

Authenticating Marvels in Phlegon's *Peri Thaumasion*

Phlegon of Tralles, a freedman of Hadrian, composed a work in prose entitled Περὶ θαυμασίων, a collection of weird and wonderful phenomena including dead people coming back to life, hermaphrodites, bones of giant creatures, and even real-life centaurs. The work belongs to a 'genre' unnamed by the ancients but referred to as 'paradoxography' by modern scholars. In these texts, now mostly preserved in fragmentary form, authors collected reports of wondrous objects, creatures, and phenomena to create compendia of the marvellous. The genre had always been very literary. The first paradoxographer was Callimachus, who probably used the great library at Alexandria as a pool from which to draw the stories he included in his collection. Subsequent authors in the genre followed this bookish approach: the best way to assert that an unlikely phenomenon really existed or had actually happened was to cite a reliable authority.

In this paper, I will consider how Phlegon departs from this bookish approach to authenticating the marvels he reports. While he does not abandon source citation as a method of backing up his own claims (e.g. 2.1, 3.1, 11.1, 13), Phlegon also relies on claims of autopsy, apparently to a greater degree than previous paradoxographers. Yet every claim of autopsy in Phlegon's text is in some way complicated or problematized. In support of his claim that a certain Aitete in Syria underwent a sex change and became Aitetos in 116 AD, he claims to have met the man personally (9 τοῦτον καὶ αὐτὸς ἐθεασάμην). Yet this assertion can really only provide the flavour of authenticity, for seeing a man who claims to have once been a woman is not the same as having visual evidence of what is actually improbable about the situation, namely the process of transformation itself. Autopsy is further problematized in Phlegon's report of the giant bones of a hero discovered after an earthquake during Tiberius' reign. One tooth is sent to the emperor as proof, and Tiberius, wishing to avoid the sacrilege of moving the entire

body (14.3 ὁ τε ἀνόσιον τῆς νεκροσυλίας) has his geometer Pulcher use the tooth to make a model of the head and estimate the size of the entire body. Tiberius then sends the tooth back, saying that seeing his model is enough proof for him (14.4 ἀρκεῖσθαι τῇ θέα ταύτη). To Phlegon's Tiberius, seeing the actual object itself is not necessary; looking upon the giant bones indirectly through the 'window' of the reconstruction is sufficient.

Phlegon also uses autopsy to involve the reader directly in the process of authentication. Phlegon reports that a centaur was captured in Arabia, brought to Rome, and embalmed after its death, and its body remains in the imperial storerooms as visible proof for anyone who doubts the report (35 εἴ τις ἀπιστεῖ, δύναται ἱστορηῆσαι· ἀπόκειται γὰρ ἐν τοῖς ὀρίοις τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος τεταριχευμένος, ὡς προεῖπον). His assertion that giant bones are available to be examined in Egypt (15.1) uses a similar strategy. Scholars have noted that Phlegon is the first of the paradoxographers to involve the reader directly in the process of authentication in this way, but no one has yet considered the implications of other problematized autopsies for this involvement. Not every improbable occurrence leaves clear, observable evidence of itself, much as a set of male genitals is not in itself proof of a sex change. And the story of Tiberius and the geometer indicates that some of the marvels in the imperial storehouses may be fabricated. The reader is invited to inspect the centaur and the bones himself, but with the implicit caveat that not everything is what it seems.

Phlegon thus invites the reader to question the notion that seeing is believing. Far from being an unrefined sensationalist writing for a prurient audience, as some scholars have claimed, Phlegon is capable of inviting sophisticated reflection on autopsy and the nature of truth.

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