

---



# Rosetta

Pinkham, A. (2022): 'Daniel Ogden. *The Werewolf in the Ancient World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.'

Rosetta **27**: 106-110

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue27/pinkham.pdf>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25500/rosetta.bham.00000007>

---

**Daniel Ogden. *The Werewolf in the Ancient World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 261 pages. £25.00. ISBN 978-0-19-885431-9 (Hbk).**

*Alexandra Pinkham* (University of Sydney)

To produce an entire monograph devoted to ancient werewolf stories may seem an impossible task given the paucity of sources that describe the phenomenon directly. Daniel Ogden, Professor of Ancient History at the University of Exeter, has approached the topic through the lens of folklore, making the most of the available ancient sources to produce a refreshing look at a subject that has been dominated until now by studies of the Arcadian Lykaia festival. Ogden acknowledges the lack of ancient sources at the outset. There is, as he says, 'only one really good, corking story about them [werewolves]', in Petronius' *Satyricon* (61-2); this is Niceros' tale from the 'Cena Trimalchionis', in which he describes witnessing a soldier friend remove his clothes in a graveyard before transforming into a wolf and bounding off into the night (pp. 1-3). It must be said that large portions of the book are devoted not to the few ancient sources on werewolfism, but instead to medieval, early modern, and modern comparanda. But this is not necessarily to the book's detriment. Scholars of later periods in particular will find amongst Ogden's arguments an extensive catalogue of werewolf tales from across Europe and Scandinavia as well as a detailed study of the common motifs found in these tales, all of which Ogden argues had their origins in a rich tradition of werewolf folklore in antiquity. Readers should also note that Ogden's approach to collecting ancient werewolf stories has been to cast the net wide for tales that mention any sort of human-wolf transformation, actual or implied, and the result is that the book features several ancient sources that have hitherto not been considered as including or alluding to werewolfism. By the end of the book, having taken this broader approach to the definition of 'werewolf', Ogden is able to offer a significantly expanded catalogue of ancient stories about werewolves, an outcome which will surely benefit future scholars working on the topic.

The book's defining feature is a 'folklore first' approach to the ancient sources pertaining to werewolves. The tendency in earlier scholarship has been to

understand the few ancient stories about werewolves as derivative of the myth of Lykaon (turned into a wolf by Zeus as punishment for attempting to serve the god human flesh) and the associated Lykaia festival in Arcadia (Ogden provides an overview of the scholarship on pp. 8-12).<sup>1</sup> Ogden on the other hand contends that the opposite is true, challenging the predominant ‘myth and religion first, folklore later’ understanding of the sources and arguing instead that the material related to the myth of Lykaon and the Arcadian rite are themselves products of the folkloric tradition.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Ogden takes a thematic approach to the ancient material, examining the persistent associations between werewolves and witches – particularly the *strix*-witch – (Chapter 1 ‘The Curse of the Werewolf: Witches and Sorcerers’) and werewolves and ghosts (Chapter 2 ‘Werewolves, Ghosts, and the Dead’).<sup>2</sup> This association is most effectively demonstrated by the material presented in Chapter 1. Metamorphosis from human to animal (and indeed human to wolf) is a motif frequently encountered in ancient stories of witchcraft, and Ogden extends his study of this phenomenon to include not only references to witches and sorcerers transforming into wolves, but also evidence of wolfish behaviour in witches. Together, these two chapters establish one of the book’s main lines of argument: that, in the ancient imagination, werewolves inhabited the same storyworld as witches and ghosts. Much is made in Chapter 2 of the link between werewolves and ghosts, a connection returned to in Chapters 4 and 5. There is less concrete evidence from antiquity linking werewolves and ghosts (compared, say, to the evidence linking werewolves and witches), but Ogden argues for a close association between the two based on their tendency to both frequent graveyards.

Chapter 3 (‘The Werewolf, Inside and Out’) aims to untangle the way the werewolf was conceptualised in antiquity: as a wolf inside the body of a man, or a man inside that of a wolf. Most of the sources Ogden examines in this respect suggest that the ancient werewolf was conceived of as a human shell over a wolf core, the human shell being represented by the clothing that was so frequently shed before

---

<sup>1</sup> The Lykaia rite has been the focal point of earlier werewolf scholarship, including Buxton 1987, Moreau 1997 and 1998, Metzger 2011, and Gordon 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The *strix*-witch is the subject of another of Ogden’s recent monographs (2021).

transformation into lupine form. A smaller number of sources point to the opposite view, that the werewolf consisted of a human core within a wolf carapace. It is from these examples that Ogden segues into the bulk of the chapter, which is essentially a catalogue and subsequent discussion of the dozens of medieval and early modern sources which adhere for the most part to the human core/wolf carapace view of werewolves. Despite the fact that the chapter is heavily weighted towards non-ancient sources, the overall effect of tracing different werewolf story motifs throughout European folklore over several centuries is nonetheless satisfying and Ogden's survey will be of as much use to scholars of later periods as it is to those studying antiquity.

Chapter 4 ('Werewolves and Projected Souls') deals almost exclusively with post-ancient evidence. The focus of the chapter is an association between werewolves and soul-projection, the latter a *topos* prevalent in medieval and early modern sources. Ogden argues that the post-ancient stories about soul-projection (in which the soul sometimes takes the form of a wolf) have their origins in antiquity and Greek shamanistic practices. A passage from Augustine of Hippo about the transformation of a man's soul from human to pack animal (while the man himself slept) and a fragment on *strix*-witches as soul projectors attributed to John Damascene constitute the ancient sources Ogden works with in this chapter. Although neither of the ancient examples feature human-to-wolf transformation *per se*, Ogden uses the ancient evidence for soul-projection to argue in favour of extending the definition of werewolfism to include the imagined transformation of the soul as well as the actual transformation of the body.

Two passages from Pausanias on the Hero of Temesa – the ghost of one of Odysseus' crewmates – are at the centre of Chapter 5 ('The Demon in a Wolfskin: a Werewolf at Temesa?'). Again Ogden draws on the arguments advanced in Chapter 2 for the strong association between werewolves and ghosts in order to argue for a new reading of the wolfskin-wearing Hero as a werewolf. In Chapter 6 ('Werewolves of Arcadia'), Ogden tackles the ancient material that has been the focus of earlier werewolf studies. A large part of the chapter consists of a catalogue of the ancient sources pertaining to the myth of Lykaon (the aetiological myth for the Lykaia) and the tale of Damarchus, an athlete transformed into a wolf at the same festival.

A short summary of the main arguments is given at the end of each chapter. The concluding chapter contains Ogden's own expanded catalogue of ancient stories about werewolves together with a summary of each passage, followed by a short section on the context for the narration of werewolf stories (as yarns told at dinner parties and symposia, by travellers at inns, and as tall tales peddled by attendants at shrines and sanctuaries). Three appendices are also included, the first being an argument in tabulated form for reading Homer's Circe as a witch (an interpretation discussed briefly in Chapter 1). Appendices B and C both cover human-canine/lupine associations that Ogden asserts should not be considered as werewolf-related: the 'dog-headed' Cynocephali (Appendix B), and wolfish undertones in the Dolon episode in Homer's *Iliad* and the rite of the Lupercalia, erroneously thought to be equivalent to or derivative of the Arcadian Lykaia (Appendix C).

The only hindrance to Ogden's study is the lack of stories from antiquity that are explicitly about werewolves. Ogden counters this scarcity by drawing associations between other supernatural beings (witches, ghosts, and the like) and the werewolves of the extant sources, and using the recurring themes and motifs from these stories to construct an image of a rich tradition of werewolf folklore in the Graeco-Roman world. This method is more successful in some chapters than others, and readers should be prepared to acknowledge that some of Ogden's arguments for this ancient tradition are built around conjectural rather than actual evidence. Nevertheless, the project of tracing the development of werewolf-related *topoi* from ancient beginnings through the medieval and early modern periods is worthwhile in its own right, and there is no doubt that Ogden's book – packed as it is with lengthy translations of both ancient and post-ancient comparanda – is a fascinating and highly useful contribution to the scholarship on European werewolf folklore.

## Bibliography

### Ancient Sources

Augustine, *The City of God, Volume II*, trans. M. Dods (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1871).

John Damascene, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca*. ed. J. P. Migne, (Paris: Garnier, 1857-1904).

Homer, *Iliad, Volume I: Books 1-12*, trans. A. T. Murray, revised W. F. Wyatt [Loeb Classical Library 170] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).

Homer, *Odyssey, Volume I: Books 1-12*, trans. A. T. Murray, revised G. E. Dimock [Loeb Classical Library 104] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919).

Pausanias, *Description of Greece, Volume III: Book 6-8.21*, trans. W. H. S. Jones [Loeb Classical Library 272] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933).

Petronius, Seneca, *Satyrica. Apocolocyntosis*, ed. and trans. G. Schmeling [Loeb Classical Library 15] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

### Modern Scholarship

Buxton, R. G. A. 1987. 'Wolves and werewolves in Greek thought', in J. N. Bremmer (ed.), 60-79.

Gordon, R. L. 2015. 'Good to think: wolves and wolf-men in the Graeco-Roman world', in W. de Blécourt (ed.), 25-60.

Metzger, N. 2011. *Wolfsmenschen und nächtliche Heimsuchungen. Zur kulturhistorischen Verortung vormoderner Konzepte von Lykanthropie und Ephialtes*. Remscheid: Gardez! Verlag.

Moreau, A. 1997. 'Le loup-garou (i)', *Connaissance Hellénique. Revue de culture grecque pour non-spécialistes* 73, 69-79.

Moreau, A. 1998. 'Le loup-garou (ii)', *Connaissance Hellénique. Revue de culture grecque pour non-spécialistes* 74, 6-17.

Ogden, D. 2021. *The Strix-Witch*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.