

## Introduction

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Many of the chief spaces of interaction between humans and non-human nature in the ancient world were areas that we would today call wilderness. Wild animals and wild spaces feature prominently in ancient Christian texts. Speaking crocodiles and lions, marvellous bees and dangerous snakes, remote mountain forests, arid deserts, and lush islands are all types of wild nature that play important roles in hagiography and ascetic literature. These roles are not exhausted or fully explained by classical historical approaches that focus on geographical location, or by dichotomous readings that view wild areas and beings as chaotic, demonic, or dangerous. Such interpretations often omit the concrete verbalisations of wild, natural, and material components, as well as their key role in the formation of Christian identity, or overlook the ambiguous or sometimes benign portrayal of wild spaces and wild beings.

This special issue explores forms of religious identity formation in late antique Christian hagiography and ascetic literature that relate to non-human wild nature and wild beings. The contributions understand the natural-material component of wildernesses in light of recent theoretical criticism of the concept of nature, by the history and anthropology of religion. The articles suggest new analyses of wild spaces and wild beings that move beyond seeing them only in terms of chaos-cosmos or nature-culture dichotomies; these analyses build instead on recent work that views wilderness, landscapes, and nature as complex and hybrid. The articles thus address the wild spaces and variable landscapes used in the formation of ancient Christian identity. We look comparatively at spaces such as forests, deserts, mountains, islands, and rivers and at wild natural beings. The key question that guides our analyses concern how the formation of ancient religious identities is reflected in these religious texts. Which types of identity formation are developed? Which categories are applied to the world and the beings involved, and how do these categories reflect continuities and disruptions in late antique Christianities? Before I describe the five contributions to this special issue, let me briefly outline some of the theoretical perspectives on which we draw.

I. NEW DIRECTIONS IN STUDIES OF SPATIALITY, LANDSCAPE,  
AND WILDERNESS<sup>1</sup>

While the term “wilderness” is often associated with the natural biosphere free from human influence, this understanding of the term is far from accurate. Conceptions of wilderness are always embedded in specific lifeworlds and social practices. Wildernesses are imagined cultural spaces, and they encompass concrete aspects of geography and social practices at the same time<sup>2</sup>. The theoretical perspectives and concepts relevant for analysing ancient religious understandings and uses of wilderness, wild nature, and wild animals, as well as the religious functions and history of wildernesses and various other landscapes, intersect not only with classical interests in cosmologies and worldviews, but also with contemporary interest in spatiality and non-human nature. The notion of wilderness is connected to concepts such as chaos or nature, but is not identical with them. In studies of religious cosmologies, cosmos-chaos, nature-culture, and wilderness-civilisation dichotomies have been prominent, but recent interest shows that they may be too rigid and not apt to capture the diversity of human engagement with our environment in a cross-cultural perspective<sup>3</sup>.

Nature, climate, and ecology have also become major research foci in the social sciences and cultural studies, and interest in religion and nature has been growing during the last two decades<sup>4</sup>. A key insight in this field is that nature and culture are invariably interconnected and never appear as separate entities but always as varieties of “naturecultures”<sup>5</sup>. The growing field of ecocriticism and the flourishing interest in ontologies among anthropologists<sup>6</sup>, inspired by Actor-Network theory and new materialisms<sup>7</sup>, has shown that more complexity is needed in our analyses. Human beings are not opposed to a nature that we do not inhabit but are invariably immersed in diverse practical, bodily, and perceptual engagements with

1. For this section, I draw freely on aspects of my forthcoming monograph on ancient wilderness mythologies, as well as on previous writings about approaches to wilderness: L. FELDT, *Introduction*, in EAD. (ed.), *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion* (Religion and Society, 55), Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, 1-24; EAD., *Ancient Wilderness Mythologies – The Case of Space and Religious Identity Formation in the Gospel of Matthew*, in *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16 (2015) 163-192; EAD., *Religion, Nature, and Ambiguous Space in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mountain Wilderness in Old Babylonian Religious Narratives*, in *Numen* 63 (2016) 347-382.

2. FELDT, *Introduction* (n. 1).

3. *Ibid.*

4. E.g., B. TAYLOR, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, London, Continuum, 2005.

5. Cf. D. HARAWAY, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

6. See, e.g., G. GARRARD, *Ecocriticism* (New Critical Idiom), Abingdon, Routledge, 2012.

7. P. DESCOLA, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2015; M. HOLBRAAD – M.A. PETERSEN, *The Ontological Turn*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

the surrounding environment; landscapes and natural spaces invariably affect human practice and understanding<sup>8</sup>.

As mentioned at the outset, the concept of wilderness is commonly associated with the pristine and natural biosphere free from human influence. Yet such a conception of wilderness demonstrates quite vividly that wildernesses are cultural and historical spaces that are embedded in specific lifeworlds and social practices. This embeddedness means that wildernesses simultaneously contain aspects of imagined cultural spaces, natural-geographical spaces, and concrete forms of materiality, and that special social practices pertain to them. For these reasons, it is difficult to grasp wildernesses by means of the dichotomies that have often been used – wilderness versus civilisation, tame versus wild, domesticated versus free, nature versus culture, authentic versus fake, and more<sup>9</sup>.

Wildernesses have often been imagined as remote boundary regions, as meeting places between humans, animals, monsters, demons, and gods. In such ambiguous territories, it was possible for transgressions, exchange, and interaction between realms and persons to take place, and no easy demarcations between nature and culture can be made. But how can we investigate wildernesses cross-culturally in ways that integrate the multiple aspects of this cluster of human-environment relationships? One approach is to define what can be understood by the concept at the beginning, so that it can be openly discussed. This approach allows us to analyse ancient conceptions of wilderness comparatively, discussing their differences as well as their similarities. Our objects of study are of course not given but are rather composed of varying material, cognitive, cultural, and social conditions and frames. This complexity means that wildernesses are at once heterogenous products of an *ars combinatoria*, constructed culturally, materially, and socially (etc.), and that they appear when we start looking for them. Wildernesses and the wild can, in principle, be found in freshly rewilded, urban spaces<sup>10</sup>, or in environmentally damaged landscapes<sup>11</sup>, as well as at the remote edges of the planet and in national parks set aside and designated as wilderness. We suggest that wildernesses can also be found in an important sample of ancient Christian texts. The concept of wilderness may be more or less useful with regard to varying cultural contexts and sources, and we need to discuss its usage critically. Still, any concept should, ultimately, be judged on its analytical fertility. I propose the following definition or set of basic assumptions that allow us to identify specific natural spaces and landscapes as our objects of

8. FELDT, *Introduction* (n. 1).

9. *Ibid.*

10. P. VANNINI – A. VANNINI, *Wilderness: Key Ideas in Geography*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 25.

11. A. TSING, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015.

study across different ancient religious contexts and to analyse their roles in identity formation:

A wilderness is a naturecultural space, an area narrated, mediated, and practiced as a marginal, liminal zone primarily dominated by non-human life forms, forces, and objects; a wilderness is neither seen as the home or centre of activity for humans, nor fully placed in an other world inhabited only by deities or other superhuman beings or forces; rather it is placed at the outskirts of the everyday world.

In religious narratives, wilderness spaces are often distanced from and marginal with respect to an inhabited or home region, as well as the other world of the deities. This marginal status means that wildernesses have mediating functions in regard to these two other spaces: the home space and the other world. Often, wildernesses are imagined as boundary zones, areas in which humans, animals, monsters, demons, and gods can meet, and often these boundary zones are characterised by ambiguity and liminality<sup>12</sup>. Wilderness spaces are, however, not intrinsically free from human influence or from interactions with humans, since the notion itself is nature-cultural and subject to historical change. Rather, wild spaces are peripheral areas seldom inhabited by humans or in which non-human animals dominate. In religions and mythologies, such spaces can be ascribed a special status in relation to the other world, or the sacred, and thus harbour many kinds of sociality and culturality.

Wildernesses are thus heterogenous and encompass places, objects, and a variety of actors from humans to non-human animals, monsters and deities, etc. They can stand in various relations to other places, objects, and actors in different contexts. Across the Christian hagiographies studied in this issue, we argue that the concept of wilderness enables us to observe and compare naturecultural marginal spaces and landscapes which have historical, social, and more-than-human-natural significance, and that this endeavour is fruitful for a better understanding of late antique Christian forms of identity formation. We need concepts and strategies of analysis that are apt for handling the complexities involved in comparing such spaces across variable contexts, and we suggest that wilderness is such a concept.

If we consider the neighbouring concepts of marginality or liminality, they leave out most, if not all, aspects of non-human nature. The term “wilderness” signals a more detailed attention to non-human life forms, landscapes, and natural materiality<sup>13</sup>. In some religious imaginaries,

12. A. VAN GENNEP, *Les rites de passage*, Paris, Émile Nourry, 1909; V. TURNER, *Liminality and Communitas*, in ID., *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1979, 94-130; J.-P. SCHJØDT, *Wilderness, Liminality, and the ther in Old Norse Myth and Cosmology*, in FELDT (ed.), *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion* (n. 1), 183-204.

13. As opposed to artefactual or technological kinds of materiality.

wilderness areas can also become so imaginary and metaphorical that the natural aspects all but disappear; this, too, the concept helps us to make visible. So, with this special issue and by opening a conversation on naturecultural landscapes and wild nature, we suggest that the concept of wilderness and the focus on landscapes are useful perspectives in discussions about the formation of late ancient Christian identity. We hope to show that these perspectives are valuable in concrete analyses, including in those cases where some aspects of the concept of wilderness are barely present or present in very differing ways, because it is still the comparative concept that makes us see precisely those aspects that might be missing or that might vary. Our investigations also show that the values and meanings attached and ascribed to such wilderness regions and landscapes can differ considerably and that wildernesses can, but need not necessarily, be regarded as standing in negative contrast to cultivated terrains or as being void of sociality. Nor are all wildernesses regarded as related – negatively or positively – to only *one* other space, since relations to several other spaces, or several different types of actors or practices, may be highly relevant in some contexts.

New approaches to place, space, and landscape in history and anthropology have motivated scholars to take up the notion of spatiality<sup>14</sup>. The current interest in how space is produced, imagined, and lived<sup>15</sup>, in addition to a more conventional interest in space as a geophysical, mapped reality, means that spaces and landscapes, such as rivers, forests, deserts, and more, should not be investigated only geographically, as positions on a map or in terms of physical materiality, but also with respect to practices, ways of moving about, experiences, relations, and forms of engagement<sup>16</sup>. Theories of space share an interest in how space is imagined, lived, and produced, including in material ways, and so spatiality theory shares concerns with recent studies in the field of nature, culture, and religion, as well as with materiality studies and the research trend in ontology.

Since space has to do with ways of moving about, experiences, modes of production, forms of materiality, relations between actors, and forms of engagement, this body of theory is well suited for combination with an interest in naturecultures. Space is seen as actively created and shaped through practices, experiences, and relations – it is a social *and* material construct<sup>17</sup>. Although much interest has centred on cities and buildings,

14. E.g., H. LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1991 [translated from *La production de l'espace*, 1974]; S. SCHAMA, *Landscape and Memory*, London, Fontana, 1996; N. THRIFT – S. WHATMORE (eds.), *Cultural Geography*, London, Routledge, 2004.

15. E.g., K. KNOTT, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, London, Routledge, 2005; T. INGOLD, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 214; THRIFT – WHATMORE, *Cultural Geography* (n. 14).

16. FELDT, *Introduction* (n. 1); EAD., *Religion, Nature, and Ambiguous Space* (n. 1).

17. Especially the work of philosopher Henri Lefebvre and geographer Edward W. Soja demonstrates that space is not a mental construct alone; it is also always material, and

“natural” spaces should also be studied from such perspectives. Differing social conditions, means of production, material environments, imaginations, experiences, histories, relations, and varying ways of moving about play into the construction of particular wilderness spaces and landscapes. Although they draw inspiration from these trends, the articles gathered here all work from their own strategy of analysis, highlighting the complexities of spatial studies, nature and ecology studies, and ancient sources. Acknowledging that the sources are and ancient lives were more complex than our theories, our strategies of analysis all converge on trying to make room for complexity in the relations between humans and their environments, without losing analytical sharpness or focus.

In this special issue, we try to take the natural materiality and non-human natural beings – animals – of different spaces and landscapes seriously. The articles discuss the variable forms of materiality of wild spaces and animals, how these spaces and beings have been imagined and understood in various cultural and religious contexts, as well as aspects of how relationships with them were fostered, and how these relationships were practised and lived out in various forms of Christianity in late antiquity.

## II. PRESENTATION OF THE ARTICLES

The contributions to this special issue have been organised according to types of space and thematic interests, rather than chronology. This thematic organisation means that we start off in the seminal desert space, moving from there to the river and the forest as alternative types of wilderness that influenced the formation of ancient Christian identity. Then, we delve into the significance of one specific wild animal, the lion, and finally we touch upon the composite features of a specific landscape, Cappadocia.

Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* has been the subject of much study and, by intimately connecting ascetic performance to the desert wilderness as a space, it has played a tremendous role in the formation of ancient Christian identity and beyond. Jan N. BREMMER discusses how asceticism and the wilderness became connected in antiquity by tracing a *longue durée* history of asceticism beginning with the Pythagorean care of the self. Into this context, he places his study of Jerome’s *Life of Paul the Hermit* and compares Jerome’s work with that of Athanasius. After showing that the physical desert wilderness could be interpreted in quite different and opposite ways, Bremmer examines how Jerome painted a picture of an idealised

representations of space in social thought and practice cannot be understood as projections of modes of thinking independent of socio-material conditions (E.W. SOJA, *Postmodern Geographies*, New York, Verso, 1989, pp. 124-126; LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space* [n. 14]).

and fictitious hermit, who had devoted himself completely to life in the wilderness. For Jerome, the physical wilderness was clearly not populated by demons and did not have the terrifying characteristics it had for Athanasius; for Jerome, the demonic and the terrifying is found in the city, that is, in Alexandria. He pictures the wild beings of the wilderness as faithful Christians, while the Christian inhabitants of Alexandria are the true demons. Interestingly, the wilderness is a fully transformed and salvific space: all who live there are worshippers of God, even the lions. Thus, Jerome is very critical of Athanasius' work throughout the biography of Paul. He uses the description of Antony's visit to let Paul surpass Antony in all aspects of ascetic life, from small details, such as the age of leaving home, to ways of practicing asceticism in the desert. Jerome thus presents more radical ascetic ideals than Athanasius does, and Jerome connects the salvific strivings of the hermits even more intimately to the desert wilderness, such as when he presents the image of a white-robed Paul ascending to heaven amidst bands of angels.

The desert was not the only space that could be seen as a wilderness and used in religious identity formation in antiquity. Many cultures attach religious significance to the sea and to rivers, often emphasising the aspects of size, depth, constant motion, and un-differentiation as wild or chaotic features. In ancient Egypt, characterised by mountainous desert and dry lands, the Nile was of primary importance for agricultural fertility, trade, fishing, hunting, water supply, and more. The Nile accordingly formed an important part of people's identities and lifeworld. In the issue's second article, Ingvild GILHUS investigates the wilderness aspects of the Nile and focuses on how aquatic space was produced, imagined, and lived by ascetics and monastics in Christian Egypt. The article brings out how the imagined space of the river could shift character, depending on how it was conceived and lived. Gilhus argues that we need to distinguish between several aspects of the river Nile in ancient Christian sources. The river is understood as a life-giver that offers natural fertility and wealth, but many sources also portray the river as a negative image of life in this world that needs to be combated, and a space in which the ascetic heroes can demonstrate their superhuman powers. Moreover, the sources also demonstrate that the river encompasses more terrifying aspects of wilderness; these are embodied in crocodiles and in the life-threatening qualities of the waters. Contrary to the desert wilderness that has been the focus of much scholarly attention and that could be ascribed paradisiacal qualities, the Nile as a watery wilderness was a more thoroughly ambiguous space in Christian sources, and liminal in more ways than one, inasmuch as it could also represent a meeting-space between ancient Egyptian religion and Christianity.

As ascetic ideals moved from east to west in late antiquity, aspiring hermits sought out alternative wilderness spaces. Islands, caves, and forests thus became functional equivalents of the Egyptian desert, as we can



see in Laura FELDT's examination of how wild nature is framed and used in late antique Gaul. Her article presents perspectives drawn from theories of spatiality and narrative, and she discusses the role that wild nature plays in the formation of Christian identity in this era. Her focus is the Latin text of *The Life of the Jura Fathers*, in which the material space of the forests of Gaul is interwoven with aspects of designed space from biblical and ascetic literature, as well as with ideas of Gallic rusticity into a new and complex synthesis that is not dichotomous. The wilderness is here a benign and peaceful space that secures the decisive identity transformation of the ascetics, and in which they can connect to the other world. Interestingly, the natural fertility, protection, and power of the other world that they can access via wild nature gains a remarkable literary aspect and can be channelled into their writing and letters. The text indicates that the material-physical qualities of wild nature were quite important in the formation of Christian identity in this region. It was not just about harnessing the well-known qualities of the desert; it was about a broader idea of the benefits of ascetic practice in wild nature, about simplicity and rusticity, connected to Gaul. Clearly, wilderness mythology continued to be important for the formation of Christian, ascetic identity, in the West, too, where the desert was transformed into a wider category of marginal space that encompassed islands and mountainous forests.

In addition to focusing on large-scale landscapes, important aspects of identity formation can be teased out by analysing the roles of a single wild animal. Not only were wild and rustic landscapes decisive for Christian piety in antiquity, so were specific wild animals. In our next article, Christian HØGEL argues that the use of lions in the writings of Cyril of Skythopolis does not amount to exoticism or an attempt at naïve endearment, but instead forms a crucial part of the hagiographies. In framing this motif, the author draws creatively on the use of lions in a large narrative network reaching from Androkles to the Old Testament and various hagiographical stories. Høgel shows that Cyril uses lions, as the inhabitants of the ἔρημος, in order to emphasise a noble handing over of the landscape to the Christian Fathers as its divinely sanctioned guardians. Using a three-fold scheme of pre-Christian wilderness, saintly transformation, and present time, and emphasising the eschatological connotations of the lions, Cyril lets these wild animals take an active part in the miracles and in suggesting the sublimity of the desert space. The lions and their relations with the monks in the remote wilderness are clearly markers of the new life. Still, the ambiguity of the wilderness space does not fully leave the account, since Cyril's attitude to the wilderness as a space also demonstrates a wish for more monastic settlements and thus a human transformation of the area.

Delving deeper into the dialectics between city and various countryside landscapes, we touch upon more general aspects of a tension between centre and periphery. This tension points to the relevance of architecture



in transformations of cultural memory during times of religious competition. In our final article, Chiara TOMMASI combines these aspects in an investigation of how religious traditions in late antique Cappadocia approached their sacred spaces, in part thanks to the geographical structure of the region. Discussing first the peculiar structure of the Cappadocian countryside, she draws examples from the writings of the Cappadocian fathers, taking into account episodes from the lives of Gregory Thaumaturgus and other saints. Tommasi looks at the shaping of a local martyrial tradition and the experience of ascetic communities, and she discusses the persistence and marginalisation of heretical fringes. In Tommasi's analysis, the power of controlling nature is explicitly linked by the sources to the civilising power of Christianity, as she brings out how the Cappadocian fathers worked to demonstrate that Christian morality was inherent in the natural landscape. Tommasi provides a detailed socio-historical reconstruction that fits into the wider perspective of late antique religious struggles. We see clearly how the compositeness of the Cappadocian landscape as a boundary space offered a great measure of elasticity to shifting forms of identity formation.

### III. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Today the concepts of wilderness and wild nature are often associated with a pristine and natural biosphere free from human influence, but as the case studies of this special issue show, wilderness ideas and practices are historically and culturally variable. Wild nature is rarely a natural environment that has not been modified by human activity, nor is it an area uncontaminated by civilisation, for differing conceptions of wilderness bear witness to human practices and to varying natural, cultural, social, and historical aspects. In this special issue, we highlight some of the variations in ancient conceptions of wilderness, wild nature, and wild or rural landscapes. Across the case studies, we not only analyse and discuss variations and cultural specificities from ancient Egypt through Palestine, Cappadocia, and Gaul, we also look at different forms of wilderness and wild nature from the desert, the river, and the forest, to entire landscapes and particular wild animals. The articles bring out very clearly that these varying and heterogenous wilderness understandings and practices cannot easily be grasped by means of dichotomous approaches and that a detailed attention to the concrete materiality of natural landscapes is necessary if we wish to understand better how ancient Christians related to natural landscapes and how these relations affected the variable formation of ascetic identity. It is worth highlighting, in view of older, dichotomous approaches to non-human nature, that the wild landscapes and wild animals play important roles across the sources studied here; at the same time, wild, marginal space and wild animals are clearly seen as connected to the

other world, the divine realm. While in several cases retaining important measures of ambiguity, the benign qualities ascribed to wild nature and wild animals is striking. We hope that our investigations will stimulate further investigation of ancient ecologies and religion.

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