

1 | Introduction

Encountering the Sphinx

If you went hunting for tigers and encountered a centaur, you would start a revolution in zoology.

Sábato, *Sobre héroes y tumbas*

The Riddle of the Sphinxes

Hybrids, such as centaurs, gorgons, sphinxes and satyrs, are among the most recognizable characters in Greek mythology and continue to turn up in popular culture. From the centaurs in *Harry Potter* to Pegasos in *Clash of the Titans*, Greek hybrids exert a hold on the popular imagination. This is a book about such hybrids, but it is also a book about hybridity. The two are not the same. The difference can be illustrated by looking at what is surely one of the most famous hybrids in Greek myth, the Sphinx. As imagined by Moreau in the middle of the nineteenth century, the encounter between Oidipous and the monster takes place in a gloomy landscape suffused with menace and laden with eroticism (Figure 1.1). ‘The bane of the Thebans’, as the Sphinx is called by Hesiod, is singularly focused on the handsome young hero.¹ As she gazes up at Oidipous, her body thrusts against him while she remains unnaturally suspended, as if the scene were set in a dream. Below her innocent face the Sphinx’s paws cling to him, ready to tear off his carefully arranged garment. She is the focus of our attention even as we take in a profusion of other elements: the body parts of her previous victims, glimpsed at the bottom of the tableau, a belt of red beads around her waist, a vase decorated with griffins and a column in the lower right, around which curls a snake. But in the midst of all these visual cues suggesting sexual violence cloaked in classical serenity stand the hero and the monster, their eyes locked. The allegorical significance of the hybrid here is unmistakable. A composite of woman, eagle and lion, she unambiguously embodies the male fear of predatory female desire. All these elements combine to render the Sphinx a hybrid monster, horrifying and

¹ Hesiod, *Theog.* 326. Oidipous’ encounter with the Sphinx is referred to in Aeschylus’ *Septem* 773–5. The full story of the riddle is given by Apollodorus 3.52–5.



Figure 1.1 Oedipus and the Sphinx. G. Moreau. 1864. Oil. 81 1/4 × 41 1/4 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 21.134.1.

attractive, full of menace, a symbol of all that threatens male control. Ingres' 1808 painting of the same episode is less feverish, but takes on added significance when set against the artist's lifelong struggle to free himself from his father's influence. As Posèq has shown, the painting is an Oedipal treatment of an Oedipal subject.²

Do any of these factors shed light on the sphinx in Greek culture?³ Moreau's and Ingres' sphinxes resemble their Greek antecedents in so far as each is composed of a lion's body, an eagle's wings and a woman's head, although the prominent breasts of the modern sphinxes are an addition that highlights a sexual threat only latent in the earlier figures. Since sexual threat is not an emphatic part of the ancient sphinx's make-up

² Posèq 2001. ³ For the iconography of Greek sphinxes, see Tsiafakis 2003: 78–83.

(although Odysseus might disagree), we are forced to look elsewhere for the sphinx's place in Greek culture and for its sudden popularity in the sixth century. At that time, sphinxes proliferate in Greek decorative arts. They are found on vases as part of a larger composition, usually flanking vegetal motifs, gorgons, riders or '*Nikai*'. On the François vase, for example, there are in fact four such figures, heraldically facing each other with one paw raised, possibly an apotropaic gesture.⁴

They also appear on funerary monuments and on the roofs of temples. A sixth-century funerary marker now in the Met illustrates how imposing such funerary monuments could be (Figure 1.2). The sphinx sat atop a funeral stele commemorating a young man named Megakles. At a total height of more than four metres it was a dramatic statement of the status of the family – in this case, the Alkmeonids – that erected it.⁵

There have been many interpretations offered for the popularity of the sphinx in Archaic Greece, and Thierry Petit sums up modern attempts to explain the sphinx under these headings:

- Purely decorative. Acroteria are fantasy decorations that yield to no logic of meaning.
- Psychoanalytical explanations, in which the sphinx represents the 'bad mother'.
- The creation of liminal and sacred space. In this reading the sphinx marks the threshold between this world and the other.
- An apotropaic function. According to this interpretation the sphinx guards either the dead or the deity.
- Death demons, mastered by the deities of the temples they adorn.
- Tamed nature. Since many of the gods whose temples the sphinxes adorn are masters or mistresses of animals and nature, by extension the sphinxes symbolize that mastery.
- Hypostases. In this interpretation, the sphinxes are like satellites representing in miniaturized form the major deity with whom they are associated.⁶

The sheer range of these explanations alerts us to a significant hurdle to understanding these and other hybrids: the profusion of sphinxes resists attempts to infer a single meaning. Can the sphinx be apotropaic and a death demon at the same time? A fifth-century headstone from Pagasai

⁴ For a description of the vase, see Petit 2019. For the *Schutzgestus*, see Petit 2011: 176–82.

⁵ Attic grave stele with sphinx, 530 BC. Marble. total H. 4.23 m. Metropolitan Museum of Art (11.185a–c, f, g).

⁶ Petit 2013: 211–14.



Figure 1.2 Marble capital and finial in the form of a sphinx, ca. 530 BC. Attic. Parian Marble. Height with acroterion 142.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 11.185d, ×.

carries an inscription addressed to the sphinx guarding the burial: ‘Dog of Hades, whom do you watch over, sitting over the dead?’⁷ This sphinx, at least, is a protector, but in the fifth century there were also depictions of Oedipus killing the sphinx. In this tradition, as in the literary accounts, the creature is an agent of death rather than a guardian. Nor can we solve the riddle of the sphinx by simply treating it as a Near Eastern figure transplanted to a Greek setting. Petit observes that ‘We have long known that the Kerûbhîm (“cherubim”) of the Bible are represented in the form of the hybrid called “sphinx” by the Greeks.’⁸ But what prompted the Greeks to adopt the Cherubim, and did the Greek sphinx mean the same thing as its antecedents? Origin is not explanation. Furthermore, symbols can lose their meaning and become just images. When Kleitias arranged his

⁷ Inscription: Volos 690. See Kurtz and Boardman 1971: 239 and Tsiafakis 2003: 82.

⁸ Petit 2013: 217.

sphinxes on the François vase facing a vegetal motif he was employing a syntax of decoration that only dimly recalled the Near Eastern motif of the tree of life.

This is not to dismiss the hybrid's capacity to evoke awe. The Naxian Sphinx is proof, if any is needed, that a monumental hybrid will always be powerful.⁹ At more than twelve metres tall, including the column on which it stood, it dominated the Aire in front of the Stoa of the Athenians in the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. It also offered visitors the opportunity to experience it up close from the temple terrace. On many temples, there are hybrids and monsters on metopes, as acroteria and in pedimental sculpture, where their dynamism complements the regularity and symmetry of the temple's underlying architecture. Together, the orderliness of the temple's design and non-figural elements combines with the liveliness of the hybrids and monsters found in the decorative elements to create a unique experience: comprehensible, and yet at the same time awe-inspiring.¹⁰ It is at this general level that many Greek sphinxes reflect their ancestry, so to speak. The sphinxes that protected tombs in the Kerameikos are distant cousins of the red granite Sphinx of Ramses II. It stood outside the temple of Ptah at Memphis and, like many other ram- or goat-headed sphinxes placed along the avenues leading to Egyptian temple complexes, it was apotropaic and a statement of the pharaoh's power¹¹ (see Figure 1.3). The comparison with the Greek sphinxes (and Moreau's sphinx) reminds us that as hybrids move between cultures they may lose old meanings and acquire new ones, just as new stylistic details are added or changed.

As the sphinx motif moves from Egypt to Mari and Anatolia in the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries BC, the figure diminishes in size, first depicted on frescoes, then carved onto ivory plaques and finally into small seals cut from precious stone, such as jasper.¹² Along the way the sphinx acquires wings and becomes female. It is the last of these configurations, on the highly portable media of carved sealstones and ivory plaques that comes to Greece in the eighth century, where sphinxes are dedicated in temples and buried as apotropaic devices.¹³ An example from the palace of Nimrud built by Ashurnasirpal II in the ninth century illustrates how elegant such pieces were, but also how easily portable they were (Figure 1.4). The range of forms and associations is a reminder that any explanation of hybridity (as opposed to the interpretation of a particular hybrid) must cast a very

⁹ Amandry 1953: 26–32.

¹⁰ Hölscher 2009 makes a powerful case for viewing the decorative elements (*kosmos*) of a temple as contributing to the temple's affirmation of order (also *kosmos*).

¹¹ Wegner and Wegner, 2015: 239. ¹² Sagiv 2018:130–1. ¹³ Tsiafakis 2003: 82.



Figure 1.3 Red granite Sphinx of Ramses II (nineteenth dynasty, ca. 1293–1185 BC). Sacred enclosure of the temple of the god Ptah, Memphis. 362 × 145 cm. University of Pennsylvania Museum, E12326.



Figure 1.4 Openwork plaque with a striding sphinx. Neo-Assyrian, ninth-eighth centuries BC. Nimrud. H. 3 7/16 × W. 4 1/16 × Th. 13/16 in. (8.8 × 10.3 × 2.1 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, 64.37.1.

wide net. Some hybrids may be hideous monsters, but monstrosity is not an inevitable component of the hybrid. Some hybrids may be benign or protective, yet with a slight shift they can become menacing.

Further complicating any analysis of hybridity is that the Greeks encountered hybrids in a wide variety of media and settings. In the *Seven Against Thebes*, Aeschylus refers to the Sphinx as the ‘ravenous, detested beast’ and describes the shield of Parthenopaios adorned with an image of the monster. It serves as an emblem, designed to humiliate the Thebans by reminding them of their city’s shame. These and other literary references guide our reading of the Theban sphinx: she is, as Aeschylus says, ‘a deadly, man-seizing plague’. But it is highly unlikely that the sphinxes depicted on an Assyrian ivory pyxis from the thirteenth century BC were read precisely this way.¹⁴ The pyxis was found in a royal tomb in (Greek) Thebes but the hybrid figures on it reflect an international style, and they should not be seen as early depictions of the Sphinx that would later be banished by Oedipus. The pyxis’ precious material (ivory), expert craftsmanship and distant provenance confirm the object’s exotic appeal and affirm the status of the member of the Mycenaean elite who acquired it. Unlike Aeschylus’ fifth-century sphinx, the Assyrian import does not offer a clear reading of the sphinx as a pestilential threat; sometimes the foreignness and exoticism of the sphinx are its most telling features.

There are other dimensions to hybridity that call for caution. Aside from hybrids that are a mixture of parts that remain distinct, such as the sphinx with her leonine body and eagle’s wings, there are other, real hybrids produced by breeding in which the hybrid is wholly new. The mule, cross-bred from a horse and a donkey, is one such. It is as much a hybrid as the Theban Sphinx, but it is a dependable work animal and as helpful to humans as the Sphinx is threatening.¹⁵ And there are other, ‘real’, hybrids that are benign and ubiquitous, but are also barely noticed: emmer, durum, and bread wheat, for example, are all hybridized grains responsible for increased yields of disease resistant crops.¹⁶ Hybridization, in fact, has long been recognized to play an important role in plant evolution.¹⁷ It is not clear, however, that the people of the ancient Mediterranean world were aware of naturally occurring hybridization.¹⁸ Hybrids, then, exist on

¹⁴ Ivory pyxis with sphinxes, from Thebes (Greece). LH IIIA-B, Archaeological Museum of Thebes 42459. For an image see Aruz et al. 2013: 249.

¹⁵ On mules, see Griffith 2006.

¹⁶ Many wheat hybrids occur naturally, and it is often claimed that Einkorn is the only unhybridized wheat. The deliberate hybridization of corn and rice is more recent, dating to the 1940s. The development of hybrid rice by Yuan Longping in the 1970s was perhaps the most significant step towards food security in modern times. See Schmalzer 2015: 73–99.

¹⁷ Mehregan and Kadereit 2009: 36.

¹⁸ As Robert Sallares (1991: 36) notes, ‘Lucretius . . . denied the possibility of plant hybridization’; Lucret., *DRN* 5.920–4: ‘for the species of plants which even now spring abundantly from the

a continuum from the real to the imaginary and from the benevolent to the monstrous, from the Sphinx to the hinny. But this does not mean that hybridity is simply a matter of any kind of mixing. In each instance around the hybrid there lurks a host of questions: what bits have been mixed, how exactly are the parts combined, and is the mixture taxonomically fitting or anomalous? Each of these questions remains in the background, shaping our response to a hybrid, affirming the power of hybridity to challenge (or affirm) categories and taxonomies. And since taxonomies are the proof of our comprehending the world by classifying phenomena, hybridity represents a culture's uneasiness with the limits of its epistemology. If such things exist, even if only in our stories and imagination, how certain is certainty?

The Origins of Hybridity

Hybrids have a prehistory that lies in the human encounter with the animal. Most human societies which maintain an intimate relationship with the natural world contemplate what it means to be human by focusing on our deeply entangled relationship with animals.¹⁹ A recent study puts it succinctly: '[Animals] helped us deal with questions of human existence while still appearing as themselves, speaking to us in their alterity.'²⁰ And it is a deeply intimate, symbiotic relationship. The white *scelera* around the dark iris of our eyes make it possible for the dog to track our gaze as we hunt. Consequently, as canids undergo the transition from wolf, a threat and competitor, to dog, companion and hunting partner, we adapt to a mutual reliance.²¹ Animals guide us, threaten us, compete with us and,

earth, and the cereal crops and fruitful trees, cannot even so be crossed with each other, but each kind goes on its own way and all maintain their distinctions by a fixed pact of nature' (tr. Gale).

¹⁹ Animal-human studies have mushroomed in recent years. For the Greek world, fundamental is Lonsdale 1979, updated and expanded by Calder 2011. Comprehensive bibliographies up to the early 2000s can be found in Kalof et al. 2004 and Fögen 2006. For a useful overview of recent work relating to the ancient Mediterranean, see Kindt 2017. Major contributions in the field more generally include Ingold 1988, Agamben 2004, Ingold 2007 and Calarco 2008. For attempts to write an animal history from the animal's point of view, see Baratay 2015 and the essays collected in Baratay 2019. The modern interest in animal welfare is only the most recent expression of the complexity of our relationship with animals, particularly as we continue to eat them. For a recent discussion of the notion of 'the Good Life' in relation to animals' quality of life, see Yeates 2017.

²⁰ Korhonen and Ruonakoski 2017: 191

²¹ Shipman 2015: 218, notes that 'domestic dogs not only share the wolf's genetic ability to communicate through gazing, they also gaze at humans twice as long as wolves do on average – suggesting that duration of gaze may have been selected for during the domestication process'.

in some instances, create us. One aboriginal Dreaming captures this succinctly in the observation, ‘Dingo makes us human.’²² Similarly, Hemas Harvey Humchitt sums up the world view of the Heiltsuk people of the Pacific Northwest as ‘Everything revolves around the herring’.²³ Nor is this an intimacy restricted to contemporary indigenous societies living close to nature. There is good reason to believe that early human communities shaped their entire world view through their experience of animals. In the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic, animals were the nearest category of living beings with whom we engaged. As hunters we looked at them as prey, yet poorly equipped as we are in the face of nature, red in tooth and claw, we were also sometimes preyed upon. Our relationship with animals is therefore subject to constant shifts, and we experience the animal universe as an insistent, polyvalent cosmos. It is worth exploring this further, not because every Greek hybrid is an evolutionary holdover from some imagined *Urzeit*, but because hybridity is a direct outgrowth of human–animal entanglement.

The blending of human and animal can be shown to go back at least to 35,000–40,000 years BP. Carved from the right tusk of a mammoth, the Löwenmensch from Hohlenstein reveals that already in the Aurignacian there existed a human capacity to imagine the possibilities created by merging parts of different species²⁴ (Figure 1.5). Is the hybrid creature a projection of the human hunter into another predator’s body? Whether or not the Löwenmensch was a trophy commemorating the hunter’s victory over the mammoth from which the tusk was taken, the figurine offers evidence not only of the hunter’s imagination but of a symbolic engagement with the world, in which lion and human hunter are fused.²⁵ Figures such as the shaman depicted as a ‘reindeer-man’ in Les Trois Frères, the bird-headed female of Pech Merle and the bison-man from

²² Rose 2000: 47, 104–5, 176–7. Readers unfamiliar with the concept of Dreaming should see Rose 2000: 43–7. The term encompasses both the place and time of creation, as well the creator beings and the telling of these in ‘a poetic key to Reality’ (Stanner 1979: 29).

²³ Gavreau et al. 2017.

²⁴ Beutelspacher et al. 2014: 13 refer to the figure as ‘ein einzigartiges Zeugnis der fantasievollen Vorstellungswelt der Menschen im Aurignacien der Schwäbischen Alb’ (a unique attestation to the rich imaginative world of the people who dwelt in the Swabian Alps during the Aurignacian period). For a cognitive neuroscientific discussion of the conceptual blending of animal and human in the figure, see Wynn et al. 2009.

²⁵ On the time needed to carve the piece, see Berger 2012: 37. A replica took 320 hours to carve using flint tools. Given the haptic qualities of the figurine it is also not unrealistic to imagine a use in shamanistic rituals. Such an identification with the animal’s power is a deeply rooted practice: in the nineteenth century, King Glele of Dahomey received a divination sign (du) promising a full and prosperous reign, which the king chose to commemorate by adopting the hybrid of a man-lion as his personal device. See Blier 1993: 191–2.

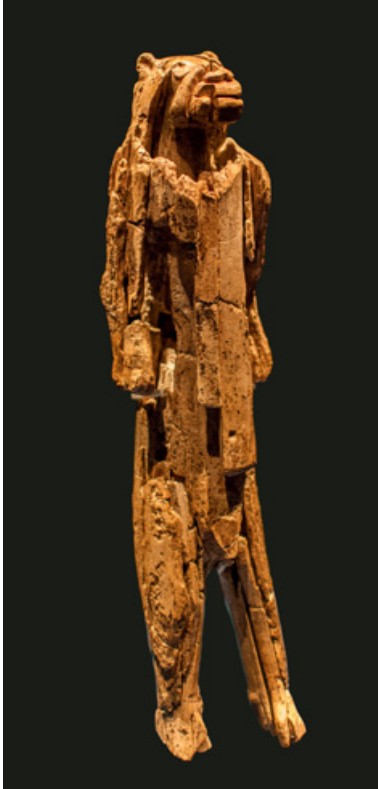


Figure 1.5 The Lion-man ('Löwenmensch') from the Stadel cave in Hohlenstein in the valley of Lone (Germany) ca. 35,000–40,000 BP. Copyright Landesamt für Denkmalpflege im RP Stuttgart/Museum Ulm/Yvonne Mühleis (CC BY-NC-ND).

the Chauvet Cave show that the boundary of human and animal is not firmly fixed, but is forever breaking down.

Discussing the figures of the Chauvet Cave, for example, Gernot Grube has recently concluded that

What we discover with this extremely cautious interpretation, very close to the visual findings, are a few basic attitudes. First, the psychological theme of the transformation of men into aggressive beings, who threaten the peace of the community. Second, a metaphysical theme: worship of a being that embodies the ideal community. Third, the association of man and bison. Fourth, the association of woman and lion . . . Fifth, the association of the horse with a positive male role.²⁶

²⁶ Grube 2020: 47.

Even the most cautious analysis of such images concludes that ‘We can be rather sure that people reflected on the abilities and qualities of animals and compared some of these qualities with their own.’²⁷ Set against this universal phenomenon of humans interacting with animals, Bataille proposed seeing hybrids as a sign of humans fleeing their humanity, both resisting and endorsing their animal origins.²⁸ Similarly, Kristeva uses the abject as a means of explaining monsters by proposing that the early societies sought a clear demarcation between the animal and the human: ‘The abject confronts us’, she writes, ‘on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.’²⁹ Such claims rely on a highly simplified and problematic view of ‘primitive’ societies in which primal drives can be mechanically displaced. Yet the exuberance and complexity of non-Western cultures should lead us to pause for a moment and ask if there might not be a wider range of possibilities at play here.

There is, for example, a very different approach to what could be called humanimity among the Kujamaat Diola people of Senegal. Here, a human will defecate an animal, the *ewúúm*, which runs off into the bush.³⁰ This creature, a totemic double of the human, is usually some kind of common wild animal, such as an antelope, leopard or snake. The human and the *ewúúm* are in communication with each other, and are metonymically bound, sharing the same *yut* or soul. Social relationships, in fact, are constructed not simply around the individual and their lineage defined monadically, but around a series of dyadic relationships arising from the person and their *ewúúm*, mediated through their respective places of residence and the behaviours appropriate to their own and others’ ‘doubles’. This and other instances of human–animal relations show that it is a mistake to put human and animal experience into separate compartments: it utterly misses the richness of the entanglement of human and animal. Similarly, the practice of Chimbu women breastfeeding piglets arose neither from feelings of abjection nor as a response to a threat from the animal realm (see Figure 1.6). The pig was often nurtured by spells also used to protect humans. The keys to this relationship are proximity, value and affection.³¹

²⁷ Antl-Weiser 2018: 66.

²⁸ The theme of animality runs through Bataille’s work. See Pawlett 2016: 1–19.

²⁹ Kristeva 1982: 12. ³⁰ Sapir 1977. ³¹ Oliver 1989, Fowke 1995 and Sillitoe 2003.



Figure 1.6 Chimbu woman breastfeeding a piglet, 1939. Peter Skinner: Ian Skinner Collection/Science Source. 1494781.

As far as we can tell from ethnographic comparisons and from the testimony of rock art and other artefacts of early human culture, from the earliest times of human consciousness animals have been present as creators, ancestors, guides and sometimes competitors. The animal dimension of human experience is pervasive and finds expression in the deepest structures of human society, expressed in song, dance, figural art and combined performances. It is enormously powerful, because if humans exist in a here-and-now, we also exist in a there-and-then. In the Dreamtime animals crossed the land, leaving their traces in lake, stream, hill and cave, which we create afresh in dance, song, initiation and ritual. At the corroboree all these performances cohere. Peter Sutton sees this human incarnation of the Dreaming as temporary, in contrast with the Dreaming itself, which 'pre-exists and persists'.³² The contrast, however, is potentially misleading. Animal and land spirits are channelled and accessed by human participants led by their shaman in the corroboree. For example, in an episode, recorded in 1938, the old barnmarn (poet, medicine man and shaman) Allan Balbungu teaches other Worrora men his songs, after which he passes into a trance described by one of the others present, Ngarinyin man David Mowaljarlai:

Yeah. You see him breathing but he gone. He travelling. And that's how uh they compose corroboree there. Juunba. When they get all the story

³² Sutton 2003: 117.

belong to every Wunggud, snake story, Wondjina story, any animal. We dance now. They teach us now. That how he go. It's all round the nature power. Power all belong nature. We get all the power from land. That's why it's important.³³

Here there exists a consubstantiality, in which place, animal and human are intimately intermingled.

The oldest cave paintings recently discovered in limestone caves on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi also illustrate the deep antiquity of the human/animal encounter. The warty pig depicted on the wall of Leang Tedongnge dates to 45,500 years ago, while nearby at Leang Bulu' Sipong 4, a panel 4.5 m long depicts a hunting scene.³⁴ Various local animals, pigs and anoa (pygmy buffaloes), are being roped or speared by eight or more theriomorphic figures. The scene has been dated to at least 43,500 BP, and is the most recent evidence that the earliest figurative art created by humans arose in response to our complex relationship with animals. If the theriomorphs in these paintings represent humans draped in animal skins to approach their prey, it only goes further towards supporting the notion that hybridity is one of our most deeply rooted mechanisms for symbolically shaping the world around us. The Sumatran paintings confirm Jacques Cauvin's claim that the earliest figural representations were of women and animals, and that these are evidence for the beginnings of a richer engagement with the natural world that helped the shaping of early human consciousness.³⁵ As the objects of immensely stimulating experiences, especially hunting and killing, these animals are woven into the fabric of the human psyche grappling with life and death. Not coincidentally, the earliest repertoire of images created by early humans focuses on the locus of birth and life: the female body. Narration, allegory and symbolic thinking all have their source in these experiences, focused on the female and the animal. The constant repetition of these intense interactions with animals – tracking, chasing, lying in ambush, waiting, pouncing –

³³ See Lommel and Mowaljarlai 1994: 286–7. This is a remarkable account based first on the notes taken by a German anthropologist (Andreas Lommel) during his time in the Kimberleys in 1938. More than half a century later, in 1993, Lommel's draft was offered to David Mowaljarlai for comment. Mowaljarlai, a Ngarinyin man of the Brrejirad (Pink Hibiscus) clan, was thirteen years old at the time of Lommel's visit and had first-hand memories of the corroboree supervised by Allan Balbungu. See also Hume 2004. Wunggud may refer both to a creator earth snake and to places of concentrated earth power, usually marked by pools of fresh water. Wondjina (also Wandjina) refers to a Raingod creator, usually depicted as a white figure shrouded in cloud and mist.

³⁴ Leang Tedongnge: Brumm et al. 2021; Leang Bulu' Sipong 4: Aubert et al. 2019.

³⁵ Cauvin 1994. See also Helmer et al. 2004.

stimulates a range of responses from scanning and stalking to killing. This is a world before domestication.³⁶

In Cauvin's scheme, animal and female figures are the first figural representations made by men, outgrowths of the symbolic thinking and consciousness taking shape in the Neolithic. The spectacular finds at Göbekli Tepe (ca. 9,000 BC) in south-eastern Turkey demonstrate conclusively that before farming, and even before the domestication of plants and animals, human groups were taking shape as cult communities for whom the proximity with animals was a stimulus for symbolic communication, probably aided by intoxicants such as early forms of beer and wine.³⁷ At Göbekli Tepe pillars are carved with bird-like creatures, some with the heads of raptors and with human-like legs, while at both Göbekli Tepe and Çatalhöyük, according to Ian Hodder and Lynn Meskell, 'the birds that are associated with the headless bodies have human traits or adopt a hybrid human/animal form'.³⁸ Rather than separating themselves from the animal realm, the people of Göbekli Tepe experienced a world in which the human and animal domains constantly overlapped. In this respect they continued the traditions that clearly go back into the Palaeolithic, where encounters with the animal had already produced hybrids. A similar picture can be seen at Karahan Tepe, approximately 80 km from Göbekli Tepe, where 266 T-pillars have been found, some of these are carved with anthropomorphic arms and animal legs.

One way of reading these pillars would be to view them as markers of affiliation to the land or as assertions of group identity employing totemic animals. Traditional societies frequently use animals such as the emu, leopard and raven as markers of expressing a group identity. In some instances these may serve as caste designations – leopard men, for example, being warriors and hunters. Or they define exogamous moieties; in the northern Kimberleys, the men of the Kuranguli (black crane) line only marry women of the Banar (bush turkey) moiety.³⁹ In yet other instances

³⁶ It is not credible that the development of symbolic thinking and communication occurred only among men. Marija Gimbutas postulated a complementary world of symbols and shapes that arose in a female sphere; see Gimbutas 1989. From 'female' symbols such as the chevron and triangle Gimbutas famously extrapolated an entire reconstruction of a peaceful matriarchal Neolithic European culture. Few archaeologists accept this system in its entirety, but for a sympathetic evaluation see Christ 1996.

³⁷ For animal images at Göbekli Tepe, see McGovern 2009, Schmidt 2010, Dietrich et al. 2012: 684, 687–98 and Clare et al. 2018. Wengrow 2014: 40 downplays the animal images from Göbekli Tepe, arguing that 'they make very little play on the possibilities of composite depiction.' Contra, see Gifford and Antonello 2015: 275, who claim 'that the association of animal and human is in fact present virtually, anticipating implicitly . . . hybrid forms'.

³⁸ Hodder and Meskell 2011: 247. ³⁹ Lommel and Mowaljarlai 1994: 281.

the raven may bring sacred knowledge, the control of which is both significant for the status of the knowledge-keeper and helps maintain group solidarity through the orderly transmission of secret knowledge through initiation. Entire lodges organize and distribute resources such as whale hunting or salmon fishing in deliberate and rational ways for the continuing health of the community and the curating of the resources of the natural world on which we depend for survival.⁴⁰ All these cases, drawn from a variety of cultures, are examples of the different roles played by our animal awareness in the expression of group identities – a stunning range of operations lurking behind the single term ‘totemism’.⁴¹ If Karahan Tepe and Göbekli Tepe are the earliest examples of monumental architecture systematically deployed at a site of communal sacrifice and ritual, the presence of animals in both the faunal remains and in the iconographic programme proves that from the first moments when human societies grew beyond the limits of the hunting band, animals shaped our awareness of life, death, violence and the cycle of being that governs our lives.⁴² Animals taught us to be human, and there is a persistent impulse to reaffirm our humanity by minimizing the difference between human and animals.⁴³ Instead of a barrier we see a bond so powerful that the boundary between human and animal frequently disappears.⁴⁴ As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, ‘Animals continue to haunt man’s imagination, compel him to seek out their habits, preferences and cycles, and provide models and formulae by which he comes to represent his own desires, needs and excitements.’⁴⁵

The close entanglement of human and animal is especially evident in folklore, where the proximity of the animal extends well beyond pet cats

⁴⁰ On the intersection between animal stories and ecological awareness, see Pierotti 2020: 50, who notes that such stories ‘demonstrate connection, respect, and how to live properly in a world filled with nonhuman beings’.

⁴¹ The study of totemism has a long history. See Durkheim 1912, Lang 1911 and, more recently, Kuper 2005. For a description of various animal and hybrid forms as part of a coherent visual language appropriate to funerary rites across a swathe of Steppe cultures, see Andreeva 2018.

⁴² On the symbolism and iconography of Göbekli Tepe, see Gifford and Antonello 2015. As they observe (266), the T-shaped pillars are carved with arms, hands and clothing, revealing their anthropomorphic character. On the totemic significance of this, see Peters and Schmidt 2004: 209.

⁴³ The animal-guardian has been a remarkably resilient figure in popular culture. In addition to dogs (Lassie and Rin Tin Tin), we have also had dolphins (Flipper) and kangaroos (Skipper).

⁴⁴ A Belgian Malinois, Kuga, was awarded a medal for bravery in 2018, having been shot in Afghanistan seven years earlier. The language used to describe the dog’s actions are no different to a citation one would expect for a human combatant: ‘Kuga’s sacrifice was an ultimate sacrifice. The reason he got the Dickin Medal was he just was so courageous.’ <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2018/10/26/kuga-the-adf-war-dog-bravery-award/>.

⁴⁵ Grosz 1995: 278. For animals in popular culture, see Baker 1993 and Chris 2006: 1–44.

and dogs. In an early twentieth-century work on the folklore of Florence, Rev. J. Wood Brown noted three kinds of monsters that might attack children born between 25 December and 6 January (the boundary between one year and the next): the *callicantzaros*, the werewolf and the vampire.⁴⁶ The first he describes as 'shaggy, black and wild, in whose name some vestige has been found of the classic centaur'. Like the *callicantzaros*, the werewolf too challenges the categories of human and animal, not by blending but by transformation, while the third, the vampire, breaks down the boundary between life and death. These are instances of hybrid monsters giving shape to a community's fears that boundaries are sites of danger, that they may collapse. Here, as elsewhere, the shape emerging from our imaginative response is frequently hybrid, because hybrids foreground boundaries. In the case of the *callicantzaros* and his cousins, their composite bodies destabilize the boundaries between categories.

The Plan of the Book

From the Neolithic to the Iron Age, cultures around the Mediterranean were deeply influenced by the intimate bonds between human and animal. The immediate result of this fundamental condition of connectedness was the prevalence throughout the eastern Mediterranean of hybrids, born of the merging of the human and the animal. These would appear in many guises in Greek culture, becoming one of its most characteristic features, yet, as the brief examination of the sphinx has demonstrated, hybrids are polymorphous, polysemic and polyvalent. In order to arrive at a better understanding of hybridity I suggest, therefore, approaching the phenomenon from various angles. In Part I explore some of the complications of defining hybrids and developing theories of hybridity. This may seem unnecessary; after all, most people can recognize a centaur by identifying its parts, but form and function are very different beasts. Hybrids aside, hybridity is a term used very loosely in cultural studies, where any aspect of cultural and individual identity characterized by mixing is a hybrid, from fusion cuisine to hip-hop sampling. A study of hybridity runs the risk of being about everything and nothing. Certainly, in classical studies and Mediterranean archaeology the term has often been used as a shorthand for many kinds of culture contact, and so I suggest greater care in how the term is applied. It is better to apply a rather literal interpretation

⁴⁶ Brown 1911: 287–8.

of hybridity, grounded in the history of hybrid figures combining animal and human parts, as a corrective to the flawed view that any mixture is a hybrid. For the most part I restrict this study to hybrids that are composites of human and animal, or male and female bodies. Not only does this clarify exactly what does and does not count as a hybrid, it also invites us to see hybrids evolving out of our earliest involvement with animals.

The need for both clarity of definition and a theoretical framework is addressed further in Chapter 2, which also asks whether a comprehensive theory of hybridity is even possible. I do not aspire, like *Middlemarch's* Casaubon, to find a universal key to all hybrids, but rather to identify the various fields in which hybridity operated in the Greek world. At the same time, this should not be taken to mean that a study of hybridity in Greek culture amounts to no more than a catalogue of odd mythological creatures. In other words, I hope to respect the particularity of hybrids – Skylla, Medusa, Pegasos – while identifying the features that are common to hybrids as cultural products. (Hint: they're anomalies.) Recent work in monster theory offers some guidance, emphasizing the role of monsters in policing the borders of what is normative. Monsters have repeatedly been interpreted as threats to order. I suggest that hybrids, as anomalies, undermine the very categories from which order is constructed. As a mode of cultural production hybrids are a means of coping with that which defies neat classification. This may veer towards the monstrous, as in the case of the demonic female figure, the gorgon, but equally it can tend towards the curious and the wondrous, like Pegasos alighting at the Peirene Fountain in Corinth or the horses of Achilles grieving for the death of Patroklos. In trying to understand how and why the Greeks generated hybrids in their mythology it may seem that I am trying to put the Greeks on the psychiatrist's couch, but Freud's conception of the uncanny sheds some light, I hope to show, on how hybrids function. I navigate between the Skylla of reading every mixture as a hybrid and the Charybdis of treating hybridity as monster-lite by sticking to a narrow course: the path of anomaly.

Part II of the book opens the aperture of the study to bring non-Greek monsters and hybrids into focus. In Chapter 3, I examine the Near Eastern antecedents of the familiar hybrids of Greek myth and art. This may be thought of as a shallow dive into the deep history of hybrids in the Mediterranean world, going back to various cultures of the Ancient Near East, Egypt, Crete and Cyprus. The danger here, of course, is to confuse origin with explanation. Nevertheless, Greek hybrids do not simply pop up like mushrooms after a rain shower and a greater danger would be to consider them in isolation, as if they had emerged fully formed from the

head of Zeus, like armed Athena. The disciplinary boundaries between the Classical World and the Ancient Near East have meant that Greek historians move into such territory at their own risk, but it is impossible to write about early Greek culture without giving some consideration to eastern antecedents. Walter Burkert, Martin West and Jan Bremmer, to name only three major scholars, have demonstrated that the Greek imagination was powerfully influenced by a creative engagement with eastern cultures.⁴⁷ I am not arguing for an earlier generation's notion of diffusionism, whereby eastern motifs are simply 'borrowed' by the Greek poets, but rather endorsing a view of the eastern Mediterranean as a place of endless fluid engagements characterized by bilingualism, intermarriage and the movement of artisans, traders, poets and itinerant religious practitioners.⁴⁸ Indeed, much of my writing about these processes of cultural transmission is meant to signal that hybrids were like vessels that could carry different contents depending on the audience or the market. I compare material from the Ancient Near East such as *Enuma Elish* and the *Gilgamesh* epic with Homeric and Hesiodic accounts of similar episodes to underscore the congruence of Greek and Near Eastern cosmogonies. And, just as often as an echo of Akkadian or Sumerian can be heard behind the Greek voices of the eighth and seventh centuries, I am also keen to show how and where Greek sensibilities respond creatively to source material, adapting it freely in new settings. As a complement to this attempt to situate Greek hybrids in a broader East Mediterranean setting, I also consider recent work on the so-called International Style of the Late Bronze Age, which relied heavily on hybrid motifs to fashion a shared visual language for the elites of Egypt and the Near East. Located on the edge of this culturally enmeshed zone, Greece and Crete were influenced by the cultural productions emanating from the power centres of Egypt and Mesopotamia, but wherever we find traces of cultural exchange, ideas and objects always take on new forms in Greek settings. This is not the result of innate genius, but rather a function of the differences between the imperial states of the eastern Mediterranean and the smaller communities of Greece and Crete. In fact, since hybrids are not restricted by having to correspond to a 'real' avatar, there is no simple line of transmission from either Mesopotamia or Egypt to Greece, and in each instance of a hybrid emerging in a Greek context it is testimony to the flexibility of hybrids to convey new meanings in new settings. The Minotaur, as we shall see, is not merely royal authority wearing a crown of horns.

⁴⁷ Burkert 1988 and 1992; West 1997; Bremmer 2008. ⁴⁸ López-Ruiz 2010: 23–47.

In Chapter 4, I move from this general discussion of hybridity in the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean to a more specific cluster of hybrids crucial to the Greeks and their setting: the sea. After looking at the Mediterranean as a zone of rich contact, characterized by the movement of goods, people and ideas, I examine the sea as the element from which hybrids arise, such as Skylla, Nereus, the Nereids and other, more monstrous figures in Hesiod's *Theogony*. These hybrids shape and give expression to the fears and aspirations of Greek speakers on the move. In this discussion, the existence of contact zones such as Sicily stimulates a powerful response from Greek speakers, who are compelled constantly to undergo confrontations with other people, other tongues, other styles. Hybridity emerges as a useful mechanism for envisaging otherness and rendering it manageable, either as monstrous threat or as something in a more muted register: recognizable, similar, yet at the same time different, like the prow of a Phoenician ship. It is this polarity of similarity and difference that is the pendulum swinging through Archaic Greek culture. Focusing on two places of particularly rich cultural encounters, Naukratis and Samos, I tease out the ways in which the categories of exotic and hybrid map onto each other, suggesting an eclecticism for which hybrid objects are a fitting expression. Even more complicated is Cyprus, which, in this reading of the Iron Age, demonstrates the most intense cultural layering in the eastern Mediterranean. It is hardly coincidental that where EteoCypriots, Mycenaean Greeks, Assyrians and Phoenicians all mingle and merge, hybridity should be a recurring feature of the island's culture.

In Part III, I turn to a series of case studies designed to illustrate the central importance of hybrids to the culture of Archaic and Classical Greece. Chapter 5 begins with griffins and gorgons, exploring the connections between wondrous objects and the depiction of hybrid creatures. At the same time, the clear connection between gorgons and the toxic demonization of women reintroduces gender into the study of hybrids, a theme going back to the earliest hybrid monsters of cosmogenic myth. Developing the theme of gendered hybridity, this chapter juxtaposes the demonic gorgon and the female demons threatening mothers and children with the satyr, an exaggerated figure of the man identified by and with his penis. These matched exaggerations, by turns horrific and comic, illustrate the function of the hybrid as a projection of certain human anxieties along the lines of thought experiments: what if the man were no more than his erection? What if the woman were as dangerous as she is beautiful? What if a mother devoured her children instead of protecting them? Each caricature exists as an alternative to the ordinary men and women encountered in

our daily lives, but in recognizing these alternatives the Greeks are also using the contrafactual to ask what exactly it means to be human. For this reason, transformation is a recurring theme in early Greek culture, with a wide range of applications. The hybrids born of transformation appear on the stage, especially the comic stage, exuberantly breaking down the barrier between human and animal, but also in religious contexts, especially linked to initiation. Even the different forms and faces worn by the gods arise from our experience of the cosmos as a space of entanglement. If a human shares some characteristics with an animal, does the divine also partake of this mutability? When the gods resemble men and women, what is the significance of their animal avatars?

Chapter 6 focuses on the horse. Here is the best evidence for the distinction between the monster and the hybrid, since no horses or equine hybrids were considered entirely monstrous, with the exception of the flesh-eating Mares of Diomedes. Instead, the intimacy of horse and horseman resulted in a generally positive set of associations. Horse riding, as opposed to chariot driving, was actually a relatively recent development in Archaic Greece, and the hybrid figures of riders fused to their horses reveal that this was a psychologically charged experience. This is entirely understandable given that riding requires control of an animal much more powerful than the rider. Furthermore, as possibly the best-known hybrid in the Greek bestiary, the centaur is a perfect illustration of how in form and function hybrids can be immensely flexible. Some centaurs are human cap-a-pie, with a horse's rear end jutting out of the middle of the creature's human back. Others exhibit the more familiar human head and torso rising from the horse's withers. This might seem no more than a stylistic variation until one considers that the centaur is frequently used as a symbol of unrestrained lust. The change in form forces the audience or viewer to consider uncomfortable questions regarding sexuality and animality. There is also a greater complexity to horse hybrids than a simple externalization of sex drives, since the complete opposite of centaur behaviour is embodied in another centaur: Cheiron, the tutor of heroes. Pegasos, too, reflects a different way of imagining a horse hybrid: not with a human body but with wings. Here, the horse figure is the hero's companion and makes possible monster slaying. In all these ways, the horse emerges as much more than a beast firmly fixed one rung below humans in an Aristotelian chain of being. More powerful than the human, less civilized than the human, a symbol of sexual aggression challenging the human, matched with the human, the horse and its hybrid cousin, the centaur, capture the kaleidoscopic nature

of being and identity in the Archaic Greek world: not fixed and categorically neat, but refracted, shifting, unstable.

Shifting associations and unstable meaning are also a feature of the class of hybrids studied in Chapter 7: snakes. Despite the appearance of snake deities in a variety of religious systems, no precise antecedents suggest an external point of origin for the snake hybrid figures of Athenian myth in the Archaic period. Rather, the presence of human/snake hybrids appears to have been an Athenian invention, the snake's connections with the earth and rebirth providing a suitable form for expressing the Athenian claim to autochthony. This was not an uncomplicated claim. For some aristocratic *gene*, such as the Eteoboutadai, autochthony marked them as superior to more recent arrivals, but the foundational myth of Athens, involving the birth of Erichthonios after Hephaistos' attempted rape of Athena, was tinged with incest and pollution, indicating a degree of ambivalence towards autochthony. A significant reason for this is that traditions of snake-bodied kings and daimons reflected a conception of the past that was conceptually both near and far from the present. The hybridity of the snake-figured ancestor connected them to a deep mythic past, but also bridged the gap that separated the present and connected past (recent, measurable, similar) from the plupast (long ago, primordial, aorist, alien). This was a particular concern in the sixth century, as new notions of national identity, place and embeddedness were taking shape. Bluebeard, the famous pedimental sculpture from the Archaic Akropolis, embodies this. This chapter argues for identifying Bluebeard as the Tritopatores, ancestral deities of the Athenians, who mark the emergence of the recent past from that primordial time of monsters that preceded it. These and other hybrids signify the continuous irruption of the deep past into the current world, a condition that produced a creative tension between order and chaos.

Chapter 8 is a discussion of another source of tension: the anxieties within (conventionally cisgendered) communities facing the complex realities of transgender identities, sexual binarism, dysphoria and other aspects of what Luc Brisson has termed 'sexual ambivalence'. While the underlying issues are complex and arise from the broad gamut of possibilities created by human sexuality, anatomy and cultural practices, ancient discourse tended to reduce this to a simple binary according to which conventional constructions of cisgendered bodies contrasted with a single representation of anomaly: the hermaphrodite. But the varieties of sexed bodies and gendered performances resist oversimplification, and a close analysis of the story of Hermaphroditos told in his hometown of Halikarnassos shows

that different iterations of the story conveyed very different messages: from Hermaphroditos, the emasculated figure combining both male and female in a single epicene hybrid, to Hermaphrodite, the child of Hermes and Aphrodite, the perfect union of male and female and a model for the ideal married couple. Detecting another polarity embodied in the figure of Hermaphroditos, specifically the ethnic difference between indigenous Karian and exogenous Greek, we find sexual hybridity and ethnic categorization operating in tandem and recursively: one group's culture hero (as founder of marriage) becomes another's intersex monstrosity. Hermaphroditos is only one example of a body undergoing sexual transformation, and other figures such as Teiresias, Kaineus and even cross-dressing Achilles illustrate that in counterpoint to a normative understanding of sex and gender in Greek society there existed a space for imagining alternatives to the classes and categories of conventional thinking. At the same time, an imaginative space is not a revolutionary manifesto, and sexual anomaly (as it appears in ancient thinking) illustrates a trajectory of Greek culture beginning in the Classical period: hybrids and anomalous bodies become partly decorative and, in literary works, interesting paradoxes, while their power to shock is largely relegated to the sphere of magic. Here and in other spheres of social praxis, the category of the strangely familiar allowed Greeks to play with different constructions of being human.

In Part IV, two chapters take the discussion beyond the Archaic and Classical World to examine the later history of Greek hybrids and hybridity. Chapter 9 presents the argument that hybrids were an integral feature of the classificatory schemes that accompanied the acquisition and organization of information parallel to the control of territory in the wider Mediterranean world and beyond after Alexander. Texts produced by Hanno, Ktesias and Megasthenes reveal the slippage that allows ethnographic description to mutate into exercises in ordering hierarchies of both animals and humans, so attractive to readers that even authors sceptical of increasingly fantastic tales full of magical hybrid beasts nevertheless continued to spice up their histories and travel accounts with them. The fabulous assumed a life of its own thanks to the importance of marking out the farthest limits of certainty and imperial control by populating it with the incredible, the mutant and the monstrous. Literary accounts of exotic lands mirrored the menageries and displays of the Ptolemies, Seleukids and later Roman emperors. In these accounts, India played an especially significant role. It was a mirror image of the Mediterranean, yet far enough away to also generate anomalous wonders on its borders. It was

not merely the exotic animals of distant lands, such as camels, leopards and giraffes, that astonished the Greek subjects of Hellenistic kings, but also the descriptions of anomalous humans, such as Blemmyes, Dog-Heads and Skiapods, that confirmed an orderly Mediterranean world of properly recognizable humanity, the edges of which were populated by the monstrous, the ugly and the deformed. Ethnography and paradoxography were therefore highly conservative genres that provided hierarchies structured on normality and anomaly to reinforce order. It was in philosophy and literary criticism that hybridity continued to represent both an opportunity and a challenge. As a contrafactual the hybrid invites reflection on what is fitting, what is appropriate to a genre and whether beauty and harmony can be found in forms that are mixed. And even more than these aesthetic questions are the ontological and epistemological quandaries posed by the hybrid: if a centaur never existed and could never have existed, how can we dream it up? Why do we imagine it? The contrafactuality of the hybrid proved to be a Trojan horse within the secure citadel of ancient philosophy.

There is, however, another aspect of the hybrid that deserves attention. Perhaps like other people, the Greeks created a culture that seemed secure and well ordered, in which status, gender and identity appeared to be if not fixed, then at least clear-cut. A free man knew his place and his privileges, a foreigner was aware of the disabilities under which he laboured, an enslaved woman had a fair idea of her lot, a worker in the mines of Laureion even more so. Yet, as I suggest in the final chapter, lived experience was in fact more precarious for all the Greeks than perhaps we recognize. The rich man could lose his fortune, the highborn girl could be shipwrecked and enslaved. These are not just the plot devices of Hellenistic novels; they are the possible experiences of men and women for whom vulnerability and impermanence were as real as wealth and good fortune. These conditions favoured expressions – stories and images in particular – that made change and anomaly part of the cultural repertoire of the Greeks. It is perhaps for this reason that the vivid, vibrant hybrids of the Greek imagination attracted so much attention from Christian writers of late antiquity and beyond. By raising the possibility of other ways of engaging with the world, and by offering alternatives to the settled order of things, hybrids would always be a threat to those attempting to impose their order on the world: demons that demanded to be slain.