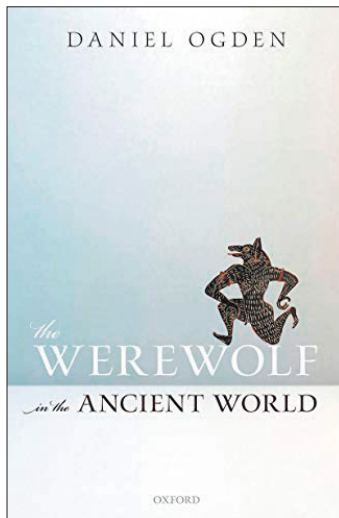


## THE WEREWOLF IN THE ANCIENT WORLD




---

OGDEN, DANIEL (2021). *The Werewolf in the Ancient World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, xvii + 261 pp., 33 € [ISBN: 978-0-1988-5431-9].

---

TOMMASO BRACCINI  
UNIVERSITÀ DI SIENA  
tommaso.braccini@unisi.it

DANIEL OGDEN, CONTINUING HIS MERITORIOUS EXPLORATION of the Greco-Roman fantastic imagery, after his essays on – among others – the tales in Lucian’s *Philopseudes*<sup>1</sup> and various dragons,<sup>2</sup> publishes this work on werewolves, in his own words an offshoot of his very successful sourcebook *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Ogden, 2007.

2. Ogden, 2013.

3. Ogden, 2002 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2009).

In his Introduction, the author gives his definition of what, for the purposes of this book, he will consider as a werewolf: “a creature that changes form, or appears to do so, or can be inferred to do so, in whole or in part, between the humanoid and the lupine” (p. 7). Immediately thereafter, he specifies that he will not consider a whole series of aspects, including whether the transformation into a wolf is permanent. This point, however, has evidently aroused some hesitations in Ogden, who refers (“sympathizing a little”) to other viewpoints (like that of Madeleine Jost) according to which the transience of the transformation is fundamental for the identification of the werewolf (thus, among other things, excluding the mythical Lycaon from lycanthropes proper). Ogden’s broader choice, in fact, seems to go against one of the few definitions of lycanthropy that come to us from antiquity (and probably the most effective of them), that of Pliny, who in *Naturalis Historia* VIII 80, referring to the *fabula versipellium*, expresses himself like this: *homines in lupos verti rursusque restitui sibi falsum esse confidenter existimare debemus aut credere omnia quae fabulosa tot saeculis conperimus*. Ogden’s decision not to limit himself to this “emic” definition, although perhaps questionable, in any case allows him to broaden the discussion considerably, by including a whole series of testimonies relating to a phenomenology that could be defined as “peri-lycanthropic”, relating to witches and ghosts.

The book, it can be anticipated, is (also for this very reason) extremely rich and thought-provoking. In this review we will try to account for at least some of the most important elements that emerge from its pages.

In the Introduction, which takes its cue from the famous story of werewolves in the *Cena Trimalchionis*,<sup>4</sup> the author has good cause to stigmatise the relatively scant attention the tale has received in the modern monographs on Petronius. The crux of the problem, as Ogden notes, lies in the difficulty and unwillingness of classicists to confront the folkloric nature of the material, not only in Petronius, but concerning werewolves in antiquity in general. The unfamiliarity with the tools of folkloric research, and the irresistible attraction of the conventional and reassuring sirens of purely literary intertextuality, fatally lead to errors of perspective, like those that induce many scholars to give disproportionate importance to presumed “mythical antecedents” of the werewolf phenomenon, such as that of Lycaon, which instead, as Ogden notes, have a secondary and derivative character. In the author’s caustic words (p. 9), in these cases classicists show a disturbing propensity to enact what is known as the “drunkard’s search”, that of someone who loses his wallet in a dark alley but insists on looking for it under a lamppost “because there is more light there”.

---

4. *Satyricon* 61.

In the Introduction, the author also mentions an important element that will recur in the rest of the book, that of lycanthropy identified with a psychiatric medical condition. It is not at all a peculiarity confined to antiquity or to eras far removed from our own. In fact, the use of the term “*lupo mannaro*” (werewolf) or “*licantropo*” to indicate people suffering from psychic disorders is still well documented in the Italian press of the last century. Headlines (without any irony) such as *Movimentato inseguimento di un licantropo a Roma* (“Spirited werewolf-chase in Rome”) or *Il licantropo si rotolava nelle acque dell’Arno* (“The werewolf rolled in the waters of the Arno”) recur in national newspapers still in 1950.<sup>5</sup> By the way, the etymology that the author proposes (p. 7) for the Italian “*lupo mannaro*”, from the Germanic “*Mann*”, does not seem to enjoy particular credence. Generally, it is thought that the word derives from the Latin *lupus hominarius*, a parallel of *lupus homininus*, which in turn gave rise to the form “*lupo menino*”, attested in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

The first chapter then moves on to explore the relationships between witches, sorcerers and werewolves. Sometimes the label of “werewolves” seems dubious, as in the case of men turned into wolves by Circe; in other occurrences, however, the relationship is clearly there, as in the case of Virgil’s Moeris:<sup>7</sup> *his ego saepe lupum fieri et se condere siluis / Moerim, saepe animas imis excire sepulchris, / atque satas alio uidi traducere messis*. The same goes for Propertius’ Acanthis, accustomed to *audax cantatae leges imponere lunae / et sua nocturno fallere terga lupo* (IV 5, 13-14), and for Ovid’s Medea, who adds to her rejuvenation filter *in... uirum soliti uultus mutare ferinos / ambigui prosecta lupi* (*Met.* VII 270-271). The author has good reason to underline the peculiarity of this last passage, from which it seems to emerge that, at least in this case, the “basic form” of the werewolf is that of the wolf and not that of man (p. 42). Less convincing seems to be the hypothesis (cautiously put forward) that the term *lupulae* used by Photis in Apuleius (*Met.* III 22) might refer to witches who transform themselves into she-wolves. The word, as other internal comparisons with Apuleius’ work show,<sup>8</sup> seems instead to denote jealousy and rivalry: it is not by chance that Psyche’s sisters are also called *perfidae lupulae* (V 11). It also seems a bit of a stretch to compare (pp. 44-47) the story of Socrates, recounted once again in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, with the fable of the wolf and the kids.<sup>9</sup> Although this fable

---

5. See respectively *Corriere d’Informazione*, 29-30/5/1950, p. 2, and 16-17/9/1950, p. 5.

6. Cortelazzo & Zolli, 1999, p. 897, s.v. “*lupo*”.

7. *Ecl.* VIII 97-99.

8. See *ThLL* VII 2, p. 1851.73-80, s.v.

9. ATU 123.

was indeed already known in antiquity,<sup>10</sup> the fact that the wolf's belly is filled with stones after the still-living kids are taken out of it, and that the predator dies when he goes to drink, dragged into the pond by the weight, does not actually seem comparable – except for some superficial similarities – to the fate of Socrates, whose heart is taken away by witches and replaced by a sponge, that falls out when he bends down to drink in a river. The substitution of the entrails of a witch's victim with minced meat, straw or dry leaves (an explanation for otherwise inexplicable forms of rapid decay followed by death) is well attested also in the European folklore of medieval and modern times,<sup>11</sup> and it seems quite different, in tone and substance, from the childish and cartoon-like imagery at the basis, instead, of the fable of the wolf and the kids.

On the other hand, the author's use of late antique and medieval hagiographic texts, which often have less qualms than other sources about reporting folkloric beliefs, is always very interesting and productive. A notable case, for example, is that of the so-called "Were-women" of Mount Lebanon (perhaps linked in some way to hyenas?) mentioned in the Syriac *Life* of Simeon Stylites (pp. 53-54). Medieval sources could also be relevant to corroborate the relevance of the Neuri (pp. 24-26, 64-67), a people from the steppes mentioned by Herodotus (IV 105) as *goetes* who transformed themselves into wolves for a few days every year. One might suspect that the simultaneous accusation of witchcraft and lycanthropy also weighed heavily, over time, on other peoples who had arrived from "outside" to threaten civilisation: one need only think of the accusations against the Bulgarian prince Bajan that circulated in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> cent. at the court of Constantinople. In his *Antapodosis*, Liutprand of Cremona recalls that *Baianum autem adeo ferunt magicam didicisse, ut ex homine subito fieri lupum quamuecumque cerneret feram* (III 29).

The second chapter deals with the connection of werewolves with ghosts and the dead. There are indeed many convincing connections highlighted by the author, which in some cases can be further strengthened. The case of the plague demon who is stoned to death and under the heap of stones takes the form of a large dog, as narrated in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* IV 10), is very close indeed to a medieval legend in which the victim is expressly transformed into a wolf. The reference is to the heresiarch Lykopteros, "Peter the Wolf", who, according to the words of the monk Euthymius of Peribleptos (11<sup>th</sup> cent.), was stoned to death in Georgia and, when people tried to examine his remains under the pile of stones, "they found his body prodigiously changed into the shape of a wolf; and when all the stones were

---

10. See Braccini, 2018, pp. 170-176.

11. See Cherubini, 2010, pp. 40-41.

taken away from him, the wretch leaped away in the form of a wolf before the eyes of all, and fled to the mountains".<sup>12</sup>

Equally relevant are the points of contact (attested since the Middle Ages) between werewolves and vampires, to the point that, as the author reminds us, the most common Greek name for the vampire, *vrykolakas*, derives from a Slavic root meaning precisely "werewolf". On the one hand, this could be due to a sort of osmosis of folkloric elements, but on the other hand, the binomial dead-wolf may also have roots in the ethology of this animal species. It should be borne in mind, in fact, that especially in the past cemeteries and burial grounds could actually be infested with dogs and wolves (or hybrids of the two species), which, especially at night, dug up the corpses and fed on them. Ogden himself (p. 100) quotes a passage from Aristotle where precisely this possibility is taken into account.<sup>13</sup> Faced with the sight of a wolf (or a dog) walking away from an open pit, the horrified spectator could easily be led to one of two explanations. Either the wolf had killed a vampire trying to get out of the grave (which would be the origin of the belief, much older than *Underworld* or *Twilight*, that the werewolf is the vampire's mortal enemy); or, conversely, the vampire had momentarily left his body and turned into a wolf (or a dog).<sup>14</sup>

The third chapter ("The Werewolf, Inside and Out") offers, among other things, many valuable insights into the anatomy and physiology of the werewolf, starting with the question of the fur that, as also implied by the term *versipellis*, would have grown inside him.

The striking 16<sup>th</sup> cent. testimony (p. 88) by Hiob Fintel, about a self-styled werewolf from Padua who, on trial, claimed to be a real wolf, "save for the fact that his fur grew inwards from his skin instead of outwards", raises interesting questions about the possible interweaving of folk beliefs and psychoses of various kinds. The latter, in some cases, could have been a precursor to the paranoid imagery underlying, for example, the so-called, controversial "Morgellons' disease", today alarmistically fueled by posts on the internet (a simple Google search will provide plenty of documentation). Morgellons' "patients" are convinced, among other things, of the existence in their bodies of mysterious "fibres" of various kinds, that emerge from the wounds they cause by scratching themselves.

Also of great value is the treatment of what the author effectively labels as "Identifying wound" (pp. 93-98), also present in the above-mentioned Petronian

---

12. See Hamilton & Hamilton, 1998, pp. 155-157 and Braccini, 2011, pp. 117-119.

13. *History of Animals* 594ab.

14. See Barber, 1988, p. 93; Braccini, 2011, pp. 114-117.

narrative. In Niceros' story, however, this feature is clearly plethoric (the narrator had seen with his own eyes the transformation of the soldier into a werewolf, he didn't need any other proof), and this shows how here the author of the *Satyricon* was influenced by "what must have been an already long-established, deeply familiar and powerful motif".

The fourth chapter, one of the most impressive of the book, deals with the interpretation of lycanthropy as a phenomenon linked to the so-called "projected souls". The "projection of the soul" is well documented in antiquity, as shown by the cases of, among others, Aristeas of Proconnesus and Hermotimus of Clazomenae. This phenomenon, generally associated with shamanism, is explicitly linked to werewolves in the Icelandic sagas, not to mention the famous Livonian case of Old Thiess, on which, as Ogden points out, Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln have also recently written.<sup>15</sup> This connection was also active in late antiquity: it is postulated (also in reference to transformations into a wolf) by Augustine in the *City of God*<sup>16</sup> and recurs also in a passage about witches in the so-called *De stryigibus*, a very interesting short writing traditionally attributed to John Damascene, although it is most probably a rhetorical progymnasm dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Less convincing, however, is the far-fetched attempt (pp. 131-135) to somehow link the conceptions of the projection of the soul to a passage in Petronius' tale of the werewolf, in which the narrator declares that he has run home "like the robbed innkeeper" (*domum fugi tamquam copo compilatus*). At the root of it all is a connection, practically certain (and postulated almost a century ago<sup>18</sup>), between Petronius' passage and a fable<sup>19</sup> that has found its way into the modern editions of the Aesopic corpus, in which an innkeeper is robbed of his clothes by a thief pretending to be a werewolf about to be transformed. In order to support his complicated hypothesis, the author is forced to postulate a series of chain equivalences, in which the guardianship of the clothes of the werewolf is equated to the guardianship of the body of the one who projects his soul, and the escape of the innkeeper deprived of his clothes is compared to the fate of the werewolf deprived of his clothes, by means of the bad reputation and bad stories that in antiquity circulated about tavernkeepers. The convoluted conclusion is that "perhaps here too we are dealing with a tale in which traditional motifs have become kaleidoscope: the innkeeper must not, at any cost, have his cloak stolen, for he, again, is a (real) werewolf, and

---

15. See Ginzburg & Lincoln, 2020.

16. XVIII 16-18.

17. See Roueché, 2002, pp. 130-135.

18. See Citroni, 1984, pp. 33-36.

19. 301 Hausrath = 419 Perry.

depends upon it for his human form – and if the thief were inadvertently to turn the [sic] into a werewolf by stripping him of his cloak, that is of his humanity, what, do we suppose, would happen to him next?” I must confess, with all due respect, that I am unable to follow the author in these speculations. If anything, I prefer to note that the aforementioned Aesopic fable 301 Hausrath is only handed down from two very late manuscripts.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Petronius alludes to this fable, documents its existence well in advance of its appearance in the two manuscripts that preserve it (the most recent of which, moreover, is a copy of the oldest). The language in which the tale is written, as noted by Ben Edwin Perry, is characteristically medieval,<sup>21</sup> suggesting a long period of oral circulation (perhaps mediated by some lost storybook from the Middle East), which further confirms the importance of folkloric inspiration in the construction of the Petronian lycanthropic episode.

The fifth chapter deals with the famous case of the so-called Hero of Temesa and its wolfish connections. In his in-depth treatment, the author takes into due consideration, among other things, the 1992 monograph that Monica Visintin dedicated specifically to this topic. I find particularly remarkable the gently bewildered and politely dismissive approach (p. 144), which I absolutely agree with, regarding the scarce usefulness of the “curious, algebraic” Proppian analysis to which, in deference to the fashion raging at the time in Italy (and elsewhere), Visintin had dedicated more than ten pages of her work. In addition to this monograph, as is well known, much other has been written about the Temesan episode (even a novel, the Dutch *De held van Temesa* of 1962, by Simon Vestdijk, mentioned on p. 137, n. 1). The author, in dealing with the various approaches, is perfectly right to warn against attempts to create a single story by combining the accounts in our possession: it seems much more judicious, instead, to accept the existence of several versions, not always compatible with each other, and for this very reason particularly interesting, as a reflection of traditions that differ in time and space.

A similar, deleterious tendency to unify discordant traditions is also opposed in the last chapter, entitled “The Werewolves of Arcadia”. The author argues persuasively that the complex of narratives concerning the myth of King Lycaon, the maturation rituals of the Anthids and the story of the athlete Damarchus, who was transformed into a wolf for nine years, have too often been considered as the basis of all ancient traditions on lycanthropy, and have therefore enjoyed a disproportionate amount

---

20. Laur. 57, 30, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the much less well-known codex 1201 of the National Library of Athens, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

21. See Perry, 1961, pp. 10-11.

of attention, especially since, as mentioned, they are three aspects to be considered separately. Trying to clarify these three different traditions, the author assumes convincingly that the real duration of the Anthids' lupine initiation was not nine years, but much shorter (as in the case of comparable transition rites such as the *ephebeia-krypteia*), and that this detail was inferred by analogy with the story of Damarchus. In dealing with this aspect, Ogden also clears up two "myths" that have been asserted or reiterated even in recent studies. The first (pp. 191-192) is that the link between the full moon and lycanthropy is "a modern invention": in reality, the association already existed in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, as documented by the mention of the moon, *luna lucebat tamquam meridie*, in Petronius' episode (which once again proves to be a true collector of ancient folkloric traditions about werewolves), and a very clear passage from Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia imperialia*.<sup>22</sup> The second (p. 197) is the popular scholarly belief, also recently "confirmed" by news of sensational archaeological finds (later revealed to be much less significant than it seemed at first), that human sacrifices took place on Mount Lykaion during the Lykaia: as the author points out, the analysis of the altar of ashes that still remains on the site of the sacrifices has revealed, however, that the victims were goats and sheep. With regard to the story of the athlete Damarchus, transformed into a werewolf for having eaten (perhaps inadvertently?) human flesh during the Lykaia, the author argues in an exemplary manner (pp. 198-205) how this historical character, like other famous athletes, became a magnet for migratory supernatural legends, who coagulated around him to prove and corroborate his ultimately superhuman status. And among these legends, therefore, must be included also that of the transformation into a wolf.

The Conclusion offers a rather generous list of werewolf stories attested in antiquity (not all of them will be perceived as such by everyone). Less controversial, and in fact absolutely convincing, is the contextualization of the places and occasions where werewolf stories were most likely circulated and exchanged in the ancient world (pp. 208-210): dinners and symposia, on the one hand, and travellers' haunts (such as taverns, to which one could also add ships) on the other, in both cases as a form of entertainment, and finally shrines and sanctuaries, in aretalogical contexts or linked to memorials and votive offerings. These locations, in fact, have remained of extreme folkloric relevance up to contemporary times, and constitute a further element encouraging the continuation of studies such as this one, which illuminate and clarify lesser-known aspects of Antiquity through judicious comparison with the folklore of later periods.

---

22. III 120.



The work continues with three short appendices, one on Circe as a witch, another (of great interest) on the cynocephali and the last one on “false werewolves” such as Dolone and the *luperci* and concludes with a bibliography of about thirty pages and a general index.

The book has the airy and elegant layout that is a trademark of Oxford University Press; the editorial care has been high, and only a handful of typos are detectable, but these do not constitute an obstacle to comprehension.<sup>23</sup>

Summing up, the importance of this work is undeniable: *The Werewolf in the Ancient World* is destined to become the reference treatise on lycanthropy in antiquity, and it certainly has what it takes to be so – not least, the author’s familiarity with scholarly literature in languages other than English. In addition, throughout his work the author did not content himself with references and summaries available in existing literature (e.g. in Montague Summers’ classic *The Werewolf*), but commendably took the trouble to verify the sources, in more than one case correcting the inaccurate statements of his predecessors (see for instance the Portuguese case reported by Oswald Crawford, summarized on pp. 102-103). As always, in works of broad synthesis like this one, there is room for minor quibbles of various kinds, and certainly not all the interpretations proposed, especially the most daring, will find everyone in agreement. Nevertheless, the materials collected by the author, and also his debunking of some “myths” and scholarly conventions, especially with regard to the Arcadian “sagas” about werewolves, are valuable and commendable, and will undoubtedly constitute the term of comparison for any future research on lycanthropy in Greece and Rome.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barber, Paul (1988). *Vampires, Burial, and Death. Folklore and Reality*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Braccini, Tommaso (2011). *Prima di Dracula. Archeologia del vampiro*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Braccini, Tommaso (2018). *Lupus in fabula. Fiabe, leggende e barzellette in Grecia e a Roma*. Roma: Carocci.
- Cherubini, Laura (2010). *Strix: la strega nella cultura romana*. Torino: UTET.
- Citroni, Mario (1984). *Copo compilatatus*: nota a Petronio 62,12. *Prometheus*, 10, pp. 33-36.

---

23. For instance, on p. 49, n. 117, read “*pharmakis*” for “*pharakis*”; on p. 71, l. 13, read “*cynanthropy*” for “*cyanthropy*”; on p. 174, l. 25, read “*Catasterismi*” for “*Catasterimsi*”; on p. 176, l. 9, a full stop is missing at the end of the sentence; on p. 182, n. 82, read “*Imperialia*” for “*Imperiala*”.

- Cortelazzo, Manlio & Zolli, Paolo (1999). *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*. Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Ginzburg, Carlo & Lincoln, Bruce (2020). *Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf. A Classic Case in Comparative Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hamilton, Janet & Hamilton, Sarah (transl. & eds.) (1998). *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine world, c. 650 – c. 1405*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Holmes, Catherine & Waring, Judith (eds.) (2002). *Literacy, Education, and Manuscript Transmission in Byzantium and Beyond*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Ogden, Daniel (2002). *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman worlds. A Sourcebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ogden, Daniel (2007). *In Search of The Sorcerer's Apprentice. The Traditional Tales of Lucian's Lover of Lies*. Swansea: Classical Press of Wales.
- Ogden, Daniel (2013). *Drakon. Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Perry, Ben Edwin (1961). Two Fables Recovered. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 54, pp. 4-14.
- Roueché, Charlotte (2002). The Literary Background of Kekaumenos. In Holmes & Waring, 2002, pp. 111-138.