

The attempt to engage with recent developments in evolutionary psychology and neuropsychology has been one of the more distinctive theoretical trends in recent histories and archaeologies of art, increasingly dissatisfied with purely cultural modes of interpretation, whether derived from the German critical tradition or more recent structuralist and post-structuralist art histories. I think in particular of Orians' and Heerwagen's (1992) account of aspects of landscape gardening and painting in terms of evolved dispositions to respond favourably to certain features characteristic of the savannah landscapes within which modern humans evolved; or of David Freedberg's recent essay (2007), co-written with the neuropsychologist Vittorio Gallese, which explores how the functioning of mirror-neurons may inform our response to depictions of action, from the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock to Doubting Thomas' thumb, pressed into the wound in Christ's side, in a painting by Caravaggio. Whilst interesting, such studies have had little resonance within mainstream art history, in part because of their rather ahistorical character. Although they may address how certain features of evolved human psychology may inform the character of and responses to some forms of artistic representation, they do little to explain why such forms manifest themselves in some places and periods rather than others.

David Wengrow's account of the origins of monsters in the iconography of early Bronze Age Western Asia takes the debate to a new level by integrating evolutionary psychology, and the epidemiology of representations, with a strong archaeological emphasis on the material technologies of visual representation, and a sophisticated account of art as an institution, embedded in social and political structures, and articulated with trade networks permitting intercivilisational exchanges. The surprising stability of composite iconography in cross-cultural transfers supports Wengrow's claim that the composite character of this 'monster' iconography combines the right combination of aberration and appeal to taxonomic common sense to have the same kind of broad cross-cultural appeal as certain themes of religious symbolism famously discussed by Pascal Boyer (2002). The relative infrequency of such representations before the Bronze Age and their extraordinary efflorescence and widespread transmission thereafter are then explained in terms of the changing affinity between the socio-cultural affordances of such representations and key features of cultural ontology grounded in the rather differing social and political structures of Bronze Age, Palaeolithic and Neolithic civilisations.

These arguments seem to me largely persuasive, and certainly much more compelling than competing explanations, not least since most of them, as Wengrow points out, focus only on one part of the larger picture he describes, the reception of composites in Bronze Age Crete, for example, or in early Iron Age Greece. A particularly attractive aspect of Wengrow's argument is the role played by comparisons across time and space both to justify his claim about the status of composites as 'minimally counterintuitive images' and to unpack the different kinds of mechanism - cognitive, social, and political - which inform the genesis and the chronological and spatial distribution of the images. It was here, however, that I found myself on the one hand questioning some of the claims made by Wengrow for the mechanisms operating to explain the epidemiology of composites, and on the other simply wanting more, in particular an extension of the analysis beyond the West Asian/EastMediterranean focus of the bulk of his discussion. It is against this background that I would like to raise a series of questions which I hope he may be able to address in order to clarify, and perhaps elaborate, his arguments.

Both the title of the book, and Wengrow's analysis of composites, lay particular emphasis on the mechanical replication of composite images, primarily through the medium of sealstones and their impressions. Wengrow makes a persuasive case for a structural affinity between modularity in the construction of composites, and the standardization, through modular principles, of material culture and social life in the increasingly bureaucratically organised societies of early Mesopotamian city-states, transformations in which seals and sealing played an integral role. "Composites thus

encapsulated in striking visual forms the bureaucratic imperative to confront the world not as we ordinarily encounter it – made up of unique and sentient totalities – but as an imaginary realm made up of divisible subjects, each comprising a multitude of fissionable, commensurable and recombinable parts” (p. 71). It is this affinity (if I understand Wengrow correctly) which explains the universal affordances of composites, not exploited in earlier Neolithic etc. civilisations, being taken up and exploited so intensively in the early Bronze Age. Yet in neither the archaic Greek case – where most representations of composites are singular representations (on vase-paintings or sculptures) rather than media of mechanical replication – nor the Shang Chinese (as discussed by Wengrow himself pp. 85-6) is mechanical reproduction particularly central. What does this imply about the causal significance of technologies of mechanical replication in the genesis and distribution of composites? Is the relation a necessary and internal one – no mechanical replication, no composites—or simply a contingent and facilitative one, first in the genesis of composite iconographies, and second in their transmission beyond their context of origin? As regards the issue of their genesis, how might comparison with other cases – particularly independent ones like the first New World cities and states, and perhaps also those of South Asia – clarify (or complicate) the issue?

A parallel set of questions might be asked about the importance of the role of bureaucratic states. Wengrow makes a compelling case for core structural parallelisms between early Bronze Age states in terms of key features of social organisation, and the cultural practices associated with them, in particular bureaucratization and standardisation in practices of state administration and in the organisation of commercial life within “the large urban institutions, which acted as the religious and economic hubs of the earliest cities” (69). None of these features is really characteristic of the emergent poleis of early iron-age Greece which—in striking contrast to their Bronze Age counterparts—lacked any elaborate bureaucratic organisation of political life or commercial enterprise. Nevertheless, as Wengrow discusses, early Iron Age Greek artists and their patrons were enthusiastic adopters of composites. What does this imply about the variable causal weight of the different factors identified by Wengrow in different contexts? For example, would it make sense to argue that once generated, the psychological stickiness of composites of counterintuitive images is sufficient to explain their transmission independently of any affinity between their composite character and the character of the receptive society? How far is it possible to disentangle the role of the strategies of local elites, emulating the practices of peer-polities, from the intrinsic potency of composites as minimally counterintuitive images? There are, after all, many other cultural practices, and features of artistic style and iconography, which are transmitted between the Near East and Greece in the same period, for which one cannot invoke the kind of evolved psychological mechanism relevant to composites: iconographies of lion hunting, animal friezes and the like. Ockham’s razor might be taken to imply that we could explain the transmission of the composites also simply in terms of sociological processes of elites emulating their Near Eastern counterparts and appropriating a range of exotic visual images to legitimate the new positions they were carving out for themselves in emergent Greek states, without needing to invoke the evolved psychological mechanisms which may be associated with composites. These two lines of criticism are of course mutually contradictory, but they do at least open up some issues of the logic of causal explanation which it would be good to see clarified.

A final set of questions addresses the passing comment that Wengrow makes about the transmission of composite iconography as occurring most intensively in ‘proto-’ or ‘archaic’ periods, before the coalescence of the officially sanctioned styles sponsored by the ruling elites of emergent state-level civilisations, for example of Dynastic Egypt and Classical Greece. This is intriguing, and surely requires further exploration. What does Wengrow see as the relationship between the intercultural character of composite iconography – sponsored by state-building elites according to his model – and the forms of social and cultural closure characteristic of the civilizational styles developed by the

same elites (cf. Baines and Yoffee 1998)? How far does the more bounded character of these civilizational styles suggest that the kind of epidemiological model, linked to evolutionary psychology, which informs Wengrow's account of composites, is applicable only in rather special cases, rather than being a model which may be of general relevance to the analysis of ancient visual art? How far does the Chinese case fit this model, since the dominant artistic style of the Shang elites and the composites of Bronze Age China seem to develop together, indeed in internal relationship to each other, on ritual bronzes?

It perhaps seems churlish, in raising these questions, to ask for even more wide ranging comparison from one of the few studies – at a time when there is so much empty talk of 'World Art Studies' – that is genuinely cross cultural and comparative in its approach. Doubtless a full answer would require another book, maybe even a series of books, since *The Origins of Monsters* offers not just an intriguing set of case studies but an entire research programme which deserves much further elaboration if the fruits of Wengrow's approach are to be fully realised.

References

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