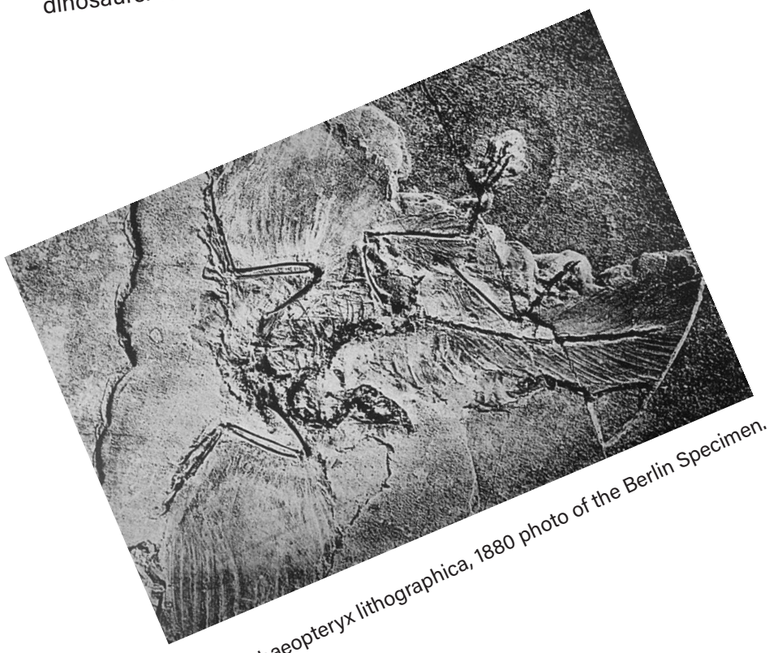
1875: A bird is born from stone

In a stone quarry in Southern Germany, a farmer finds a rock and sells it for a cow. On that rock is a famously well-preserved fossil of a dinosaur that came to be called the Archaeopteryx. It lived 150 million years ago, when Europe was still a smattering of islands rising from a warm and windswept sea. The archaeopteryx (meaning “ancient wing”)is also known as the Urvogel: the first bird. In the fossil that now hangs in Berlin Museum für Naturkunde, the bird has been bent back by the slow pressure of rock on rock, so that it seems, impossibly, to stare at its own tail. Around the clearly sculpted bones, there is a faint but exquisite outline of plumage, like the ghost of a wing.
This echo of a wingstroke, stuck in the stone, was among the first proofs that dinosaurs were feathered. Or should I say, that dinosaurs are feathered? We now know that birds are not descended from dinosaurs. They simply are dinosaurs, living on in shrunken form.



Archaeopteryx lithographica, 1880 photo of the Berlin Specimen.

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1876: A bird is born from stone

The following year, a young British scholar named George Smith publishes the first fragments of a poem that was written near Babylon some four thousand years ago. It is the story of a huge and mischievous bird named Anzu.
Much like the rok of later Arabic mythology, the wingspan of the Anzu is as large as a cloud. And just like the archaeopteryx, it sprang from a stone. As the poem puts it: “He is the one that was born from the mountain rocks.”
The story is preserved on tablets of clay, inscribed with the cuneiform script, but it is also about a tablet of clay. The Anzu steals the Tablet of Fates, in which the destinies of all things are written, flying back to the mountains with the Tablet in its grasp.
When the god Ninurta tries to retrieve the Tablet, the Anzu defeats him by editing its text, and so turning the god’s arrows back where they came from. The Anzu is eventually defeated by an elaborate Babylonian pun that tricks it into calling all feathers to itself, including the feathers on the arrows of Ninurta. The Anzu had been thrown into oblivion for over two thousand years when the tablets bearing its tale were discovered in what is now Iraq, and then deciphered by George Smith. The ancient past hid in the clay until it was ready to be reborn.



Black and white crop of full engraving plate scan - from Plate 5 of the work “A second series of the monuments of Nineveh: including bas-reliefs from the Palace of Sennacherib and bronzes from the ruins of Nimroud ; from drawings made on the spot, during a second expedition to Assyria” (AH Layard). The image depicts Ninurta (on the right) battling Anzû.

1877: A bird is born from stone

The year after that, a young German artist named Max Klinger creates a series of ten etchings that show the artist becoming obsessed with a glove dropped by a woman as she was skating. Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove (1877–1878) depict Klinger plunging into a tormented sequence of hallucinations that revolve around the glove he cannot give back. He is eventually released from this cycle of longing and loss when a pterodactyl steals the glove and flies through his window—like the Anzu absconding with the Tablet of Fates.
Max Klinger is today best known for pioneering the use of printmaking in art, and the Paraphrase series is the most famous of his many prints. At the time, Germany was the main center of printing technology anywhere in the world, because the stone quarries in the south of the country were perfect for lithography (meaning “writing in stone”).
These quarries yield a soft and spongey limestone that is easily etched by acid. The image is drawn on the stone with wax, and a faint acid mixed with gum arabic is then applied to it.
The acid affects the parts of the stone that are unprotected by the wax drawing, making it repellent to the ink that is then rolled onto its surface. The ink sticks to where the wax once was, allowing for endless reproduction of the image.

As it turns out, this gentle limestone is also the perfect vessel for a fossil to survive in. The quarry in which the Urvogel was found was mined for lithography, which is why its full scientific name is Archaeopteryx lithographica: the ancient wing that writes in stone.



Abduction/Entführung (plate IX) from “Paraphrase über den Fund eines Handschuhs”) by Max Klinger

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Beth Cellar

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