WHAT IS A HUMAN?
NATURE AND KNOWLEDGE BEFORE MODERNITY

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Description: People in the premodern era lived in a world populated by all kinds of lifeforms: human, animal, and mineral, alongside angelic, divine, and demonic. Deciding who was who or what was what had profoundly political and social consequences. By what means did people living in the ancient and early medieval Mediterranean and Near East conceive of different species and to what extent did they delineate the human as a category of its own? How did they account for how bodily and organic life came into being, reproduced, and died? We will investigate these questions by entering into the world of ancient knowledge-making, in fields that are today called science (biology, zoology, geology), medicine (gynecology), literature, religion, and philosophy. Our primary sources will be drawn from Greco-Roman philosophical, medical, and ethnographic writings; ancient and medieval Jewish and rabbinic literature; and late antique Christian texts.