



Forests as a Concept or Forests as an Encounter

Whose Experience of Nature Do We Find in Ancient Stories?

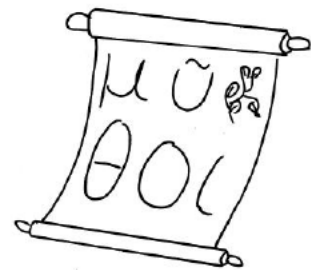
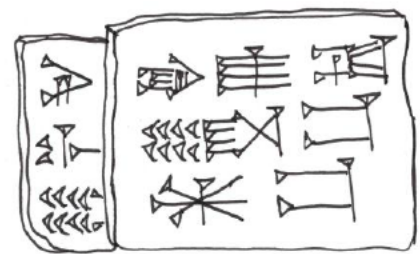
OIKOS-meeting on Ecocriticism
May 8th 2026 (14:45-15:15)

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A Story about Stories

- The Project
- The Data
- Preliminary Results
 - Five Roles for Forests
 - Explaining the Similarities Between the Text Corpora
- A Story from Mesopotamia
- A Story from the Aegean
- Concluding Remarks



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The Project

- **Underlying research matter:** Can we use narrative literature to reconstruct the ideas and attitudes of people in antiquity?
- **My research project:** Do ancient stories about nature tell us about how people viewed and treated their environment?
- **Central problems:** Whose views and which environments?
- I focus on forests and try to answer **two research questions:**
 - Does the role of forests in ancient narrative literature differ between forested and forestless areas?
 - What can explain the eventual differences and/or similarities?

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The Project

- Seven ancient text corpora, analyzed through **Storied Ecology**
- **Environmental Humanities:** Places humans back in nature as an explicit part of it.
- **Assumption:** Stories as a reservoir for environmental knowledge and thus resilience
- **Storied Ecology**
 - Stories are imaginative and meant to be known
 - I am looking for (implicit) imagined landscapes
 - Feedback loops & environmental encounters
 - Categorization useful, but imposing genres it not
 - Recursive exercise, which includes other sources

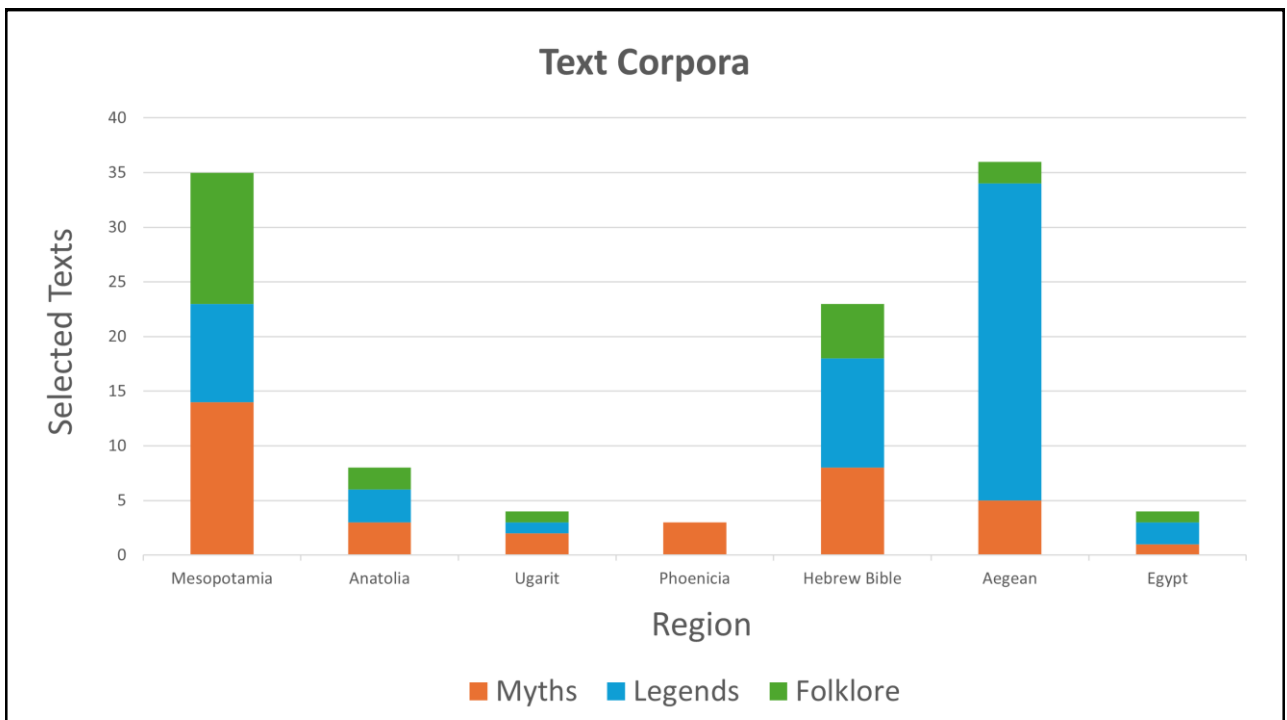


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The Data

- Comparing texts from different environments
 - Forestless: Mesopotamia, Egypt
 - Forested: Anatolia, the Levant, the Aegean
- Chronology Mesopotamia as starting point
- Caveats concerning the comparability of the texts
 - Was cuneiform culture uniform over different regions?
 - Almost only (far) later sources for the ancient Aegean
 - Merely certain kinds of texts from ancient Egypt
 - Lineage of many texts poses questions of comparability
 - Contemporary oral traditions are largely unknowable

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The Data

- Nuances concerning the data as it is represented here
 - Natural environments differ **within** regions that are taken together here. Important to consider microecologies
 - Not every mention of forests is created equal: the extent of their role in the various stories differs
 - The amounts can distort. Only two folkloric texts from the Aegean, but one is the voluminous *Histories* by Herodotus
 - Distinction between myths, legends, and folklore useful, but not always straightforward – stories within stories
- There is perhaps a better system: number of mentions?

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Preliminary Results

Role of forests is ambiguous, as befits a liminal space. We can discern at least five distinct aspects to the roles forests fulfil.

1. A **neutral** element, often before the world order is created
2. A place of material abundance, which can be considered **positive**
3. A liminal place outside of the everyday life in the built environment with spiritual abundance, including **positive** encounters
4. An inimical obstacle, both in a material and spiritual sense. Mostly portrayed as **negative**, despite the possibility for fame etc.
5. A contrast to the built environment, which is used to define who 'we' are vs. 'them'; the latter are mostly portrayed **negatively**

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Preliminary Results

- Possible explanations for the similar, ambiguous role of forests in the stories from forested and forestless regions
 1. Similar circumstances breed the same kind of stories
 2. Written stories were an elite project and these people had another connection with (faraway) biomes than others
 3. It was a motive that circulated in a literary-cultural continuum
 4. Mystified forests were (and are) a so-called universal motif
- At least a caution that these stories do not necessarily pertain solely to experiences of ancient persons with local environments



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A Story from Mesopotamia

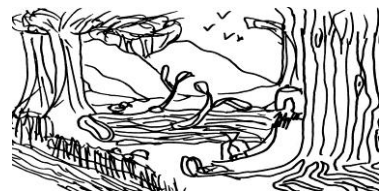
- Important terms:
 - Sumerian: ^(Ĝiš)TIR (forest), ĜIŠ (wood), name(s) of the constituent trees
 - Akkadian: *qištu*, *ħalbu* (forest), *qīšu* (thicket), Sumerograms, tree names
- **Gilgamesh & Huwawa** – A Sumerian story
 - Cedar forest is a faraway and dangerous place
 - The forests is the divinely legitimated domain of it's inhabitants, ruled over like a proper polity
 - In the forest are divine energy and dwellings
 - Power of the guardian is imagined as cedar trees
 - The guardian bargains with Gilgamesh for things they cannot acquire
 - Gilgamesh deceives the forest guardian before ultimately killing them



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A Story from the Aegean

- Important terms:
 - Greek: *drūmós*, ὄλη (forest), *nápaios* (forested dale), *álsos* (grove, but also a transferred meaning – sacred enclosure), *dendrê-eis* (tree-filled), names of constituent trees
- Sometimes links with experienced environments (*i.e.* Bently 2025)
- Examples of forests as a liminal place in Herodotus' *Histories*
 - **2.133:** The Egyptian king Mycerinus aims to undergo a rite of passage in the marshes and groves, in order to combat the curse that has been laid upon him
 - **4.109:** Forests house animals who harbor special healing abilities, such as that of the Geloni people
 - **2.32 & 4.191:** Forests house unusual creatures
 - **4.76:** Anacharsis retreats to a forest after his fantastical travels, where he celebrates rites to the gods before he returns to the mundane world of the Scythians
- Comparable with cuneiform texts? How far do these stories go back?



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Concluding Remarks

- An important ecocritical project is using surviving narrative literatures from the past to establish what people's attitudes towards the environments which they considered to be natural were back then and how those views influenced their treatment of nature. Storied Ecology can aid us therein
- Comparative research can help us determining if and to what extent we can actually deduce ancient attitudes from stories
- But the conclusion will always be a combination of experiences and preconceived notions, as are all human environmental encounters
- My example with forests presents a few further lines of research
 - One's local environment did not solely determine one's attitude towards forests
 - We are perhaps dealing with a broadly shared attitude or (blind) literary motif

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Thank you for your attention!

Very (very!) concise Bibliography:

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