

Mythology "Explains"

Marsh Gas (Ignis Fatuus)

Denmark : Will-o-the-wisp



Ignis Fatuus is the scientific term for the very rare phenomenon of the presentation of spontaneous phosphorescent light above marshland (in fact marsh gas, CH_4) which has attracted some people who have lost their way towards it, thinking it the light of a house and the marsh has sucked them down as a result of their mistake.

In the Danish 2006 issue we meet a pantheon of mythical forest beings including elves, incubi, ghost horses, goblins, trolls, sprites and marsh woman—and right at the centre of the sheet we see the true "cause" of *ignis fatuus*—Will-o-the-wisp, a malicious sprite who deceives people with his fleeting appearances and leads them to a watery grave. (*Marshy environments are shown on this card from the 2010 Polish Beauty of the Earth series of postcards*).



Mythology "Explains"

Why the Sea is Salty... and a Whirlpool

Åland: Fenja and Menja



The sea is salty essentially because relatively weak mineral salts from the Earth's various strata are washed by rivers into our seas, but evaporation caused by the Sun makes that water very much more brackish.

But a much more romantic explanation is given in the Scandinavian legend *Grottasöngur* in which the seal-king Mysing demanded that two strong slaves called Fenja and Menja (Åland 2004 minisheet) grind salt for him for a long time so salinating the sea! They worked so industriously that a whirlpool formed above the hole in their millstone pulling ships down into it.

Fenja and Menja also appear dressed more modestly as they work at their millstone in an etiquette accompanying the 2001 Faroes Myths of Light and Darkness stamps, designed by Anker Eli.

The original Maelstrom whirlpool (described by Edgar Allan Poe) is the Moskstraumen, a powerful tidal current in the Lofoten Islands off the Norwegian coast. The Maelstrom is formed by the conjunction of the strong currents that cross the straits between the islands and the great amplitude of the tides.



Japan 1963 shows a whirlpool at Naruto in Tokushima where tidal whirlpools form in a channel between it and Awaji Island in Hyōgo, Japan.

Mythology “Explains”

Storm Vibrations

Åland: Letesgubbar



Dark nimbostratus cloud formations – heralding heavy rain and an approaching storm—can be seen on paintings and photographs in stamps from Hungary (1973), Guernsey (1983), Romania (1971), and Germany (2013) whilst New Zealand 2008 shows its violent arrival on land.

You can usually tell that a storm is coming your way by dramatic changes in barometric pressure and a gradual build up of wind. However, to the people of Åland in The Baltic Sea those associated vibrations were the work of mythical little men called Letesgubbar, who went around banging walls, jangling and throwing objects about in order to attract people’s attention. In this 2006 mini-sheet such a creature is shown banging his “leten” or floats attached to herring nets to warn people of the oncoming storm.



Mythology “Explains”

The Rainbow

Greece: Iris



What we know to be a meteorological phenomenon caused by reflection and refraction of light in water droplets producing a multi-coloured spectrum was understood by the Greeks 2500 years ago as the manifestation of the goddess Iris, who carried messages from the gods to humans, *referenced above on France (1946, Air), Grenada (1973), and Greece (1935)*

On many international stamps Iris is a portrayed as a beautiful young winged woman carrying a herald’s staff. She appears on the definitives of Greece as early as 1911 and is first seen on a French issue in 1939.



The name of the beautiful goddess is given to a species of plants with showy “iridescent” flowers some of which can be seen on these issues from the USA (2005), France (1969) and Greece (1958).



Mythology “Explains”

Earthquakes

Norse: Loki’s Agony



In Norse mythology earthquakes (*referenced on Armenia 1998, showing a fissure in the Earth’s surface following the quake there in 1988 and Greece’s 1953 Charity Tax stamps for the Ionian Island Earthquake Fund*) are really the screams of the wicked god Loki, who is finally punished for betraying the wonderful Balder, god of light, purity and innocence. When Loki discovered Balder’s “Achilles Heel” - that he could be killed with mistletoe - he tricked Balder’s blind brother Hod into throwing a dart made of that wood at him so killing him.



The right hand stamp in the 2004 Norway sheet depicts Balder’s funeral pyre as his wife and horse look on. When captured Loki was taken to a rock, chained with his own son’s intestines and over his head a serpent dripped searing poison which he could not avoid falling on his face and he screamed and wrenched so much that earthquakes were the result (*as shown on Faroes 2004 above left from a ten stamp sheet illustrating poems by Janus Djurhuus [1881-1948]*).

Apparently Loki’s agony is prolonged going by evidence of seismic activity across the world today !

The Morning Dew

Because Balder (who symbolised daylight) was loved by everyone, when he died everything in Nature grieved for him and these tears are why we have the dew each morning as Nature mourns the death of the previous day.

Mythology “Explains”

Landscape Features

Maori: New Zealand’s Islands and Rugged Terrain



The origin of New Zealand’s two main islands (New Zealand 1957) is explained by the ancient Maori myth concerning their cultural hero Māui who first created the North Island by using the jaw-bone of his ancestor Muri-ranga-whenua to hook and haul the great fish Te Ika from the depths. (New Zealand 1994 and 2005).

When he left to seek a priest to bless the new ground Māui’s hungry brothers cut up the fish which writhed and lashed out in such pain that it broke itself into vast mountains and valleys, otherwise the North Island, known as Te Ika-a-Māui (Māui’s fish) would have been a flat plain which a small selection of pictorial stamps from that country clearly show it not to be !



The South Island is Māui’s canoe, Tw Wai Pounamu.

Mythology "Explains"

Landscape Features

A Finnish Petroglyph



The face of a sleeping old giant may be seen preserved in the side a mountain as shown on a pair of Finnish stamps from 2008, as part of the *Top of the World mythology omnibus series*.

This petroglyph at Astuvansalmi may well have been a site of Neolithic worship after the natural contours of the cliff side were enhanced by hand to emphasise the humanoid features.

A Giant Split Rock in The Faroes

Even landscape features smaller than a room in a modern house can have myths attached to them, for example dwarf boulders as illustrated on Faroes 2008.

Many Faroese villages have a landmark nearby said to be inhabited by supernatural beings such as elves and trolls, but when one is split as in one of the stamps in the se-tenant pair that dwelling place is believed to have been abandoned.



Mythology "Explains"

Landscape Features

Greece: The Pillars of Gibraltar & Ireland: The Giant's Causeway

The most well known examples of this phenomenon in European cultures concern The Pillars of Hercules at the entrance to the Western Mediterranean and The Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland.

The first legend some 3,000 years old refers to **Hercules' Tenth Labour**—The Herding of Geryon's Cattle. As the great classical hero approached the Hesperides where the cattle grazed he stopped off to set up two great rocks to mark his way back.



To the north what we now call The Rock of Gibraltar (two faces of which are shown on stamps first issued by Gibraltar in 1938) and on the African mainland Jebel Musa, or Monte Hacho on the Peninsula de Almira (*the latter shown on a Spanish Civil War label*) near the Spanish City of Ceuta on the Moroccan coast. These are alluded to in the 1991 Europa issue from Gibraltar.

Another famous European giant, the Irish warrior **Finn McCool** (shown on IoM 1997) was said to have constructed the Giant's Causeway in Antrim order to permit access for a rival Scottish giant who was insulting him.

In reality these 40,000 interlocking basalt pillars of variable height were the product of vulcanism and they have relatives in the Scottish Hebrides in Fingal's Cave which also featured in Finn McCool mythology : GB 1981 and Staffa Carriage label from 1971.



Mythology "Explains"

Landscape Features

Faroese and Andorran Stone Pillars



A third giant story from Europe concerns two mighty stone pillars off the North Western tip of the island of Eysturoy, as featured on this issue from the Faroes in 1996. *(The Faroes issue many stamps about legends often in sets but this is a one-off issue).*

These are known locally as the Giant and the Giantess and feature in the mythical tale of what happened when Iceland wanted to pull the Faroes closer to it. Iceland called up the giant Risin and his wife Kellingin to perform this task, but they took so long to organise the tow that the sun rose and turned them both to stone. They stand there today facing Iceland and longing for their home.



Giant pillars also appear in the 2013 Andorran (Spanish Administration) issue which alludes to the Legend of Moixella, *part of lengthy and continuing series, begun in 1997.*

Legend has it that after Charlemagne (referenced on Andorra 1961 French Administration) drove the Arabs out of Andorra he left a troop of soldiers there for protection, but there was no attack and with so little to do they gradually petrified.

In fact these are geological formations near the ruins of Castellet de Moixella, Saint Julia de Loria but they can be found all over the world formed by land erosion and are variously referred to as "Hoodooos" or "Fairy chimneys".

Mythology "Explains"

Landscape Features

Lakes in Northern Ireland and Andorra

The origins of a large number of lakes have been associated with ancient myths. Indeed another version of the legend of Finn McCool has the angry giant tearing out a sod of earth in the middle of what is today Northern Ireland and throwing it in anger into the Irish Sea, so creating both **Lough Neagh** and The Isle of Man - *as referenced by issues from Isle of Man in 1997 on a previous sheet for the Giant's Causeway and GB in 2009.*



The creation of **Engolasters Lake** in the Encampe parish of Andorra came about of course via a gradual process of glaciation, but one version of the local legend has it that it was formed by a sudden and enormous gush of water unleashed by God in order to chastise a beautiful woman for her selfish behaviour. The woman who lived in a village close to what is now the shore line refused a starving pilgrim a piece of newly baked bread *as shown on the 2002 Andorran issue.* The beggar was revealed to be Jesus Christ and the result was a clap of thunder after which the valley was deluged and the lake formed.

The Lake is shown on 1961 pictorials from French Andorra and within another of the long running legend series. The 2001 Euro transition issue also contains an earlier version of this design.

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Mythology "Explains"

Landscape Features

Bizarrely Shaped Rocks in Indonesia

Sometimes a fluke of erosion can lead to be a myth being built around it as with this curiously shaped group of rocks resembling a man on his knees with a small wall around him on a beach near Padang in West Sumatra - associated with the tale of **Malin Kundang** illustrated in an 1998 Indonesian set. Malin was an ungrateful son who doing well once he had left his poor mother refused to recognise her when he returned a wealthy man. As a result she cursed him and his boat and when he set sail he and his boat were beached and turned into stone.



Malin's mother prays to God to curse him Malin's ship in storm Malin is turned to stone



A very similar tale concerns the bizarrely formed **Batu Balai** saucer shaped rock in Bangka Belitung Province which measures 8 x 6 x 5m, now a tourist attraction but in the past used as a meeting of local officials.....



An old widow and her only son named Dempu Awang in the legend of Batu in the 2005 set. Dempu left his mother to seek his fortune and after ten years in which he did not contact her he returned a wealthy man with a beautiful wife. However finding his mother a decrepit old hag he refused to acknowledge her so she prayed to God for intervention. The young man's ship was then driven ashore in a severe thunderstorm and changed into a boat shaped rock and Dempu's wife spared but transformed into a white monkey.



Dempu leaves home to make his fortune. He returns with a wife on his great ship. His mother approaches in a small boat His mother implores him to accept her. Dempu and his wife are transformed into a rock and a monkey.



Mythology "Explains"

Landscape Features

Another Bizarrely Shaped Rock in Indonesia

Batu Ballah (literally "split rock") is another unusually formed rock, in West Kalimantan—with a mythical explanation, treated in a 2000 strip of five stamps. The rock is said to have opened and swallowed an old widow called Mak Risah who struggled to feed her two children. One day she did find a good supply of fish eggs but left them unattended, returning to find her son had eaten them all himself. She left the house crying in despair and went to stand on the rock, at which point it opened and swallowed her whole ! (Like the dwarf rock shown on the Faroes stamp earlier this rock has been formed by uneven cracking in the very earliest days of the formation of the earth's crust).

Mak Risah saddened by her children. Mak Risah being swallowed by a stone. Mak Risah rock.



Mount Mauraja

According to a legend from Timur this mountain was formed when snake troops were sent to attack a village and push it into the bowels of the earth, resulting in the mountain forming nearby. This revenge was felt necessary when a local sarong maker called Raja was directed, after a dream, to a cave where a hermit gave him a handful of cotton seeds, before turning into a python. Raja married one of his snake daughters seeing her as human and took her home but local villagers turned on the snake girl, burned down the house and killed her.



Raja dreaming Raja receiving cotton seeds from a bearded man.

Raja and wife. Snake on bed, burning village and snakes infesting the village. Mountain being formed from village.



Mythology "Explains"

Landscape Features

Lakes in Indonesia



The lakes at Tolire in North Maluku according to the local legend illustrated in the 2004 set were formed following an incestuous father daughter relationship which was punished by the ruler of the universe sending a great flood to the village where they lived. As the pair tried to flee the ground suddenly opened up and turned into a huge body of water which became Great Tolire representing the father and two hundred metres away Small Tolire the daughter. (Tolire Jaha maar was formed during a violent eruption in 1775 when groundwater came into contact with boiling magma).



The tale behind the forming of Lake Tondano in North Sulawesi (2002) also concerns forbidden love, this time between the children of two neighbouring Tonaas or rulers, one of whom even insisted his daughter Marimbow disguise herself as a man to avoid attracting suitors. But eventually the two noble offspring met and despite the solemn oaths they had sworn to their parents they fell in love, whereupon earthquakes followed by a volcanic eruption overwhelmed the region and a huge area of water formed, known today as Lake Tondano. (The lake's caldera was formed in the Late Micoene era following a massive eruption).



Mount Tondano in the province of North Sulawesi, Indonesia, has a 20 x 30 km wide caldera which was formed in the Late Miocene or Early Pliocene formed by a massive eruption.

Mythology "Explains"

Landscape Features

Lakes in Indonesia

A handful of the three dozen legends illustrated in the beautiful series of over 170 stamps issued between 1998 and 2006 depicting regional folktales from Indonesia feature the mythical stories behind the creation of lakes, three of which are described below.



The tale behind the formation of the 3,000 sq kilometres Lake Toba in Northern Sumatra, the site of a massive climate changing supervolcanic eruption around 75,000 years ago concerns a local fisherman who caught a large golden fish who turned into a beautiful woman who secretly did all his housework as repayment for not killing her. When he confronted her she agreed to continue as long as he told no one but when they had a daughter called Samsosir the father insulted her by calling her the daughter of a fish ! The mother ensured her daughter was safe on a hill, turned back into a fish, and caused the whole area to flood eventually producing a vast lake in which there is an island named after her daughter. (Indonesia 1999)



Man and yellow fish. Man proposing to woman.
Woman giving food for father to son Saman and Sam eating it . Wife turning back into fish. Samsosir island and Lake Toba



Mythology “Explains”

Landscape Features

Mountain Ranges in Indonesia

The irregular shape of some mountain ranges in Indonesia can be explained away by myths. Bulupoloe Mountain in Sulawesi, shown in the last stamp of five in a se-tenant strip in 2000 illustrating the story of Sawerigading is one such range. *These five se-tenant stamps are part of more than 170 produced by that country between 1998 and 2006 to explain local legends.*



Sawerigading, a womaniser, fell in love with his sister We Tanriabeng who to avoid incest offered to make him a boat from the Walenreng tree which grew in heaven, but she lost control of it and it fell to earth breaking the mountain in half, as you can see.



The legend of Sangkuriang (Indonesia 1998) provides an explanation to the Sundanese people for the mountain called Tangkuban Parahu, (meaning upturned boat). Unknowingly Sangkuriang fell in love with his mother Dayang Sumbi who told her son to leave her when she discovered who he really was because their love was wrong and in anger he hurled his boat which fell to land upside down, forming the mountain.

Mythology “Explains”

Leukonychia

Faroes: The Norns



“What ?” I hear you ask ! **Leukonychia** is the technical term for those little white marks and blemishes found on human finger nails. (Above Kuwait’s 1980 issue for World Environment Day).

In fact, sometimes caused by injury to the nail or at other times being a fungal, yeast, or bacterial infection that attacks its substance these were believed to be manifestations of tiny creatures called The Norns, the deities of fate in Faroese mythology and close colleagues of The Valkyrie.

In the 2006 issue below we see little white spots everywhere - the “Nornaspor” - the footprints of the Faroese Norns, which were sometimes seen as an indication of sickness.



However fanciful such a mythical explanation may seem in the 21st century, it is much more fun to read about in many cases than the prosaic truths behind the related natural phenomena.