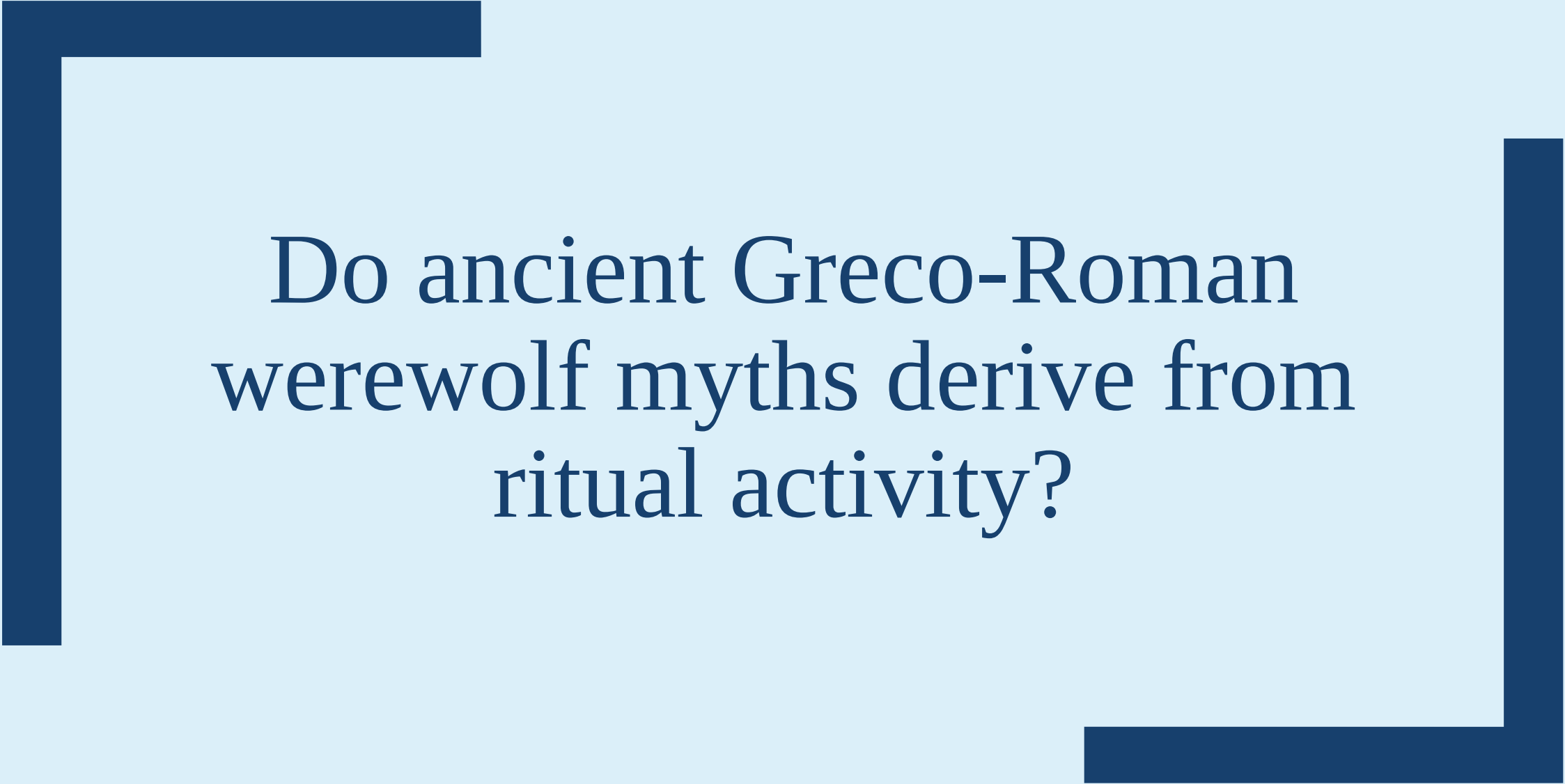




Do ancient Greco-Roman
werewolf myths derive from
ritual activity?

Ritualism

- Understanding mythology through the lens of ritual practice.
- Myth as a consequence of ritual?
- Ritual as a consequence of myth?

Wolves in Antiquity

- They are perceived as dangerous to humans and domestic animals
- Plutarch tells us that Solon instructed that there was to be a bounty of five drachmas for each wolf killed (Plut.Sol.23)
- Aristotle notes that some wolves hunt alone and that these are the most likely to be man eaters (Arist.*HistAn*.7.5)

Don't feed children to the gods

- The first story of a man being changed into a wolf is in the story of Lycaon.
- Lycaon fed Zeus a child mixed in with other meats in order to test his divinity.
- Zeus, enraged turned Lycaon into a wolf so his outer form would match his inner nature. (*Ov.Met.1.211-241*)

Neurian wolf men

- In book four of his *Histories* Herodotus talks about several tribes in the north east.
- Among them are the Neurians.
- Herodotus distances himself from the story saying that he doesn't believe it.
- “The men may well be magicians, since the Scythians and the Greeks that live in Scythia say that once a year every Neurian becomes a wolf for a few days and then reverts to his original state.” (Herod.4.105)

Wolven rituals

- Plato mentions a ritual in Arcadia at the sanctuary of Zeus Lycaeus.
- Pausanias also mentions a ritual where an Arcadian turns into a wolf.
- Though he seems to doubt its veracity
- “That anyone who tastes even a morsel of human entrails mixed in among those other sacrificial offerings is bound to become a a wolf.”(Pl.*Resp.*565.d)
- “It is said, for instance, that ever since the time of Lycaon a man has changed into a wolf at the sacrifice to Lycaean Zeus, but that the change is not for life; if, when he is a wolf, he abstains from human flesh, after nine years he becomes a man again, but if he tastes human flesh he remains a beast for ever.”(Paus.8.2)

Wolven rituals (cont)

- Pliny mentions some similar ritual taking place
- It is important to mention however that neither Pliny or Pausanias are seem entirely sure about these traditions.
- “someone chosen out of the clan of a certain Anthus by casting lots among the family is taken to a certain marsh in that region, and hanging his clothes on an oak-tree swims across the water and goes away into a desolate place and is transformed into a wolf and herds with the others of the same kind for nine years; and that if in that period he has refrained from touching a human being, he returns to the same marsh, swims across it and recovers his shape, with nine years’ age added to his former appearance.”(Plin.*Hn*.8.34)

Echoes of reality?

- There is room to doubt the veracity of these accounts. Especially as the authors themselves seem sceptical.
- But there is a possibility that these rituals actually happened if not in the exact form in which they are reported.
- Buxton argues that they have may had the form of initiation rituals as young boys pass into adulthood and citizenship (Buxton 2013:46)

Opposing view

- Irving-Forbes would disagree with this view
- He argues a lack of evidence to support the existence of these rituals. The ambivalence of the literary sources and the absence of archaeological remains. (Forbes 1990:55)

Concluding remarks

- Ultimately it is difficult to know the origin of any myth, but it is probable that the myths existed prior to the ritual.
- This appears to be the view of Pausanias (Paus.8.2).
- There is a persistence in the legend

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