

In the perspective of a deep media history, one of the most exciting points in David Wengrow's great book about the genealogy of composite monsters is the evidence of a link between mechanical reproduction, long chains of external trade, and what has recently been called "certification" by the scholar of modern standards and food chains, Lawrence Busch (in a book called "Standards", 2011). Then and now, mechanical reproduction, in this case: the culture of stamp seals and cylinder seals, gives rise to imitations and forgeries, so the people in charge of brands and seals have to make sure they own the monopoly of producing and identifying the authentic tokens of their seals. Thus, "certification" becomes a necessity: the authority to delegate the authority of issuing the authentic tokens of brands and seals. The ownership of matrices and patrices of seals becomes the obvious focal point; and the use of force against any infringement along the chains of their distribution. But why should many of those seals and certificates be guarded and vivified by monsters, or "composites", as David Wengrow calls them? Why do these composite monsters travel along the paths of "certified" elites? Somehow, the development of a bureaucratic meta-authority—the authority to decide about the authenticity of producing and issuing seals and brands—seems to be linked to the meta-monsters made out of the incompatible anatomical limbs of different animals and humanimals. As David Wengrow demonstrates, it is not modularity itself that lets these composite monsters emerge, but the mechanical reproduction of modular beings, and the bureaucratic gate-keeper position of their media. The emergence of an administrative media monopoly and of a purely media-made monster—a monster built from the pictorial representations of anatomical details, but sticking to the surface of their representations—seem to be linked. In more general terms: In the Bronze Age, a newly found 'Media Immanence' takes its turn against the world, unleashing bureaucratic force, physical violence and anatomical surrealism.

Looking at the illustrations in David Wengrow's book and comparing them with the modular designs both from the Pacific North West Coast and from Archaic China, I find it striking how "shock-frozen" most of these composite monsters appear, and that this quality seems to be part of the horror—or of the synthetic wilderness—they incarnate. Whereas on the North West Coast animals and monsters alike remain in a smooth flow of curvilinear designs of encompassing parts and divisible wholes, duck-rabbit-wise popping in and out of each incorporation like an endless fountain of images and creatures, at first glance, the composite monsters from the Near East seem to aim at a similar aesthetics of abundance. But more often than not – even in their non-mechanical versions – they arrest the flow of the gaze in dead ends, crammed corners and unhappy angles. It may be only an association, but the gate-keeper function of these media and their elites seems to have sunk deep into their aesthetic sensibility: the ability to let goods and people pass or to arrest their flow, or to arrest and confiscate people as well as goods. The Shock-Frozen— epitomized in Medusa's stare—, the Stamped Sealed & Delivered, and the Gate-Keeper function, they seem to go hand in hand.

Franz Baermann Steiner famously writes in his note on the "Process of Civilization" from 1944: "What was once outside society, what was later inside society will, when this society triumphs, one day be within the individual. That is the process. The process of civilization is the conquest of man by the natural forces, the demons. It is the march of danger into the heart of creation." ("On the Process of Civilization", in: *Selected Writings*, vol. II, p. 128). When *The Origins of Monsters* was published, I expected this Big Point to be discussed. But then I had to acknowledge the wisdom of avoiding the evolutionist bias in Steiner's proposition. Looking sideways, f.i. at the ebb and tide of witchcraft accusations in colonial and post-colonial times, there is no law governing an evolution of the "march of danger into the heart of creation". All civilizations and all societies possess the means to make this march happen and to protect against it. Still, the "epidemiology of composite monsters" is a prominent historical trajectory for the long-lasting march of the demons into the heart of the cities and city-states of Mesopotamia, the Near East and Greece... and into our hearts. And we can imagine the feelings of disgust and horror experienced by hunters and gatherers, but also by pastoralists (f.i. as visitors or captives) encountering the pictures and public media of composite monsters in those city-states, of an iconography turning (as David Wengrow spells out at the

beginning of his book) the most intimate horror of sorcery into a public proclamation of sovereign power.

There remains a striking reversal of authority and practice to be unravelled by comparing composite monsters with others. F.B. Steiner writes: "The Eskimo considers those magicians or 'sorcerers' as dangerous persons who know how to cast a spell on the spirits from the danger zone which are willing to do their bidding and can be controlled within the sphere of social relations." (p. 126) People and objects dealing with physical and spiritual danger remain ambiguous beings, and become a locus of danger themselves. Inverting this relationship, the composite monsters may transform the locus of obvious danger into ambiguity, and ambiguity into a knowledge of "how to cast a spell on the spirits from the danger zone". Within the public and private practices dealing with composite monsters, protection could be provided by public authority (especially by divination), and by rituals locating the demons on the thresholds separating the places of intimacy from the public sphere. Thus, the composite demons found their protective function in symbolizing and stopping the "march of danger into the heart of creation", by sealing the domestic location of fertility, health and well-being. The "conquest of man by the natural forces, the demons" happens all the time, and it might turn into a collective enterprise in times of publicly acknowledged crises. The only way to stop this march seems to lie in the ability to particularize or even 'privatize' its danger, turning horror into protection (like Taweret; like the shield of the Gorgo, and its relationship with the Evil Eye ever since).

"What was once outside society, what was later inside society will, when this society triumphs, one day be within the individual." How old is this particular individual? Is it only the modern psychological self in which the march of the demons triumphs? Or is the modern triumph of the demonic individual as old as the composite monster, and emerged within its ancient epidemiology? Oedipus meeting the Sphinx, this scene has obviously become one of the best-known encounters connecting the modern psychological selves with the composite monsters of ancient civilizations. We know Claude Lévi-Strauss's astonishing analysis of chthonic traits and foot handicaps in the family tree of Oedipus (in his essay on "The Structure of Myth"); and artists like Francis Bacon have been eager to show their version of swollen feet. But how would we read - or depict - the oedipal encounter with the Sphinx after reading David Wengrow's treatment? In fact, Oedipus and the Sphinx are an interesting test for spelling out some of the historical implications hidden in *The Origins of Monsters*. The kingship of rulers finds its power base in social relationships beyond kinship, in the mobilities of bureaucratic and military offices, and that is why the king time and again is symbolized by creatures of the wilderness, and especially by predators. The bronze age elites controlling the long chains of trade networks and other monopolies of power, obviously extended their power bases beyond kinship too, and they found a striking symbolism in synthetic creatures going against the grain of animal kinship - and against the very idea of kinship -, arbitrarily combining the beasts (and predator traits) of air-, land- and sea-borne creatures. Because these new beasts "beyond kith and kin" demonstrated the power of an elite, its potential of violence and the impersonal chains of bureaucracy (or 'certification'), these hybrid beasts indicated a new scale and scope of protective beings. One of these creatures was a goddess of protection indeed, protecting the nucleus of the family, or of child-birth: Taweret. But all of the composite monsters may have developed this potential of defining the intimate sphere of elites, or the core of their kinship, of "what-to-protect" against the volatility of the outside world.

When Oedipus, the legitimate king of his city-state, meets the Sphinx at the threshold to his city, he encounters his future disaster, by answering her question and destroying a gate-keeper that threatens to kill all passengers. But this composite monster turns out to be Oedipus' last protection against his own monstrous fate, arresting his tragic movement for the last time. And the riddle he solves makes him a composite monster too, four-legged, two-legged and three-legged, the baby he was, the grown-up he is and the old man he will be. In the oedipal answer that kills the Sphinx, I am inclined to hear an echo of the artists of composite monsters at work, taking the extremities of

different beasts and defining the impossibilities of kinship from without and from within. Only now, it's the one beast no one had thought of, and the murderous potential that was once outside society will from now on, for the next millennia, become implanted into the individual heirs and family affairs of royal dynasties and their kith and kin.