Beyond the tourist beaches, blue seas and idyllic islands of Greece lies an often mountainous and remote country with peaks rising to over 2,000m (the highest is Mount Olympus at 2,919m), the lower slopes cloaked in forests of mixed pine and deciduous trees and dense scrub.

The classical region of Arcadia, on the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece, typifies this wild country, a landlocked area of steep limestone ridges and thick woods of oak and chestnut. Arcadia is closely associated with Greek mythology, and with wolves. The man-eating birds of Lake Stymphalus, killed by Hercules in his sixth labour, were originally chased there by a pack of wolves. Central to Arcadian mythology however, is Mount Lykaion. Rising 1,421 metres out of the central highlands of the peninsula, Mount Lykaion means ‘bright mountain’, but is also linked to ὁ λύκος, Greek for wolf.

Legend tells that King Lykaon entertained a stranger, who may have been Zeus, but he was unsure. In order to test whether he was a god or not, Lykaon served his guest human flesh. Instantly realising, Zeus turned Lykaon into a wolf.

This myth later gave rise to the cult of Zeus Lykaios, whose rituals allegedly included a human sacrifice to Zeus on an altar at the top of Mount Lykaion, every eight years. During this ritual, a small morsel of entrails from the sacrifice were mixed with those from animals and eaten by the participants. Whoever ate the human flesh would be turned into a wolf, and could only return to human form if he abstained from eating human flesh for the next eight years. A story tells of an Arcadian boxer named Damarchus, who won at the Olympics in around 400BC, after changing into a wolf and then changing back nine years later.

In another similar myth from Arcadia, a young man was chosen to undergo an ordeal; on removing his clothes, he swam across a lake, whereupon he became a wolf. Eight years later, provided he had not tasted human flesh, he could return across the lake, don his clothes and once again resume human form.

These myths are part of the origin of the werewolf; the condition of lycanthropy, or being a werewolf comes from the Greek ὁ λύκος – wolf, and ἄνθρωπος – man, and reflects the close association between people and wolves in Greece at the time. Turning into a wolf as punishment reflected a negative attitude towards wolves, which were common in Greece in classical times and posed very real threat to people’s livestock and livelihoods. The first recorded bounty anywhere on wolves was imposed in Greece in the sixth century by the lawmaker Solon.

A more positive view of wolves emerges in the myth associated with Mount Parnassus on mainland Greece. Various versions tell that the people of the area worshipped wolves, and believed that they originated in a place called Lykoreia, or ‘wolf-mountain’; or alternatively that the city ruled by Parnassos was flooded by torrential rains, and the people fled, following the howls of wolves up the mountain to safety, where they founded Lykoreia, translated in this case as ‘the howling of wolves’.

Wolves were once present throughout continental Greece; by the 1930’s they were extinct on the Peloponnese peninsula, and by the late twentieth century were restricted to three main populations:

- The Pindos mountain range, running from the north to the south of continental Greece, and encompassing the Vikos-Aoos National Park and the Pindos National Park at Valia Calda. There is a low human population density in these mountains, although sheep and goats are grazed in the mountains in summer in the traditional way;

- the Rodopi Mountains, which form the boundary between Greece and Bulgaria, and are rich in flora and fauna, including red deer, wild boar and a healthy population of roe deer;

- the Evros area in north-eastern Greece, close to the border with Turkey, which includes the Dadia Forest Wildlife Reserve in the protected area of Dadia-Lefkimi-Soufli forest, and is also home to the rare black vulture.
Wolves are also present in Oeta National Park in the Ghiona-Vardoussia-Oeta offshoot of the Pindos mountains, in the centre of the country. There are now estimated to be just 200-300 wolves in the whole of Greece. Only the northernmost populations in the Pindos and Rodopi mountains are still connected to a larger Balkan population in Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria.

With the exception of the Rodopi Mountains, wild prey density is low, while abundant livestock is still grazed in the traditional way, with sheep and livestock ranging freely, and many of the country’s wolves survive on livestock and domestic dogs.

Wolves are protected by law under the Bern Convention, to which Greece is a signatory, and to a lesser extent by the European Habitat Directive, which excludes wolves north of the 39th parallel in Greece from the list of species requiring strict protection. Compensation is paid by the Greek authorities and insurance companies for livestock lost to wolves, however, illegal killing is not uncommon, with shooting and poisons such as compound 1080 often being used. It is estimated that around 100 wolves a year are killed this way. Traditionally, wolves are viewed as an evil, bloodthirsty animal, mainly due to conflicts with livestock interests. Despite protection, the government remains reluctant to prosecute those who kill wolves illegally.

As well as illegal killing in retribution for livestock depredation, wolves face threats from timber production and roads encroaching on their habitat, as well as uncontrolled tourist and recreation activities, particularly in the Pindos range, where off-road vehicle tours are popular.

In the twenty-first century, not many people outside Greece are aware that there are still wolves in the country that has contributed so much to wolf mythology, and whilst the population is currently classified as stable, it remains vulnerable to habitat loss and increasing human encroachment, and without conservation measures, including connecting fragmented populations with habitat corridors, may be lost altogether in the future.

Bibliography:


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