

FOSSILS AND SEMIOTICS

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Semiotics, the philosophical study of signs--how they are observed and function within a cultural system--can be applied to the study and interpretation of fossil remains. Fossils are presently non-living, often totally inorganic (as when complete mineralization occurs) markings, forms, impressions--or signs--of an organic, once living past. Yet fossils can be the very remains of, and not just a sign of, the past life they represent. Fossils both connote and denote, bear resemblance and are distinct objects, suggest resemblance and identify, allude to and name. Different cultures, cultural contexts, and scientific and rational systems can interpret fossil signs in often quite opposed and contrary ways.

The semiotic structure of modern scientific thought views fossils as evidence for past life within the context of "objective" classification systems. Since the 17th century classification systems have been based on the concept of identity. Categories of fossils are isolated in gridded museum cabinets and on the pages of books. In contrast, the semiotic structure of medieval thought was based on resemblance rather than identity (cf. M. Foucault, 1973, The Order of Things). Originally the word "fossil" referred to any rock, mineral, or other substance dug out of the earth. Fortuitous resemblances to organic forms were noted, but were not considered causally significant. The semiotic structure of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic culture superimposed man-made "fossils" of animal-deities on actual fossils. In Islamic cultures, where images are prohibited, fossils are included within the geometric patterns of mosaics.

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