



The reception of Greek myths about nature and the living world

Texts and images (14th-16th centuries)

International Conference – ERC AGRELITA

June 5th & 6th, 2025 at the University of Caen Normandy

Call for communication

ERC Advanced Grant AGRELITA • The Reception of Ancient Greece in Premodern French Literature and Illustrations of Manuscripts and Printed Books (1320-1550): how invented memories shaped the identity of European communities¹.

For more information about the ERC AGRELITA, please see: <https://agrelita.hypotheses.org/>

On June 5th and 6th, 2025, the AGRELITA project is organizing an international conference at the University of Caen Normandy entitled “The reception of Greek myths about nature and the living world: Texts and images (14th-16th centuries)”.

Argument

The ambition of this international conference is to bring together researchers from a wide range of backgrounds to examine the reception of Greek myths relating to nature and the living world in manuscripts and printed books produced between 1300 and the 1550s. The aim is to investigate the fortune, reinterpretations and new uses of myths that give pride of place to the “natural world” in its broadest sense. Which of them have been reformulated and put into images in Europe between the 14th and 16th centuries? What are their intermediaries and filters? In what kinds of text and image are such reinterpretations to be found? What are their meanings and purposes? From ancient Greece to medieval and Renaissance Europe, how depictions of nature and the living world, of the relationships between the human and the non-human, of divine and nature, offered by these myths, were transmitted and reinterpreted?

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Much studied nowadays, the notions of “nature” and “living world” have always been very hard to define, especially as their meanings evolve from one era to the next². This conference does not deal directly with the general question of conceptions/perceptions of nature in antiquity and the pre-modern world, nor with the overall problem of the evolution of the notion of “nature” from antiquity to the 14th-16th centuries. Its topic is the reception of many types of mythical narratives, from Greek and then Roman literature, that offer to nature and the living world a prominent role.

In ancient Greece, “nature” (*phusis*) was part of a dynamic vision of the world that encompassed terrestrial, celestial and infernal beings. A rich matter of speculation, nature was understood, by example, as a demiurgic and supreme power inextricably linked to divine power. Ancient gods embodied and governed the natural world. Their coming into being was sometimes allowed by the elements: the primordial waters, sown with the blood of the cut sex of Ouranos (Heaven), gave birth to Aphrodite. Likewise, nature’s places –forests, islands, seas, deserts, but also gardens, fields and springs– were populated by both human and divine or fabulous beings who were part of its reign. Such beings interacted with all categories of the living world, also with “inanimate” things: plant and animal species, minerals, celestial bodies and constellations, seasons, mountains and geological formations. Yet the boundaries between these categories remain fragile. The image of an ordered, hierarchical cosmos, in which humankind holds a predominant place, was based on transformations, on ebbs and flows, on golden ages and decadences³.

Writers and artists of the late Middle Ages and the 16th century often referred to such myths as “fables of the poets”. They were fascinated by these stories, by the literal, historical, as well as physical and allegorical meanings they often attributed to them. By appropriating nature and the living world associated with such myths, to what extent were they renewing them?

The study of reception involves investigating the more or less obvious and significant ways Greek myths, transmitted to Europe, are transformed in the 14th-16th centuries. The new literary and visual forms they take should bring up perspectives in historical, literary, philosophical and scientific domains. Our aim is indeed to explore what myths relating to nature and the living world reveal about the interests and concerns of pre-modern readers. To give an idea, still schematic, of the great variety of texts where these mythical narratives (re)appear, we might mention translations of Latin works (and, at the end of the considered period, of Greek works), sometimes with Latin mediation, mythographic works, chronicles, encyclopedias, moral treatises and other didactic works, scientific treatises, not to mention novels and poetic texts, written in Latin, Greek and vernacular languages. These manuscripts and printed books are often decorated. When textual and visual representations of myths are combined, images are never illustrations of a text, rather its extension. Whether derived from pre-existing models or

² Pierre Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis: Essai sur l'Histoire de l'Idée de Nature*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004 ; *Les Confins Incertains de la Nature (XII^e-XVI^e siècles)*, dir. Roberto Poma, Maria Sorokina, Nicolas Weill-Parot, Paris, Vrin, 2021.

³ Michel Jeanneret, *Perpetuum Mobile: Métamorphoses des Corps et des Œuvres de Vinci à Montaigne*, Genève, Droz, 2016 (first ed. 1997).

not, miniatures and vignettes produce meaning, enriches the text, and reinforce the artist's or his workshop role as inventor of new forms and narrative "montage".

Then, from the 14th to the mid-16th century, what remains of the mythical thinking about nature and the living world? How did it "survive"? As people's mentalities in this time were mostly shaped by a Christian way of thinking the natural world, what place is given to such myths in books and book decoration? If, in the Middle Ages, nature and all it contains were thought of within the Christian doctrine –in which "Nature" is an extension of God's work– Greek myths were also the subject of reinterpretations that, if not reconcile, at least attenuate the divergences between Christian and pagan conceptions. Our purpose is to understand how these stories make sense in Christian societies of pre-modern Europe, and how representations of nature and the living world conveyed by Greek myths are updated and sometimes modified.

Moreover, in mythical thought, technological invention to appropriate, organize, and dominate nature aims as much to overcome its laws as to discover its "secrets". Pierre Hadot emphasized not dualism but complementarity between a Promethean attitude (of conquest and domination of nature) and an Orphic attitude, which involves a harmonious relationship between humankind and the environment⁴. But what about this complementarity in the reception of Greek myths through texts and images? In historical reality, between the 14th and 16th centuries, the submission of nature transformed into resources by European human communities does not yet correspond to a clear separation between nature and society. Peoples don't see themselves as being outside nature. The division between nature and culture, defined by Philippe Descola as part of the "naturalist ontology"⁵, seems to emerge but is not yet what it will be in later centuries. What do authors and artists retain of the human-nature interactions from Greek myths?

We encourage proposals from a variety of research fields and methodological approaches – history, medieval and modern literature, book history, art history, philosophy, history of science or environmental humanities. Without excluding other perspectives, **communications would be focused on:**

- Transmissions and rewritings: the literary or scientific contexts in which myths find a new place, its narrative form, the articulation of myth with other sources and materials, pre-modern visual compositions of Greek myths of nature.
- Inside the reception of mythical narratives, evolution of the representations of "Nature" –a supernatural power, polysemic allegory and figure of creation– and of Greek deities who invest or personify different aspects of nature.

⁴ Pierre Hadot, *Le Voile d'Isis*, op. cit.

⁵ Philippe Descola, *Par-delà Nature et Culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005 ; id., *Les Formes du Visible: Une Anthropologie de la Figuration*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2021.

- Reception of Greek cosmogonic myths and, outside the context of the world origins, reception of myths about births: tales of childbirth, germination, eruption, spurting, fall, etc.; reception of myths that explain natural phenomena.
- Metamorphosis, a matter for the gods: stories of animal, vegetable, mineral or other metamorphosis, as a mode of expression of deities.
- Reception of myths relating to more or less violent interactions between humans and nature: stories of the exploitation of nature as a resource, of its anthropization or domination; stories depicting mankind's ability to imitate nature, to defy prohibitions or "natural" laws (healing, resuscitation, immortalization, giving life, magical enchantment); on the contrary, the fragility of men facing natural cataclysms.
- Reception of myths of union and concord between beings, human and non-human, animate and inanimate things: images of unity of different components of the living world; heroes and heroines, deities and hybrid beings who subdue the most primal forces of nature, pacify it, or inspire a harmonious vision of the world; representations of idyllic spaces that give rise to artistic and aesthetic *topoi*: imaginary or real description of natural *loci*, variety and significance of the landscape, etc.
- New lives of mythical hybrids and "fabulous" beings depicted in their imagined environments, reception of the mythical "wonders" of nature.
- Creation of new myths about nature and the living world, inspired by Greek myths.

Submission guidelines

To submit your proposal, please send the title and a summary **in French or English** (maximum **200-300 characters**), along with a **brief CV**, **by January 30th, 2025** at the following addresses:

- catherine.gaulhier-bougassas@unicaen.fr
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Notification of acceptance: **by early March 2025**.

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The papers will be published by Brepols publishers, in the "Research on Antiquity Receptions" series (<https://www.brepols.net/series/RRA>).

Travel and accommodation costs will be covered according to the terms of the University of Caen Normandy.

Organization

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