

The Wolves of Old: Classical accounts of the werewolf myth

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The Classical world of Ancient Greece and Rome is one full of beastly transformations. From the Mithraic bull-cults of Rome to the half-man, half-lion Leontocephaline, ancient texts are filled with accounts of the physical capabilities of being part man and part beast. Most well known of all these beasts is the infamous Minotaur of Crete, born to Aphrodite and the Cretan bull.

And yet, less well known are the many texts documenting the ancient ability of man becoming wolf. The metaphorical possibilities of this are evident in the Roman festival of the Lupercalia, where young men dressed as wolves would chase women through the streets, playfully whipping them as part of ritualistic fertility rites. The Lupercalia, or 'wolf festival', took place on 15th February, and is preserved today as St. Valentine's Day.

The Roman poet Ovid discusses the occasion when King Lycaon served human entrails as part of his feast and, disgusted, Jupiter punished him by turning him into a werewolf:

His clothes became bristling hair, his arms became legs. He was a wolf, but kept some vestige of his former shape. There were the same grey hairs, the same violent face, the same glittering eyes, the same savage image.¹

Another account also reflects a wolfish transformation as punishment, as Apollas narrates the case of the Greek boxer, Daemenetus, who was transformed into a wolf for ten years as a punishment for eating human flesh. Pliny, in his *Natural History*, suggests that being able to change into a wolf was quite a common ability, and that those who did this were known as 'skin-changers' or 'turn-skins'.

In *The Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter* we have the chapter entitled 'Trimalchio's Dinner', a story which recounts the actions of a man who strips naked, urinates around his clothes and immediately becomes a werewolf. These actions are reminiscent of those from Medieval accounts over a thousand years later.

This paper will explore in more detail the many and varied accounts of early werewolf literature from the Classical World and offer a foundation from which later tales and beliefs clearly draw upon.

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1:203-242

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He has conducted extensive research on both the vampire and werewolf myths in a European perspective, with particular emphasis on the history, archaeology, folklore, superstition, literature and the cinematic portrayal of the beings. His work includes *From Demons to Dracula: The Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth* (Reaktion, 2008), *Storia dei Vampiri*, with F. Biancani (Odoja, 2009) and *The White Devil: The Werewolf in European Culture* (Reaktion, 2013). He has also written articles for the *Chronicles* and *University of Chicago*, and contributed to *The Discovery Channel*, *Der Spiegel*, and *National Geographic*.