

Ancient myths reveal early fantasies about artificial life

March 1 2019, by Alex Shashkevich



A Greek vase painting, dating to about 450 B.C., depicts the death of Talos. Stanford's Adrienne Mayor examined the myth of Talos and others in her latest research. Credit: Wikimedia Commons / Forzaruvo94

Thousands of years before machine learning and self-driving cars became reality, the tales of giant bronze robot Talos, artificial woman

Pandora and their creator god, Hephaestus, filled the imaginations of people in ancient Greece.

Historians usually trace the idea of automata to the Middle Ages, when the first self-moving devices were invented, but the concept of artificial, lifelike creatures dates to the myths and legends from at least about 2,700 years ago, said Adrienne Mayor, a research scholar in the Department of Classics in the School of Humanities and Sciences. These ancient myths are the subject of Mayor's latest book, *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology*.

"Our ability to imagine artificial intelligence goes back to the ancient times," said Mayor, who is also a 2018-19 fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. "Long before technological advances made self-moving devices possible, ideas about creating [artificial life](#) and robots were explored in ancient myths."

Mayor, a historian of science, said that the earliest themes of artificial intelligence, robots and self-moving objects appear in the work of ancient Greek poets Hesiod and Homer, who were alive somewhere between 750 and 650 B.C.

The story of Talos, first mentioned around 700 B.C. by Hesiod, offers one of the earliest conceptions of a robot, Mayor said.

The myth describes Talos as a giant bronze man built by Hephaestus, the Greek god of invention and blacksmithing. Talos was commissioned by Zeus, the king of Greek gods, to protect the island of Crete from invaders. He marched around the island three times every day and hurled boulders at approaching enemy ships.

At his core, the giant had a tube running from his head to one of his feet that carried a mysterious life source of the gods the Greeks called ichor.

Another ancient text, *Argonautica*, which dates to the third century B.C., describes how sorceress Medea defeated Talos by removing a bolt at his ankle and letting the ichor fluid flow out, Mayor said.

The myth of Pandora, first described in Hesiod's *Theogony*, is another example of a mythical artificial being, Mayor said. Although much later versions of the story portray Pandora as an innocent woman who unknowingly opened a box of evil, Mayor said Hesiod's original described Pandora as an artificial, evil woman built by Hephaestus and sent to Earth on the orders of Zeus to punish humans for discovering fire.

"It could be argued that Pandora was a kind of AI agent," Mayor said. "Her only mission was to infiltrate the human world and release her jar of miseries."

In addition to creating Talos and Pandora, mythical Hephaestus made other self-moving objects, including a set of automated servants, who looked like women but were made of gold, Mayor said. According to Homer's recounting of the [myth](#), Hephaestus gave these artificial women the gods' knowledge. Mayor argues that they could be considered an ancient mythical version of [artificial intelligence](#).

The ancient myths that Mayor examined in her research grapple with the moral implications of Hephaestus' creations.

"Not one of those myths has a good ending once the artificial beings are sent to Earth," Mayor said. "It's almost as if the myths say that it's great to have these artificial things up in heaven used by the gods. But once they interact with humans, we get chaos and destruction."

Mayor said the myths underscore humanity's fascination with creating artificial life.

"People have an impulse to imagine things that aren't possible yet," Mayor said. "There is a timeless link between imagination and science."

Provided by Stanford University

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