

Some people saw visions of deities. The future emperor Galba dreamt that the goddess Fortuna was standing outside his door; when he awoke he opened the door and discovered a bronze statue of the goddess. A previously obscure man named Curtius Rufus saw a larger-than-life vision of the goddess Africa, who correctly predicted that he would become governor of the province Africa. Eucrates, a character in Lucian's satirical dialogue Philopseudes ("the man who loved tall tales") claims he saw the infernal goddess Hecate - the ghostess with the mostest - holding a sword in one hand and a torch in the other. She stood 200 feet high, had snakes for hair and snakes for feet, and her hunting dogs were bigger than elephants.

Most ghosts were of humans, namely, the shades of the deceased, who lived in the underworld and were not seen by the living except in unusual circumstances. At the end of Eucrates' tale, Hecate stamps her foot, creating a deep chasm in the earth through which Eucrates can view the entire underworld, Cerberus and all, and he distinctly sees his own father, still wearing the clothes he was buried in. Ghosts could also be consulted, as when the chorus in Aeschylus' play The Persians evokes the ghost of King Darius, who predicts the disastrous battle of Plataea; and more spectacularly in Odyssey Book 11, when Odysseus summons from Hades the ghosts of his fallen comrades (who don't spook till they're spoken to) and obtains directions for the voyage home. In Aeneid Book 6, Aeneas actually visits the ghosts in the underworld; but since he leaves Hades through the gate of false dreams, Vergil is perhaps hinting that Aeneas dreamt the entire episode.

But if the dead have been mistreated, they can return to trouble the living. Eucrates' deceased wife comes back to criticize him for inadvertently cremating her with only one sandal. (Even souls need soles.) More seriously, the ghosts of those who had been crucified, murdered, or had committed suicide were known to return to haunt those who had caused their demise. In Aeschylus' Eumenides, the ghost of Queen Clytemnestra materializes at Delphi, urging the Furies (whom Apollo had put to sleep) to pursue her murderous son Orestes.

As in modern horror fiction, the best setting for a ghost story is a haunted house. The ghost in this case is normally a murdered man who cannot enter Hades because he has not been properly buried outside the city. A certain house in Corinth was haunted and no one dared live in it, until the philosopher Arignotus spent a night there. The dark spectre tried to frighten him, changing its shape into a bull and a lion, but Arignotus used magic spells to drive it to ground. In the morning he dug up the place where the ghost had vanished, found a rotting body buried there, and gave it a proper funeral. A similar story is told about a house in Athens, haunted by the ghost of a

Be My Ghost:
Some Ancient Horror Stories

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Why do people believe in ghosts? Ancient philosophers had two different explanations. Democritus, who developed the theory of atoms, believed that the surfaces of objects give off a film-like "skin" of loose particles which flit invisibly through the air, combine with other films and enter our bodies through pores, startling our minds with images of strange shapes and phantoms of the dead. Aristotle rejected this atomic explanation, attributing ghostly visions to fear or mental agitation on the part of the beholder.

bearded old man who rattled chains at night, keeping the occupants awake until they died of fright and lack of sleep. The philosopher Athenodorus rented the house and, refusing to be scared by the apparition, followed it outside to the courtyard, where it vanished. The next morning our ghost-buster excavated the courtyard and found a skeleton bound in chains. Once again, proper burial exorcized the phantom. Plautus' comedy Mostellaria ("the haunted house"), similarly set in Athens, features the old man Theopropides, his spendthrift son Philolaches and the rascally slave Tranio. To hide the fact that Philolaches is holding a wild party in the house, Tranio tells Theopropides that it is haunted by the screaming ghost of a man who was murdered years ago and is buried within. The gullible Theopropides is hoodwinked, for a while at least.

Then there are poltergeists, ghosts who cause physical damage. One of Lucian's characters, the physician Antigonus, has a bronze statue of Hippocrates. Every night Hippocrates comes alive and roams through the house making noise, emptying jars, mixing up the medicines and overturning bowls, especially if Antigonus is late in making an annual sacrifice to him. Eucrates also has a statue, of a general named Pellichus, who wanders through the house singing and taking baths. Pellichus is usually a friendly ghost, but on one occasion a servant stole the coins which had been dedicated to the statue. Pellichus exposed him as the thief and flogged him every night (leaving real welts on his body) until he died from the punishment. Finally, two servants of the younger Pliny had their hair cut by a pair of mischievous ghosts; but Pliny interpreted this as a favourable omen that he would not suffer prosecution under the cruel emperor Domitian. For accused men have long hair and beards - like most of these ghost stories!