



## Aion (αἰών) (Ancient Greek)

**Eternity, lifetime, age, generation.** The concept of eternity in ancient Greek is signified by the noun *aion* (αἰών) and the adjective *aidios* (αἰδίος). *Aion* (αἰών) is commonly associated in early Greek literature with ‘life’, while *aidios* (αἰδίος) is usually related to ‘everlastingness’. Other terms such as *aenaos* (ἀέναος- ever-flowing) and *aeizoos* (ἀείζωος - ever-living) underline the early Greek concept of eternity and the long duration of lifetime in regards to the cosmos, spirits, or gods. (LSJ)

A religious personification or cult of αἰών appears in the Hellenistic age and the first century BCE as it is indicated by the statue of Aion dedicated at Eleusis. Epiphanius testifies in *Adversus Haereses* 51.22-3 a festival in Alexandria where an image Aion was brought of the Koreion. Suda (522.6-7) also refers to a statue of Aion, and there are indications of the divine Aion in relation to the lion-head time-god of Mithraism or the primordial time-god Iran Zurvan.

In Homer, αἰών is usually related to the ‘vital substance’ or the ‘vital force’ that keeps the human soul alive and leaves the body at death (*Iliad* 16.453; 19.27; 22.58, *Odyssey* 7.224). The Homeric term seems to have a temporal (*Iliad* 17.302; 9.415; 24.725) and emotional context (*Odyssey* 5.152; 5.160; 18.204) but not the sense of ‘lifetime’ found in later traditions. Hippocrates (*Epid.* 7) and Pindar (fr. 111) defined αἰών as the life-fluid of spinal marrow, while αἰών has been used to denote a long period of life or the length of life for gods and mortals in Aeschylus (*Suppliants* 574) and the *Hymn to Hephaestus* (6-7).

There is an etymology of αἰών deriving from ἀεί (‘always’) and ὄν (‘being’), which seems to be followed by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. In early Greek philosophy, Heraclitus' ever-living fire (πῦρ ἀείζωον) can be interpreted as an echo of the philosophical interpretation of αἰών (ἀεί - ὄν / ἀεί - ζωον) and the everlastingness of the cosmos as an “ever-living fire” (fr. 30). Moreover, Empedocles' concept of eternal life is signified by the term αἰών; and the everlasting life of the four elements and the forces of the cosmos (frs. 16, 17, 110). In the *Timaeus*, Plato relates eternity to the world of being, while time to the world of becoming. Plato conceives the cosmos as ever-living animal (37d), which leads to Aristotle's etymology of αἰών in *De Caelo* 279a25-28 as ‘always being’. Plotinus is aware of this definition in his *Ennead* III.7 *On Eternity and Time* - the first systematic treatment of the concepts of eternity and time in ancient philosophy- and

defines αἰών as an atemporal and timeless ‘true being’ associated with the unchanging and non-durational eternal life of Intellect (the second hypostasis of being) (III.7.1-6)

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### **Literature and Further Readings**

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