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 Oidipous 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 power[11] (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.

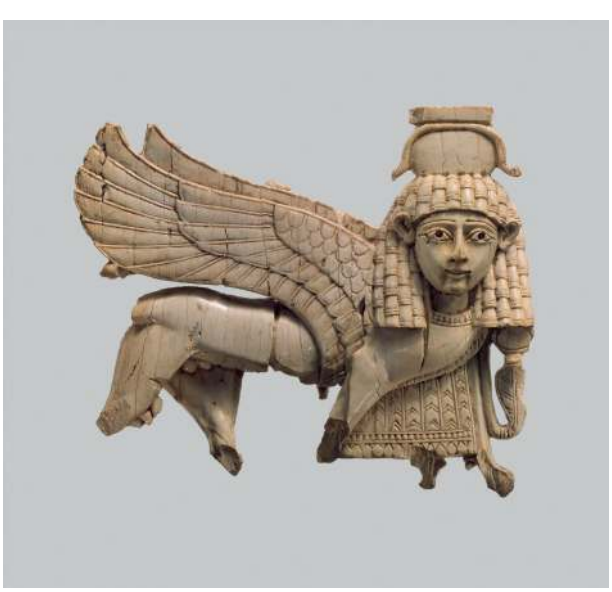

Figure 1.4 Openwork plaque with a striding sphinx. Neo-Assyrian, ninth-eighth centuries BC. Nimrud. H. 3 7/16 × W. 4 1/16 × Th. 13/16 in. (8.8 × 10.3 × 2.1 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, 64.37.1.

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 Oidipous. 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 species[24] (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.