1

Wilderness and Narrative

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.[1]

INTRODUCTION

Wilderness areas are at the forefront of contemporary concern about the environment, the preservation of biodiversity, and rewilding efforts. Impenetrable forests, solitary deserts, vast steppes, remote mountains, and even the depths of the oceans have been intimately linked to religious identity formation in the ancient, medieval, and modern eras, and perhaps most famously, in the Romantic period. Wild natural spaces still perform religious functions contemporarily in various forms of spirituality.[2] Wilderness and wildness pop up in nature writing, TV documentaries, films, and reality TV from *Into the Wild* to *Alone in the Wilderness*. Wilderness is a topic that fascinates and inspires enthusiasm and wonder.

Important forms of interaction between humans and nonhuman nature in the ancient world took place in areas many would today call wilderness.[3] These interactions affected ancient religions deeply. In this book, I argue that wilderness mythology played an important role in the history of religions in the ancient world and that wilderness is a useful concept in

[1] Toni Morrison (1994, 161:22) quoted from Ochs and Capps 1996, 22.

[2] See, for instance, Lane 2015; Pike 2017, 2019.

[3] The expressions 'more-than-human' and 'nonhuman animals' has become a common convention in environmental, ecologically oriented, green research. The expression highlights that humans are also animals. It can be assumed that should I refer to animals in this book, I mean nonhuman animals.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

cross-cultural analyses. In contemporary humanistic, anthropological, and sociological discussions about nature in the current era, wilderness also features prominently,[4] as it has become abundantly clear that both wilderness and nature in general are fundamentally entangled with the human. Still, the concept of wilderness has not been subject to extensive theorising within the study of religions, nor has it been studied much beyond the Romantic and modern contexts.[5] In this book, I challenge the ideas that wilderness and the wild are inherently tied to Romanticism and/or to the modern, and that wilderness mythology is inherently detrimental to human relationships with nonhuman nature. I analyse a set of case studies of wilderness mythologies from ancient religions, and I theorise the concept of wilderness as an analytical tool for the study of religions. Highlighting the role and functions of narratives about wild nature for religious identity formation, I bring contemporary critical developments in wilderness studies to bear on ancient religions.

In previous research, wilderness practices and narratives have been investigated as parts of confessional eco-oriented theologies (e.g., Deane-Drummond 2004; Eaton 2005; Jasper 2004) by literary critics (e.g., Falke and Poetzsch 2021; Garrard 2004; Heise 2009), by philosophers and historians (e.g., Cronon 1996; Nash 2001; Oehlschlager 1991), and by geographers and social scientists (e.g., Vannini and Vannini 2016). Wilderness has mainly been understood as a useless, modernist concept by anthropologists and philosophers (Descola 2013a; Morton 2007), and as playing a part in contemporary environmental problems (Cronon 1996; Oehlschlager 1991). Wilderness narratives have been used, especially in colonial contexts in repressive and horridly violent ways, with terrible consequences (Brunotte 2000; Hornborg 2012; Spence 1999). While it is crucial to critique specific uses of the idea of

[4] The term 'the Anthropocene' is in many ways fitting for our era but is up for debate (see Blok 2019; Braidotti 2019). It is an era that both brings out the destructive impact of humans on Earth's biosphere and at the same time highlights our fundamental dependence on the nonhuman biosphere and our lack of control over it. On how narratives about wilderness, including myths, epics, and legends, affect land use, see Worman 2010; on the positive affect resulting from wilderness exposure, even if virtual, see McAllister et al. 2017; on the cultivation of feelings of kinship with nonhuman, wild others and how it can promote environmental practice and the conservation of biodiversity, see Taylor 2021.

[5] See Schliephake 2017 for a historisation focusing on Greek and Roman sources, without attention to religion, noting that the premodern and ancient worlds to a large degree have been left out of sight by ecocritical exploration. For excellent studies of Romanticism and wilderness, see Falke and Poetzsch 2021.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

wilderness that led to repression and violence, as well as the privileging of some kinds of nature over others and the exclusion of humans from nature (McShane 2018; Morton 2007), such examples demonstrate precisely how important it is to theorise the concept of wilderness as a cross-cultural concept. In ancient religions, several influential stories are about persons travelling to wildlands far away, how they relate to nonhuman organisms in these areas, and how they are transformed by it. To approach these narratives and their formative influence, it is necessary to develop strategies for the analysis of wilderness mythologies beyond the Romantic and modern periods. In this book, I seek to do so, as well as to analyse the varied history of wilderness mythologies in the ancient world. My focus is on the important roles stories of wilderness and wildness have played in identity formation in the ancient world and on how wilderness narratives are about much more than domination, destruction, and exploitation of the wild and nonhuman others. They are also about fascination, feelings, and personal transformations in the wild, about deep entanglements of humans and more-than-humans, and about ecological care and wild resonance experiences. My aim is to demonstrate the usefulness of a concept of 'wilderness' for the study of religions beyond modern colonial contexts.

The book analyses key cases for a history of wilderness mythologies in the ancient world, from the Old Babylonian period at the beginning of the second millennium BCE to the creation of western Europe after the fall of the Roman empire in late antiquity in the sixth century CE. I seek to show that studies of wilderness mythologies in the ancient world are relevant for broader discussions in the study of religions because wilderness narratives play important roles in the history of religious identity formation. They reflect crucial aspects of the nexus of wild nature and religion that are still influential today. Wilderness mythology played a role in transformations of religion in antiquity that impact current understandings of religion, by idealising individualised religious identity formation, intense emotionality, a withdrawal from social order, and total devotion combined with utopian cultural critique. The book argues that these religious transformations have important roots in wilderness mythologies, connecting wilderness with personal identity formation.

Working from the approach that concept-based comparison is constitutive for the study of religions (Feldt 2016b; Stausberg 2021a), I seek to demonstrate the analytical utility, cross-culturally, of the concept of wilderness in a series of case studies. Wilderness is distinct from, and

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

more specific than, broader concepts such as 'nature' or 'chaos',[6] and it is fundamentally entangled with narrativity and human identity formation. Different ways of understanding and forming identities are narrated in wilderness mythologies in the ancient Near Eastern, Mediterranean, and early European worlds. I argue that cultural critique and self-transformation are among the key functions of wilderness mythology. By telling stories of human heroes and gods venturing into the wilderness, seeking out the margins of the world, a place was demarcated, in ancient religions, for imagining other ways of viewing the world, for transforming identity. In the history of ancient wilderness mythologies, we thus see the inklings of religious developments in which individuals see themselves as separate from the existing cultural and social order while developing new types of religion that require total devotion and intense emotional devotion. Aspects of this new type of religion can be re-found in common understandings of religion today. Quite fundamentally, the analyses of key examples of ancient wilderness mythologies also seek to unveil a broader variety in the ways ancient peoples understood the environment and human–nature relationships, demonstrating that it was far from uniform and that it was characterised by alternative visions and dissenting views, rather than constituted by one, dominant narrative of dominion and destruction. Ancient wilderness mythologies forcefully bring out humanity's dependence on the more-than-human world, on forces much greater and stronger than humans. As we embark on the wild journey that will take us from Old Babylonian Mesopotamia to western Europe in late antiquity, let me first give an overview of the chapters of this book.

VENTURING INTO THE WILD

How did people in the ancient world imagine and narrate their relationships with their wild surroundings? Most of the environment was at the time what many would today understand as wild nature, but at the same time – as we shall see – fundamentally entangled with human life. How were stories of the wilderness linked to religious identity formation and how did that change over time? A key argument running throughout the following case studies is that the ancient wilderness mythologies analysed

[6] The distinction between emic (culture-specific) and etic (cross-cultural) concepts is relevant here. The study of religion generally needs a set of more specific etic concepts at a lower level of analysis, closer to the empirical data, to add to the general set of very broad etic concepts such as 'myth', 'ritual', 'chaos', etc.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

here are about much more than domination and destruction of more-than-human nature. The narratives testify to nuances, complexities, and ambiguities that cannot be grasped by means of modern nature–culture or cosmos–chaos distinctions. The modern exploitation of wild nature and the ideals of its transformation into cultivated land do not have the strong ancient roots often imagined. The standard view of wilderness in anthropology and the study of religion that ties it to the modern, colonial contexts fall short faced with the ancient material. A broader and more empirically open, etic concept of wilderness is presented in this book and combined with a narrative approach. I use it to address the roles and functions of ancient wilderness mythologies across a variety of contexts and complex relations and social milieu: from the Mesopotamian scribal schools in the second millennium BCE to first-millennium-CE Mediterranean urban, provincial, and agricultural milieu. In the following chapters, after introducing my theoretical approach, the concept of wilderness, and my strategy of analysis, I present a set of case studies of narratives about personal experiences in wildernesses from ancient religions. I explore changes and transformations in the long history of wilderness mythology from the Sumerian literature of the Old Babylonian scribal schools to Latin Christianity in western Europe in late antiquity. This era helped define western, medieval Europe and brought out new understandings of what religion is that are still influential today, but also of the transhistorical importance of intractable wildness in nature for human thriving. This will be discussed in the very final chapter (Chapter 11). Before we get there, let me briefly outline the case studies.

The first section of the book (Chapters 3 and 4) analyses ancient Mesopotamian wilderness mythologies. Chapter 3 analyses stories in Sumerian about the mountain wilderness from the Old Babylonian era (ca. 1900–1700 BCE). The heroic deities Inanna and Ninurta and the human heroes Lugalbanda and Gilgameš venture into the forest wilderness in distant mountains and their experiences go way beyond conquest and dominion. Rather, their wilderness experience helps define or change who they are. Contrary to previous research that has seen the mountain wilderness of these sources as a dangerous and inimical chaos-region, this chapter brings out the complexity of the human–wilderness relations that the narratives convey. The mountain wilderness is a hybrid, naturecultural domain that contains many benign connotations and functions that disturb a dichotomising approach. The wild, monstrous persons of the mountains cannot be understood simply as enemies to be captured or killed. Instead, via the characters, their dialogues and actions,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

these stories advocate respectful interactions with the wilderness and with wild persons, the nonhuman others of the mountains. The Sumerian stories of the wilderness from Old Babylonian times clearly favour hybridity and ambiguity and reflect a deep fascination with nonhuman wildlife. Embedded in these stories of adventures in the wild, we find a subtle critique of order, power, and sovereignty and appreciation of the wilderness. In the wilderness, the characters can access the deities directly, outside the control of the temples. The same goes for the Akkadian wilderness tradition related to the famous king Gilgameš of Uruk that I investigate in Chapter 4. Focusing on the Standard-Babylonian (henceforth: SB) epic from the library of Aššurbanipal in Nineveh from the first millennium BCE, the chapter demonstrates that variable relations pertain between several different ambiguous and marginal spaces in the epic – forest, steppe, and the jewelled orchard. The epic does not pit nature against culture. Instead, the narrative emphasises the complex relationality between human persons, wild persons, nonhuman animals, deities, plants, the forest, and the steppe. By highlighting the hero's many boundary-transgressions in the wilderness or in relation to wild beings, the epic emphasises the hero's wildness. It voices critique of the cultural order, power, and sovereignty, and idealises a form of *wilding* – where an individual takes on wilderness traits in their behaviour, attire, foodways, emotional practices, and so on – as a part of personal identity formation. Indeed, wildness plays a crucial role for Gilgameš' identity formation as a hero and in this lies the narrative's formative power.

The Mesopotamian wilderness narratives do not embed explicit identity formative techniques or strategies, but they nevertheless voice ideals of personal interaction with the wilderness. How a person interacts with the wilderness and wild persons plays a role in defining who they are – as heroes and as gods. These ideals are complex and nuanced, not dichotomous. They idealise respectful interaction with wild persons and understand nonhuman animals and monsters as social beings, subjects. As for understandings of the wild, they favour hybridity and many-sidedness. They do not support or endorse exploitation or destruction of the wild environment. The wilderness and wild persons are presented as dangerous, unpredictable, and ambiguous, but also as persons of value, worthy of respect, in command of the fertile abundance of the nonhuman world. The narratives also highlight how spending time in the wilderness can offer critical perspectives on social order, power, and sovereignty, and show how a person can be *wilded* – changing their identity.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

The book's second section (Chapters 5–7) takes us into the world of ancient Jewish wilderness mythologies. Chapter 5 looks at the narratives about the people's wilderness experiences in the Torah's famous desert mythology. The desert becomes a seminal locus of collective, ethno-religious identity formation, a crucial pedagogic domain in the Hebrew Bible. The chapter argues that the desert is fundamentally ambiguous in the Torah stories. The narrative desert does not reflect a nomad culture, nor does it reflect any desire for the people to transform it into an agricultural landscape. The desert stories reflect a lived everyday life of a mixed culture of agriculture and pastoralism where human life is precarious and food is scarce. Desert mythology, and the dreams of agricultural abundance it embeds, is born out of such a world of scarcity and need, framing agricultural food as a wondrous gift from Yahweh and the people's survival as something for which to give thanks. They are not about exploitation of wild nature, its instrumentalisation, or about turning it into cultivated domains. Rather, they are about human survival in a precarious world and how all fertility and thriving, for nonhuman organisms and animals and humans alike, whether wild or cultivated, stem from Yahweh. Moreover, the stories frame the desert wilderness as a privileged arena for communication with the deity outside of the normal temple arena, for receiving wisdom (Torah), for healing and other marvels, and most importantly, for pedagogically forming the people's religious identity towards an ethos of reformation and thankfulness for the gifts of land and food in everyday life. While mobilising the audience towards thankfulness for the gift of land and food, the texts do not embed any strong concerns for the protection of wildlife or nonhuman organisms; they remain very anthropocentric. The decisive chapters of Deuteronomy that re-narrate Israel's desert experiences before their entry into the promised land also communicate in similar ways about wilderness and religious identity. Yet, those who wrote and edited these texts here voice ideals that connect the wilderness to intense and total devotion on the part of the members of Israel and a specific and intense emotionality that combines love, fear, and disgust. The formation of explicit ideals of total devotion, connected to the wilderness is, I argue, a key step in the history of ancient wilderness mythologies. Wilderness, religious transformation, and an ideal of total devotion are coupled in Deuteronomy.

This combination of the wilderness with total devotion is also found in other narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 6 deals with the stories of the two prophets of Elijah and Elisha who function as *wilded* persons; in

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

them, the wilderness is transposed to the individual person. In the stories of 1 and 2 Kings, Elijah and Elisha function as sacred mediators, ambiguous and liminal. In their characterisation, the wilderness and wild nature play decisive roles. They perform their connection to wilderness by wandering around in marginal zones, being fed by wild animals such as ravens, and by wilding their attire and habits. They can both access Yahweh's power of natural fertility. Interestingly, this power is feral, wild. This power enables the prophets to produce rain, life, health, and brings out the power of wildness in everyday life and the dependence of human life on it. Interestingly, in the Books of Kings as well, the wild man is also pictured as totally devoted in dramatic scenes of violence. The stories idealise radical religious acts done for the purpose of religious exclusivism and connect them to the wilderness and wildness.

Chapter 7 unfolds how wilderness mythology is used in selected chapters of the collection of religious literature known as the prophet Isaiah. Here, we also meet an ambiguous wilderness image, but combined with an outright benign view of a flourishing wilderness placed under the care of Yahweh. The chapters contain some of the most detailed passages about more-than-human natural aspects of wilderness in the Hebrew Bible (Is 34–35). These wilderness aspects add to our understanding of wilderness mythology by connecting the wilderness at the margins of the human world with some of the Hebrew Bible's most thoroughly unfolded nonhuman-natural images and apocalyptic ideas. The images portray Yahweh as the master of wild natural abundance and fertility, but also emphasise a cultural critique of current power structures, and voice ideas of a new world at the end of time. Wilderness mythology is here used to envision a new, fertile future, but one that remains within the scope of the biblical storyworld's anthropocentric and agriculturally focused framework.

The book's third and final section (Chapters 8–10) takes up Christian wilderness mythology. The first chapter (Chapter 8) analyses the reception and transformation of wilderness mythology from the Hebrew Bible in the literature of the emerging Christ movement to see which aspects were carried on and how new ones developed. Focusing on the gospel of Matthew, I argue that the wilderness stories are used to sanction and legitimate Jesus' identity, drawing on Hebrew Bible wilderness mythology and the Jewish wild man and apocalyptic prophet tradition. Wilderness becomes a sanctioned space for religious identity formation for the Jesus devotees, literarily, metaphorically, and as a body technology. Wilderness mythology develops into ascetic ideals and ascetic practice; voluntary self-marginalisation and total devotion are coupled to the point of renouncing

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

all other social ties in favour of a world to come. The wilderness' natural-material aspects almost disappear from the stories. Wilderness mythology is here very influential but also clearly quite disinterested in the physical, eco-material world; the focus is on human salvation.

In Chapter 9, I discuss the explicit development of religious identity formation ideals in relation to the wilderness narratives that proliferate in Christian asceticism in late antiquity from the fourth century CE onwards. Through media such as letters and narratives (foremost among which, Athanasius' *Life of Antony*) and incorporating Greek models and ideas, the desert became a decisive part of the Christian landscape, and intimately connected to it, the ascetic, 'wild' body a key religious medium for accessing the other world. The chapter analyses the Greek text known as *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* as a form of wilderness travel writing that offered touristic, armchair consumption, connected not only to the practice of pilgrimage, but also to ideas of Christian transformability – conversion – in ways that connect a radical transformation of the self tightly, and explicitly, to the wilderness. This desert wilderness was seen as a route out of this world, but the interest in the physical materiality of the nonhuman world reappears in stories about the wildlife of the Egyptian desert. The monks relate to the desert in fascinating ways that stimulate reactions of awe in the audience.

Chapter 10 takes us to the west, to late antique Gaul, where aspiring ascetics sought out the wilderness experience by venturing out into the local forests, mountains, and islands. Among these were, from the 420s, a group of Christians who travelled to the island of Lérins, off the coast of modern Cannes, to live the wilderness life. In the selected text, *In Praise of the Desert*, the wilderness becomes a metaphorical but also a storied space, deeply entangled in the biblical storyworld. In this text, any retreat, whether to an island, a forest, a treetop, or even a metaphorical one in one's heart, could count as a stay in the wilderness. The power and authority of wilderness mythology is palpable and used to gain traction in elite, urban power struggles on the mainland. Christian religious identity is framed as a pilgrimage into the wilderness, on the way towards the treasure in heaven. In the book's final analysis, we return to the forest in the mountains, as we come full circle in terms of the functions of wilderness mythology: in the sixth-century *Life of the Jura Fathers*, also from Gaul, we have voluntary self-marginalisation, cultural critique, intense emotion and devotion, and a metaphorical understanding of life as wilderness pilgrimage, *en route* to salvation in the next world. At the same time, the wilderness is an access point to the sacred power, fertility,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001

and protection of the other world that is here combined with the natural-material world of the Gallic forests, without aspects of destruction or domination and without idealisations of agriculture. The power of wildness is used, by the monks, to help the everyday lives of ordinary people by channelling it into letters and writing, thus emphasising the new literary media that became decisive in the development of western Europe.

In the book's final chapter (Chapter 11), I discuss wilderness stories and what they help us do. I suggest that wilderness mythologies played a role in the changes in antique religions that led to new religious formations. I critique the classical concepts of polytheism versus monotheism, arguing instead that the history of wilderness mythologies has opened up a new way of looking at these momentous religious transformations: the important change is not related to one or more deities, but to the development of types of religious identity formation that question and critique the existing cultural and social order, that practice voluntary self-marginalisation, see the new religious identity as non-contiguous with 'the world'. This is formulated as a journey into the wilderness, requiring total devotion and intense emotion, and supporting individualising tendencies in ancient religions. I also take up the question of the role of personal narratives in framing our relationships with the more-than-human world. Ultimately, wilderness narratives are stories that deal with the uncontrollability of more-than-human nature. Ancient wilderness mythologies are, most forcefully, stories about nature as fundamentally beyond human control and its importance for human experience, identity, and thriving. Ancient wilderness mythologies can inspire fascination and awe of nature, new forms of attention to nature beyond aggression and control, and show us how transformative that can be.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 13.201.136.108, on 26 Jul 2025 at 04:58:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009574556.001