through the literature in various languages, often in tomes that are long forgotten or hard to access. The proposed motif-centred anthologies will amount to a powerful demonstration of the unity of humanity in its narrative heritage.

primary sources

It is essential that the stories are not paraphrased. The value of the sourcebooks will lie in the fact that only primary sources are used in direct quotations, with the original spelling. The term 'primary source' is here defined as any written report that is not solely derived from another extant text, but based on (1) a text that is not known now or no longer available, or (2) information verbally relayed, ideally by native participants in a living cultural tradition. Older records and records from well-informed narrators are generally most valuable.

from multiple languages

Much of the material has never appeared in English before. If the source is in a foreign language, the latest or best edition is used and an English translation is either reproduced or freshly provided; the original wording can be supplied in an appendix.

unity in diversity

Bringing together myths that share a motif inevitably results in repetition, but there is enough diversity in the details to keep the books readable, if not enthralling.

The chosen motif is not always the main subject of a myth in which it features, but can occur in passing. Moreover, the myths are of very unequal length, ranging from one or two sentences to several pages, and vary enormously in tone and style.

format

Each book could contain between 50 and 150 myths, perhaps averaging 70. A map could be supplied to indicate the locations where these myths were told or recorded (see the attached examples). For each myth the details of recording will be specified to the extent possible: the narrator(s), any interpreters, location(s) and date(s).

The books may either have a scholarly feel or be formatted as easily digestible collections of stories, depending on your preference. In the latter case, diacritical marks and original text in foreign languages could be dispensed with, clarifying notes kept to a minimum and overly similar versions of a myth from the same culture excluded.

The myths will speak for themselves and remain 'raw data'. No attempt will be made in these books to place them in their cultural settings or explain their origin and significance.

There is a potential for illustrations. Apart from new artistic creations, which I cannot provide, portraits of the original narrators are sometimes available.

copyright

Copyright on the texts included in these books should not pose a problem. On one hand, much of the material is in the public domain on account of its age. On the other, the passages to be used are often limited to a few sentences or, at any rate, a fraction of the works in which they appear. Very long source texts can either be abridged or reproduced in full by obtaining permission. Perhaps the principle of fair use (USA) or fair dealing (UK) may also apply in some cases.

target market

The books could serve several purposes. They would further the study of the meaning and origin of myth, opening up new chapters in comparative mythology, the history of religions or cultural astronomy. At the same time, the nature of the subject will easily allow them to be read for amusement or artistic inspiration.

author's qualifications

I believe to be well placed for this project. Passion and attention to detail aside, as a comparative and historical linguist I read many languages, modern and ancient, and I am at home in the specialist literature of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Judaism and so on. I have a fair number of peer-reviewed publications on myth and the history of science under my belt, many in top journals (see my [bibliography](#)).

Over the past 24 years, I have gathered tens of thousands of mythical traditions from their earliest printed – and sometimes handwritten – forms. Not a few were culled from antique works or libraries as far from home as South America and Oceania. Many of these myths escaped scholars' notice because of their obscurity. I was able to distil a large number of cross-cultural motifs from this material. In self-published work I illustrated these by a handful of examples each, often in abbreviated form. My desire with the current project is to share much more of this valuable database with a wider public.

delivery date

For each volume a finished manuscript could be realistically delivered in a year or less.

suggested titles

- 1 **the raising of the sky**
In the beginning, the sky was much closer to the earth than now. This enabled direct contact between the denizens of each world, but could either confer benefit or cause discomfort. In some stories, the sun causes intolerable heat because it, too, is low. The eventual elevation of the sky is told in different ways and involves a range of motivations. For example: the sky is lifted with the help of one or more pillars or implements; one or two giants raise it; the sky god takes offence at some activity on Earth and withdraws; or the sky has to be detached and pushed up in stages. Frequently, the proper cycle of day and night only begins when the sky reaches its present height.
- 2 **multiple suns (and moons)**
At first, there were too many suns in the sky. The exact numbers vary from two to nine or even more. Life is generally said to have been unbearable as a result; the luminaries caused the world to burn as they appeared simultaneously or – by alternating – produced a state of permanent daylight, so that the earth could not cool down and sleep was impossible. Some stories also feature unwanted moons. Action is taken to eliminate all superfluous suns and moons, often by shooting or a ruse. Common ideas are that the moon is the remnant of a wounded sun and that today's sun remained by eating his own offspring or had to be coaxed out of hiding in order to shine again.
- 3 **severance of the sky ladder**
There used to be easy or frequent traffic between sky and earth along a ladder, stairway, rope, tree, mountain, pathway or other structure. Often, this was during a distant 'golden age' or time of magic. Due to some mishap, the connection was eventually severed. According to many versions, it was on that tragic occasion that the sky rose to its current position, death was introduced or the present era began. Remains of the structure may be shown in the landscape.

4 **the tower to the sky unfinished (tower of Babel)**

An attempt is made to reach the sky or celestial beings by building a tall structure of stacked objects. These can vary from bricks or sticks to mountains. Sometimes the aim is to wage war or obtain fire. The builders usually form a large group, but on occasion a single character performs the feat. They do not succeed. The tower remains incomplete and in most cases collapses, often under stormy circumstances. Its vestiges may again be visible in the local area.

This motif is closely related to #3. The main difference is that the ‘pathway’ functions for a time in #3, but never does so in #4. And whereas #4 usually focusses on the construction of the object, in an upward direction, #3 often introduces it without an explanation of its origin or has it form from the top downwards.

5 **the great fire (or heat)**

In global myth, a catastrophic burning of the world (*Weltbrand*) is just as common as the deluge, but this is not widely known. Both disasters, as told in many stories, leave only a few individuals alive, who survive by some stratagem. Quite often, flood and fire feature in the same story, for example when it is the flood that extinguishes the flames. Some versions tell of a disastrous heat or drought rather than a fire *per se*. A solar cause is often given: a false or former sun or the real sun appears too low in the sky, drops out of the sky whole or in part, shines too strongly, fails to set, or appears in multiples. Sometimes the sky itself is said to have burned.

6 **the sun and moon compete**

The relationship between the sun and moon used to be different. The two travelled together, the moon was at least as bright as the sun, or both. Following an argument, illicit love-affair or other incident, they part ways, they reverse roles, the moon loses its original splendour, or a combination of these happens. The sun now takes care of the day and the fainter moon of the night, though it still infringes on the day. In many versions, it is on this occasion that the pair take their places in the sky for the first time, having lived on or near Earth until then. Eclipses, lunar phases and the spots on the moon are often explained by the event.

7 **cosmic inversion**

The sky we see today is not the original one. Conceived as a solid structure, the sky collapsed long ago, sky and earth changed places, or the earth turned over. These events are frequently described as the catastrophic end of an era, accompanied by other disasters such as a time of darkness or floods. They could be the punishment for some transgression or the result of supportive pillars collapsing. They could coincide with the raising of the low sky (#1) or the appearance of the first day. The same events may also be predicted or feared for the coming ‘end of the world’.

8 **a race of giants**

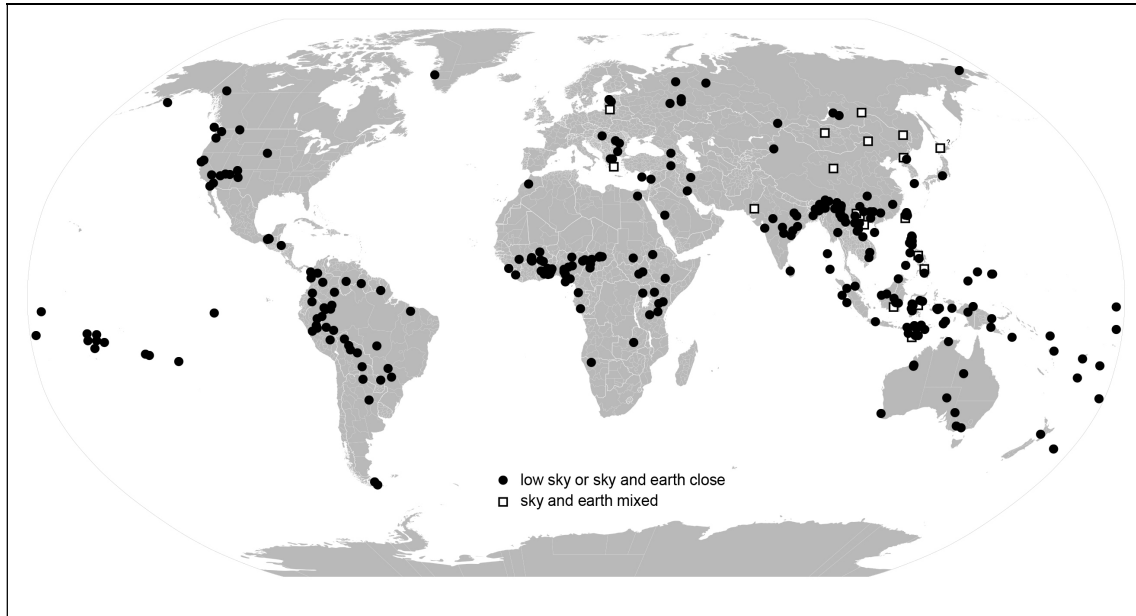
There was a time when giants roamed the world. In some accounts they possessed other remarkable properties, like longevity or immortality, a hybrid animal-human nature or magical abilities like flying. The giants may be held responsible for some features of the landscape and are often said to have met their demise in cosmic combat or natural catastrophe, succumbing to lightning, fire or deluge. Their remains may be recognised in the ground as fossils.

9 **returning spirits**

This is a combination of the King Arthur and messiah motifs: a mythical creator, hero or ancestor is not dead, but leaves the world with a promise to return and restore the world. In many places, natives mistook the first European visitors for such returning gods or spirits.

For a flavour of what the books could look like I am happy to provide samples upon request.

To recapitulate, I have a treasure-trove of fascinating and little-known material at my fingertips and would love to make some of it available to a wider audience. I would be happy to produce just a single volume or several and am open to suggestions.



Maps showing locations of cultures with traditions of the indicated types (based on original research). *Marinus A. van der Sluijs, background map courtesy Canuckguy and others (2006).*

