

## Living Stones and Stars? Looking at Ancient Life in Light of the Coronavirus

The current COVID-19 pandemic serves as a springboard to explore several cases in Greek and Roman antiquity where modern definitions of life fail to describe rightly the range of nuance in imagining what constitutes a living being. Despite the fact that the scientific definition of life excludes viruses like the novel Coronavirus ([SARS-CoV-2](#)), we often find ourselves talking about the virus as a living entity (soap or hand sanitizer “kills” it; it spreads and infects; it is the “invisible enemy”; c.f. Porubanova and Guthrie 2020). This paper follows in this vein and addresses the status of this question regarding ancient perspectives of what constitutes a living entity. Similarly, we see many instances in which Greek and Latin authors describe entities beyond humans, animals, and plants as living beings who interact, think, act, and are acted upon.

Among these include stones, statues, stars, and water. The various Orpheus narratives depict the bard’s song as so powerful that it soothes stones and rocks, implying that they hear or sense the music (Apollod., *Bibl.* 1.32; Eur. *IA* 1212 and *Bacch.* 562; Ov. *Met.* 11). Achilles Tatius’ character Satyrus reports that magnets have love for iron, (“ἐρᾶ γούν ἡ μαγνησία λίθος τοῦ σιδήρου”), hence their attraction (Ach. Tat. 1.7). Stones even become humans. Those thrown by Deucalion and Pyrrha after the great flood repopulate the earth (Pind., *Ol.* 9.42; Apollod. *Bibl.* 7.2; Hyg., *Fab.* 153; Ov., *Met.* 1.240). There are also the humanoid metal and stone lifeforms, like the "android" Talos (Ap. Rhod., *Argon.* 4.1638-88), whom elsewhere is described as a remnant of the race of bronze humans (Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.140), and Pygmalion’s unnamed ivory statue who came to life (Ov., *Met.* 243-528) (Mayor 2018). Stars and planets are also presented as alive and thinking (Pl. *Ti.* 40b; Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.15.39; Philo, *Opif.* 24; Orig. *Princ.* 1.7.2; c.f. Scott 1994). Moreover, heroes transformed into constellations. Orion, for instance, was

known to become the constellation of the same name. Orion's metamorphosis has recently been found depicted on a mosaic recently excavated from Pompei (the "House of Orion") (Ferro, Magli, Osanna 2020). Water and bodies of water are also presented as sentient beings. Achilles struggles with the river Scamander (Hom., *Il.* 21.211) Similarly, Persian Xerxes assaults the Hellespont, whipping it in frustration (Hdt. 7.35.1). Others become water, such as the Niobe's metamorphosis into weeping spring (Ov., *Met.* 6.305-15). Additionally, the Roman philosopher Lucretius, despite not ascribing mental faculties to atoms, will even phrase their movement (*sua sponte*, "by their own will"), as though they are living (e.g. Lucr. 1.214; c.f. Johnson 2013).

This paper draws upon previous studies on ancient views of nature and the beings in it. Recent research on animals in the premodern world has shown the importance of appreciating the cultural definitions and statuses of animals unique from modern and postmodern presuppositions (Kindt 2017). The question remains, however, how we as historians of the past should define an "animal," given that range of meanings to which our sources testify. Similarly, anthropological research problematizes such attempts to define ancient animals narrowly, instead introducing to those studying the ancient Mediterranean the possibilities of categorizing the inanimate among the world's lifeforms. For instance, the ancient Maya extended personhood to trees and rocks (Jackson 2019). This study, furthermore, contributes to the study of ancient paradoxographical traditions of fantastic creatures and how these discourses intersect with wider cultural attitudes (French 1994; Smith 2014). This paper seeks to provide a preliminary status of the question of what constitutes a living being in ancient sources, with hopes to broaden further our understandings of animals in Greek and Roman antiquity.

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