

Community Reading Group Annotations

August 2026

The Origins of Monsters: Image and Cognition in the First Age of Mechanical Reproduction

By: David Wengrow

Since 2019, I have developed participatory exhibitions and programs that explore interdisciplinarity, fostering artistic and humanistic inquiry into science and technology. I am concerned with nurturing a healthy ecosystem of multitudes amid a socially fragmented and climate-stressed world. In the scope of selections for CRG reading "community," I look at the dynamics of heterogeneous life as brought about by globalization and urbanization. For example, how does the global phenomenon of migration evolve ideas of the individual and the collective? How can metaphors of ghosts, monsters, and chimeras help us survive ecological damage and urbanization? How do we teach and learn together within "multi-societies" (multi-lingual, class, species, etc.)? And what can ecological thinking reveal about how we might coexist within these worlds?

–Annie Zeng

David Wengrow

The Origins of Monsters

Intro & Ch.1

Excerpted by Andrew

Introduction

Images of composite animals pose a series of interesting conceptual problems in ... regard [to the hypothesis that physical objects, bearing images, may encapsulate forms of associative reasoning that do not simply encode what is already in the mind but also organize thought into patterns that are historically and culturally distinctive.] Their transmission can be interpreted via two very different notions of modularity, one rooted in cognition and the other in technology. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology they can be viewed as 'taxonomic aberrations,' activating a dedicated neurological device (or 'mental module') for the recognition of living kinds, but at the same time confounding its expectations by combining elements from different species or genera. ... [C]omposite bodies are also the products of another kind of modularity, which is concerned with the practical and conceptual division of the physical world (including the world of images) into standard and interchangeable subunits. Although their respective starting points are very different—one beginning inside the mind and the other outside the body—both concepts of modularity have implications for cultural transmission [and] the early history of the composite figure obliges us to address the relationship between them. (6-7)

It seems Wengrow is talking about a form of reasoning that can be reducible to abstractions that help us do things like mathematics.

Image & Economy in the Ancient World

[In Mikhail Rostovtzeff's] *Iranians and Greeks*, we discover a cultural genealogy for the fantastic beasts of Scythian art, reaching back to the first Bronze Age states on the Tigris and Euphrates. The wider implications were fairly clear: feudalism had not emerged from the closed, command economies of Marx's "Asiatic mode of production," but from an interconnected world of remote antiquity, bound together by shared commercial interests.

It is, perhaps, worth trying to relate these prehistoric interests a little more closely to Rostovtzeff's better-known work on later periods of antiquity. *Caravan Cities*, published in 1932, was a more personal account of the classical remains at Petra, Jerash, Palmyra, and also Dura-Europos, on the Syrian Euphrates, where Rostovtzeff had excavated. ... [The book] demonstrates an acute awareness of archaeological evidence as a window onto far-flung connections, linking the development of ancient societies. The first great alluvial civilizations of Sumer and Egypt, he noted, were dependent on remote highland sources for supplies of metal, ivory, rare woods, precious stones, spices, cosmetics, pearls, and "incense for the delectation of gods and men." The archaeological distribution of luxury consumables, commercial instruments, and political symbols confirmed that "the oldest city-states of Sumer in Mesopotamia were linked to far distant lands by caravans.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the study of prehistoric and ancient art in continental Europe had become strongly associated with questions of racial identity and national spirit. ... The common analytical factor ... was faith in the idea that minute and critical study of form would eventually lay bare the workings of a grand totality.

Applied to culture, this paradigm could only incorporate the mixing of local and foreign elements in somewhat ambivalent terms.

[This view became complicated upon the debut of Frederik Poulsen's 1912 study] of orientaling influences upon archaic Greek art. Poulsen's achievement was to lay out, with unprecedented clarity, a range of evidence for the movement of artistic techniques and motifs—including a variety of composite creatures—from the western fringes of the Neo-Assyrian Empire to the Aegean and central Mediterranean, in the centuries preceding the formation of the classical Greek canon. Perhaps it is wrong to speculate as to whether [proponents of national spirit] would have agreed with the view of some later historians, who interpreted orientaling art as a kind of unpleasant inoculation, which Greek culture had to endure in order to realize its native genius. But at a time when social fears about a contemporary 'Eastern Problem' ran high in Europe, there seemed an obvious significance to the infiltration of Greek art by 'monstrous' forces at its point of gestation, and their subsequent 'taming' within a native scheme of representation. (11-12, 12-13)

It is against this background that we can begin to appreciate the distinctiveness of Rostovtzeff's approach to the interpretation of imagery, and his particular attraction to the imaginary creatures of nomadic art. He seems to have delighted in the unbounded character of these particular designs, following their transmission far and wide, across the boundaries of urban and pastoral, literate and

nonliterate, societies. In addition to their innately hybrid character—as depictions of fantastic, composite species—the images whose distribution he so carefully traced are also the outcome of cultural admixtures and borrowings, fusing technical knowledge of diverse media and modes of representation from multiple societies. And yet, as he intimated, we typically find these depictions on the surfaces of artifacts that possessed strong local significance as ritual or magical objects, through the use of which each individual society forged its own special relationship to the gods.

It might be argued that these movements of monsters, seemingly promiscuous and endlessly adaptive, offered a kind of visual counterpart to Rostovtzeff's story of an ever-expanding Bronze Age civilization, evolving by virtue of its receptiveness to outside influence, and its ingenuity in weaving together the local and the foreign. As a template for the interpretation of social history, however, this attempt to project *Homo economicus* onto the world of images—if such it was—was scarcely less idealized than the myths of cultural autochthony that it sought to displace. Image and economy are connected in Rostovtzeff's work through their distributions in time and space, rather than by any causal or functional relationship. We search in vain for any attempt to account for the fact that, over a period of millennia, the nomadic elite of the Russian steppe not only commissioned and accumulated exotic wealth from an urban hinterland but also sacrificed it to the ground in spectacular burial rites, creating a monumental landscape of *kurgan* mounds that extended from the Altai to the Black Sea (ensuring, in the process, the physical preservation of objects and images that have largely disappeared from their areas of manufacture). (13-15)

In addition to a projection of capitalism onto the past, there is a projection of the bourgeois individual onto the past

It's not only the commercial pressures that these objects are taking on this additional meaning but there is a further mythologizing of these objects

What, then, has Rostovtzeff bequeathed to the study of preclassical antiquity that might be of lasting value? Different people will have different answers, but the legacy that interests me, and that I propose to develop, concerns the links he explored between large-scale distributions of images and the growth of commercial and political networks. It is understandable, given the fragmentary nature of his evidence, that Rostovtzeff should have contented himself with tracing the outlines of these relationships, leaving aside questions of causation. He did, however, propose one specific avenue of inquiry, which remains relatively unexplored, and which I will adopt as my own point of departure. It concerns the sporadic transmission, across cultural boundaries, of certain distinctive kinds of image.

In *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia*, Rostovtzeff drew attention to what he perceived as an important innovation in visual culture, tracing its source to the third millennium BC, and to ancient Sumer: the world's first literate and urban civilization, located on the southern plains of Mesopotamia. Today we would extend this search for origins back at least to the fourth, or perhaps the late fifth, millennium. The innovation was, as he put it, 'the introduction into decorative and symbolic art of special symbolic and fantastic creations formed by the amalgamation of favourite animals of the period with each other and sometimes with human beings.'

Rostovtzeff never made fully clear what he viewed as the significance of this development. ... [It appears he thought] it resided in the empirical distribution of particular images (and particular ways of crafting images) along certain pathways of cultural transmission, and the historical connections and responses generated by such spreads: 'It was thus,' he went on, 'that the popular types of fantastic animals with a religious significance arose: the two types of griffin—with a horned lion's head, and with an eared eagle's head, both crested; the two types of dragon—with a snake's or a crocodile's head, horned or not; the well-known type of the sphinx. All these types spread far and wide, eastward, westward, and northward.'

... Rostovtzeff goes on to note that in Mesopotamia, the heartland of monsters, further mutations took place throughout the first millennium BC, producing new generations of fantastic beasts. As though spurred on by a sudden realization, he documents the transfer of this new bestiary into Iranian art, whence it flowed into the Scythian animal style, departing both northward "to the forests and swamps" of temperate Europe, and eastward, to the frontiers of China. So, he thought, these fabulous creatures had found their way, through diverse routes of contact and transmission, onto the surfaces of funerary offerings presented to the gods of the Danube and the Yellow River, to be received with equal grace by both. (16, 16-17, 18)

David Wengrow

The Origins of Monsters

Ch. 2:
Materials for
an
Epidemiology
of Culture

Excerpted by Annie

pg.
20

Here I will be particularly concerned with a school of evolutionary psychology called the “epidemiology of culture,” which has so far focused mainly on the transmission of concepts through language. **The analogy is not so much with the spread of diseases as with the analytical resolution at which epidemiologists address problems of distribution.** A basic requirement of this approach, as with other neo Darwinian approaches to cultural transmission, is that the distribution of cultural facts should be studied at the level of “populations.” What this means is that distributions should not be approached within predefined boundaries— whether those of the sedentary group, the nation state, or as given by geographical circumstances— but at their fullest observable extent. Only then is it possible to assess their conditions of expansion, and to establish why some elements of culture are more able than others to spread and to become stable within larger fields of transmission.

Do we need to disabuse ourselves of a pathogen sense of epidemiology and rather think about the term in the sense of a research process, in other words not a metaphor but a method?

pp.
22-
24

The modularity thesis and its possible effects on cultural transmission have been extensively discussed in the work of Pascal Boyer, with primary reference to the cognitive foundations of religion. Boyer argues that most anthropological studies of religion have greatly exaggerated the strange or counterintuitive aspects of religious symbolism. Representations of supernatural beings typically comprise strong elements of intuitive knowledge that appeal to modular common sense, and within which their more extraordinary characteristics are embedded...Boyer further proposes that some such cognitive balancing act is necessary for the successful transmission of religious ideas:

[“In any cultural environment, indefinitely many representations of religious entities are constantly created and communicated. Only some of them, however, have the potential to support both imaginative scenarios and intuitive references. These are the ones that combine a rich intuitive base, with all its inferential potential, and a limited series of violations of intuitive theories, which are attention demanding. Because of these characteristics, such assumptions are more likely than others to be easily acquired, memorized, and transmitted than other assumptions. It should not be surprising, therefore, that they constitute the most recurrent aspects of religious systems.”]

...On the expectations of this model, images of composite animals, with one foot in anatomical reality and the other in fantasy, should provide good materials for an “epidemiological” study. We might reasonably hypothesize that, as minimally counterintuitive images, they constitute robust points of reference for ideas about the supernatural, capable of crossing cultural boundaries and acting as ready vehicles for a multiplicity of ritual, theological, and mythological discourses. The striking diffusion of composite figures noted by Rostovtzeff, and to be revisited in the following chapters, thus holds out the prospect of an empirical case study in the epidemiology of culture, and a step toward a cognitive history of images.

Wengrow’s argument about mental modules and part-to-whole relations bears a lot of resonance with The Memory Police’s scene with the bird, which can’t be remembered but the protagonists still recognizes the object’s parts, such as feathers, a beak, and so on, but lacking the category “bird.”

pp.
24-
28

...throughout the remainder of this study, I reject the term “monster” in favor of what I am calling “composites.”...

It may be useful to start with an evocative counterdefinition, provided by the psychologist Rudolph Arnheim in an introductory note to a book of drawings by the New York–based artist Leo Russell, published in 1949. The book bore the simple title *Monsters*. Modern art, Arnheim observed, frequently uses distortions or paradoxical combinations of images to give an impression of “man made disorder that could and should be remedied by man.” But monsters, he suggested, are uniquely disturbing images, as they alone present this disorder as “having grown naturally,” as something organically formed rather than manufactured. The “birth of a monster,” he suggested, represents “a failure of nature herself and threatens our faith in the basic soundness of what grows,” and that is why we find “the mere thought of a biological monster so profoundly sickening,” much more so than “the sight of a mutilated body.”

...Interesting as all these observations may be, their main value here is to exemplify the kind of intuitive understanding of the monstrous that I am rejecting...

What differentiates “composites” from other types of image? As recently highlighted by Philippe Descola, in a wide ranging comparison of image making traditions, there is more to this question than first meets the eye. He points out that the regular production of composites implies a certain underlying approach to the rendering of body as image, which has been cultivated in many but by no means all societies. The starting point for depiction is not an organism in its totality but rather its constituent elements, each of which must be accurately and realistically portrayed in its own right. Working from that principle, and subject to institutional norms and constraints, makers of images can use the various components at their disposal to assemble organic figures of different kinds, including those with clear prototypes in the visible world and those that combine elements drawn from different species. It is the latter that I refer to, throughout this study, as composites.

...Precisely because of their fictive character, the creation of visually compelling composites requires *enhanced* accuracy in the depiction of individual body parts, each of which should be rendered at a common scale and should be clearly identifiable, in and of itself, as belonging to a certain kind of species...

In violating some limited part of intuitive biology, composites thus typically affirm many of its underlying structural principles. Legs are still positioned for walking, eyes for seeing, wings for flying, fins for propulsion, and so on, allowing us to infer (often extraordinary) properties of movement and vitality for the resulting figures.

p.
30-
31

...the kind of anatomical reshuffling, which is necessary to produce images of the sort I am interested in, seems generally quite at odds with the plastic and visual arts of recent hunter gatherers and small scale cultivators. It is, by contrast, an extremely important element in their “performance arts,” where ritual actors take on attributes of animal bodies—not (*contra* Arnheim) as signs of “disorder” or “nature gone out of joint”—but to gain a deeper empathy and insight into the thoughts of nonhuman beings whose modes of reasoning are considered similar to those of people. It also finds a place in

What does it mean to think of a body as an image? Is this unique to composite societies?

The word composition, as it is implied in the word composite, has an allusion to music in the sense of something not possessing a body.

The key reason why Wengrow is making a distinction between a monster and a composite is because the former has a moralizing aspect to it.

The composite does not start from a vision of a whole, it starts from the parts.

The idea of ritual actors using masks as a deeper empathy into nonhuman beings is interesting assumption along with the assumption that animals must think like humans.

Might there be a subtle allusion to Levi Strauss in his thinking on mediation and empathy.

Community Quote Sheet

Metaphor Key: ★ (recurrent); ⊥ (contradictory); Z (abstruse)

	<p>negative sorcery, as with the Greenland Inuit practice of arranging bones from diverse species to make a temporary effigy known as <i>tupilak</i>, which served as a ritual attractor for malevolent, supernatural forces that could be sent to wreak havoc on a human victim (figure 2.3). For reasons of prudence, such effigies were not traditionally rendered as permanent images...</p> <p>To depict such states of mediation in durable form is at odds with an ontology in which fluidity and flexibility are everything, and may invite danger by leaving open a permanent trace of a relationship between human and “other” that should be properly circumscribed by rites of passage and closure. Images of composite beings, rigid and unchanging, evoke these principles of metamorphosis only to subvert them, by fixing transformations within stable forms that are capable of being repeated and disseminated, over and over again.</p>	<p>Temporality may also be a significant factor in Wengrow’s consideration of identity as something that can be fluid, which is parallel to his idea of part-to-whole relations.</p> <p>A keyword for understanding the composite is that it is defined by this order element — along with that ordered element there is a heirarchical context that fosters it</p>
--	---	---

Key words/phrases	Epidemiology of culture, mental modules, counterfactual images
-------------------	--

Wengrow, David

The Origins of Monsters

Chapter 3
The Hidden Shaman

Excerpted by Bernadette

(Pages 36 – 37)

The prominence ascribed to such [composite] figures in interpretations is out of all proportion to their quantity. During the later phases of the Upper Paleolithic (ca. 13,000 – 10,000 BC), when archaeological traces of image making are first available in significant quantities, the record is dominated by detailed and anatomically accurate representations of living kinds: birds, fish, and (mainly female) humans. Among this extensive corpus of painted and engraved figures, it has proved difficult to identify images of beings with composite anatomies that are replicated with any degree of fidelity. Suggestions to the contrary are often bolstered by selective comparisons with the rock of living or recent hunter-gatherers in Southern Africa.¹⁶ In fact, such images are far from ubiquitous there, and their chronological range is unknown.¹⁷ **Were we, in spite of this to admit to the more regular depiction of composites or masked human actors in the recent rock art traditions, this would surely provide an instructive point of contrast rather than a surrogate for the Paleolithic record.**

(Pages 37)

Questioning the frequency of composites among the surviving corpus of Paleolithic art does not, of course, require us to postulate that its creators had anything than fully modern minds, capable of communications complex symbolic messages. Nor does it require us to reject interpretations that explore the significance of such images in the ritual life of prehistoric societies. It does, however, establish an important benchmark for studying their distribution in the archaeological record. The significant point, to which I will return, is that if such beings did populate the collective imagery of early hunter-gatherers, then their presence was made manifest predominantly through ephemeral modes of display such as psychotropic visions and masked performances that have left few durable traces.

(Page 39-40)

The period in question [end of the last Ice Age (ca. 10,000 BC) to beginnings of urban life (ca. 4000 BC)] saw the domestication of cereal crops and herd animals, and the establishment of sedentary life across a significant part of the western Old World.²² In an influential study, Jacques Cauvin characterized these developments as “the birth of the gods and the origins of agriculture.”²³ He was referring to a series of pronounced changes in ritual and symbolic expression in that accompanied in the early stages of plant and animal domestication in western Asia, and then spread—together with the farming economy—to neighboring regions. At the core of Cauvin’s argument was a contention that Neolithic representations of supernatural agency differed from those of earlier, hunter-gatherer societies. He perceived in the symbolism of the first farming communities an acknowledgment of remote and invisible deities: a new register of divinity, dominating and mastering a preexisting order of relations between humans and ancestral beings. With the “birth of the gods,” those ancestral figures formerly credited with the making of the cosmos were relegated to a lower plane of reality,

Löwenmensch, a.k.a. Lion Man (fig 3.1a) is frequently used as visual representation of the Upper Paleolithic era in textbooks and also the leading image in Wikipedia for [Upper Paleolithic](#)

closer to the material world of ordinary humanity. Hence, Neolithic villages became populated by the physical remains of human and animal ancestors, impinging on the most intimate spaces of the household, making new and complex demands upon the society of the living. Among those demands, we find the performance of labor-intensive rituals, which involved the cleansing and symbolic refreshing of skulls, and the provision of exotic materials—pigments, shells, and colored stones—which ornamented the bodies of both the living and the dead.

To what extent can this Neolithic birth of the gods can be considered a “birth of monsters,” or rather “composites,” to be precise? Was it among these societies, unprecedented in their willingness to intervene in the reproductive patterns of other species, that anatomical hybrids made a concerted entry to the world of images? The existence of such images among the surviving corpus of Neolithic pictorial art has been quite widely discussed,²⁴ but in fact remains intriguingly difficult to substantiate.²⁵

(Page 49)

Insofar as these latter images combine aspects of different body forms, it is in a manner clearly distinct from the composite figures that we find associated with gods and demons in later dynastic art, and whose beginnings I will discuss in the chapter that follows. The earlier, predynastic hybrids do not result from a systematic division and recombination of standardized body parts. Instead they seem to arise from a thoughtful play on continuities and resemblances in the appearance of various species, resulting in a mode of depiction that continues to resist modern attempts at classification.

They belong not to the urbanized image world of the composite figure, where we will shortly arrive, but to an earlier art of ambiguity where the forms of living beings mingle and interpenetrate on contact, and where meaningful relations emerge from the blending of affinities rather than from the assemblage of contrasts.

Wengrow then dives in examples of natural depictions not as composites but with specific and meaningful interpretations: focus on expressions than identification (fig 3.3), slight abstraction of form to match the medium (fig 3.4 and 3.5), depiction of pregnancy in animals and distinction between humans and animals (fig 3.6) or the accumulation of animal remains in burials incredibly far from their origin.

David Wengrow

The Origins of Monsters

Chapter 4

Excerpted by Andrew M.

The patchiness of composites in the prehistoric visual record ... has already posed difficulties for [the hypothesis that the transmission of recurrent composite-figure motifs across cultural and linguistic boundaries may be related to the cognitive effects provoked by the ‘minimally counterintuitive’ propositions such images elicit.] It is beyond doubt that Paleolithic and Neolithic societies sometimes created durable images of composite beings, and the few surviving candidates have often been accorded great prominence in modern interpretations. Yet they remain strikingly isolated. **If the popularity of minimally counterintuitive images is to be explained by their core cultural content and its appeal to universal cognitive biases, then why did composite figures fail so spectacularly to ‘catch on’ across the many millennia of innovation in visual culture that precede the onset of urban life?** Much hinges here upon our conceptualization of the ‘counterintuitive’ and its role in cultural transmission, a problem that I will return to in later chapters. A more immediate priority is to establish the point at which such figures *do* achieve some wider currency, and begin to behave in the kind of culturally contagious ways. ... To what kind of ‘cultural ecology’ does the composite animal belong? (51)

Cultural ecology: the whole social schema in which a particular group sees themselves as part of,

What might be important about the minimally counterintuitive is that it is just pushing the limit to what is imaginable.

Periods of intensified exposure to outside influence are often also times of extraordinary cultural efflorescence and innovation, combined with aggressive competition over traditional sources of value. In Egypt, investment in new modes of depiction focused initially upon established status symbols and media of personal presentation. Cosmetic grinding palettes, combs, knives, and mace-heads ... were now decorated with relief figures of wild and dangerous animals. Both in technical execution and principles of composition, these sculpted bodies mark a departure from the animal imagery of predynastic times. ... Together with the novel play on light and shadow produced by relief carving, there is a completely new emphasis on details of joints and musculature. **Once the outline of a figure had been established, incision and fine modeling were used to distinguish not only individual body parts but also particular structural features and elements that correspond to an empirical reality below the skin.** In some cases, the repetitive carving of these lifelike creations in row after minute row suggests an aesthetic interest in the standardization of form.

The same anatomical empiricism that allows these animal depictions to be identified with zoological precision also produced an entirely new kind of visual imaginary, based on the subdivision of accurately rendered body parts and their reassembly into ostentatiously artificial wholes. It is as though the entire field of image making were being reinvented on the basis of a new theory of material connections and integration; a new understanding of part-whole relations, of which composite animals—which now included both homegrown and imported varieties—are just one, especially clear manifestation. The same applies, broadly, to dynastic modes of depiction for the human form, the core principles of which remained relatively stable from the First Dynasty onward. Bodies were constructed out of standardized parts, each depicted with great precision in its typical form and assembled in the manner of a ‘composite diagram.’

Intriguingly, the adoption of composite principles in Egyptian art was accompanied by analogous developments in a range of other technological domains. ... Modular construction techniques can be detected in both miniature and monumental formats. ... In the remains of high-status furniture, which became a focus of craft specialization, these technological changes come together with the world of images depicted on ceremonial objects. Some hundreds of ivory furniture attachments fitted with dowels and slots have been recovered, and can sometimes be identified as three-dimensional versions of figures carved in relief on palettes, knives, and maces, pointing toward the creation of a unified visual environment for elite culture. (54–59)

Urban civilization took root on the grassy steppe of inland Syria at the beginning of the fourth millennium BC and intensified toward its end. Southern Mesopotamian influence along the Middle Euphrates is apparent in (among other things) the adoption of cylinder seals bearing images of composites, including types that were transmitted concurrently to Egypt. Around 3100 BC, both Syria and much of northern Mesopotamia witnessed a marked contraction of urban life and long-range commerce. Seals continued in use, and were once again employed in conjunction with painted pottery. Composite animals, however, had no apparent role to play in these more localized forms of cultural display, which spread across the Taurus and Zagros piedmont through social

networks comparable in scale to those of Neolithic times. Equally notable is their spectacular reappearance, both in seal imagery and in larger media, during the mid-third millennium BC. Sometimes termed Syria's 'second urban revolution,' this period saw the reestablishment of long-range commercial ties between the steppe zone and the city-states of the southern Mesopotamian alluvium. Once again, the latter region provided a ready-made repertoire of composite figures ... that was adopted with various modifications by Syrian seal-carvers.

A general relationship has emerged between the spread of urban life and the widespread transmission of images depicting composite beings. To an extent, that is perhaps alarming—these distributions are often traceable through just a single, surviving medium: image-bearing seals made of durable materials and their impressions on a variety of malleable surfaces, ranging from the mud stoppers of commodity jars to the strips of clay placed across door-thresholds to deter entry, and—in the cases of Mesopotamia and western Iran—the surfaces of clay documents used to record transactions. Undoubtedly, seals are best regarded as tracers for a wider range of commodities, most of which are not preserved in the archaeological record. Among the latter, dyed and ornamented textiles—the quintessential value-added products of early urban economies—are likely to have played a significant role in the long-range dissemination of visual styles and motifs. In view of these preservation biases, we might be wary of attaching too much significance either to the seals themselves or to the objects they marked. (65, 67)

The significance of the seals don't have a strong function locally but rather in long distance trade, which is a feature of what we would now globalization/

Two closely related features of [the transition from village to urban life] are especially germane to the development of composites: the overall standardization of material culture and the cultivation of new technologies based on modular principles of assembly. The beginnings of these processes lie in small-scale communities scattered across the plains of central and northern Mesopotamia, and in neighboring parts of southern Turkey (ca. 5000–4300 BC). ... Their ceramic repertoires exhibit a new degree of uniformity and an overall reduction of aesthetic investment, and the figurines of this period ... include complex and relatively standardized forms made by "adding body parts to a central stalk, with features created by carving, painting or application"

With the expansion of urban settlements throughout Mesopotamia during the fourth millennium BC, the trajectory toward standardization and modularity in material culture intensified markedly. Systems of modular construction, based on the assembly of standardized and interchangeable components, are evident not just in imagery at this time, but also across such diverse technological domains as mud-brick architecture and ceramic commodity packaging (figure 4.11). These wider developments in material culture underpinned the invention, around 3300 BC, of the protocuneiform script. This new system of information storage was initially designed for bookkeeping purposes in large urban institutions, which acted as the religious and economic hubs of the earliest cities. It was based on a principle of differentiation whereby materials, animals, plants, and labor were divided into fixed subclasses and units of measurement, organized according to abstract criteria of number, order, and rank. Many of the earliest known administrative tablets thus functioned in a manner comparable to modern punch cards and balance sheets. In order for such a recording system to function, every named commodity ... had to be interchangeable with, and thus equivalent to, every other of the same administrative class.

This brings to mind the superstructure and the frame — or the idea of Gestalt ... this gathering of things together.

There's this morphology that occurs that leaps things from being so fixed.

The invention of a novel repertoire of composite figures can be seen to "fit" very logically into this urban and bureaucratic milieu. In pictorial art, new standards of anatomical precision and uniformity, evident in both miniature and monumental formats, echoed wider developments in material culture. Through the medium of sealing practices, miniature depiction remained closely tied to the practice of administration, which required the multiplication of standardized and clearly distinguishable signs for the official marking of commodities and documents. Variability among seal designs was generated through often-tiny adjustments in the appearance or arrangement of figures and motifs. These did not alter the overall visual statement, but allowed each design to fulfill its designated role as a discrete identifier within the larger administrative system to which it belonged.

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. (68, 69-71, 73)

David Wengrow

The Origins of Monsters

Ch 5

Excerpted by Beth

75 Cases of "arrested development" are not difficult to find. One such case may be illustrated by an atypical cuneiform text, known as the Babylonian *Göttertypentext*. Most probably composed in the second millennium BC, it survives only in Neo-Assyrian copies. The text gives a detailed technical program—of just the kind recommended by Leonardo da Vinci (see chapter 2)—for the depiction of composite beings, and uses them in a very unusual way to personify nouns. The following image was intended, for instance, to personify "Grief":

The head is supplied with a cap and horns of an ox; he is supplied with ears of an ox; the hair hangs loose over his back; the face is that of a woman; his hands are those of a man; he is supplied with wings and his hands are stretched outwards towards his wings; the naked body is that of a woman; his feet stand in the *huppu* posture.

The context of this is that he is trying why some composites become popular and don't.

77 More needs to be said about the strange "reproductive habits" of the composite animal, and its strong association with mechanical modes of image making. It may be instructive here to step outside the realm of composites proper and consider another type of image, which occupies a middle-ground between masking and the depiction of imaginary beings: the face of Humbaba, legendary guardian of the Cedar Forest defeated by Gilgamesh in battle, exemplified here by a cast terracotta plaque of the second millennium BC from central Iraq (figure 5.2a). The face of Humbaba and its distant Greek relative the *gorgoneion* exhibit remarkably broad distributions in time and space. Both are to some degree "counterintuitive" images, in which the "usual conventions and typical classifications [of physiognomy] are syncopated and intermixed." "In disrupting the features that make up a human face," as Jean-Pierre Vernant wrote of the *gorgoneion*, "it produces an effect of disconcerting strangeness that expresses a form of the monstrous, oscillating between two extremes: the horror of the terrifying and the hilarity of the grotesque."

The idea of something being both terrifying and hilarity has subtle resonances with fort/da

78-80 There are perhaps few better settings for thinking about the cultural significance of monsters, in the broader colloquial sense, than the ruins of Tiryns, overlooking the Gulf of Argos. The Argolid was Bronze Age Greece's face to the East, just as the Gulf of Corinth—on the other side of an isthmus dominated by the palace at Mycenae—was its face to the West. According to Pausanias, Tiryns became the kingdom of Perseus after his return from the ends of the world with the head of the Gorgon, and his subsequent shaming and exile from Argos. The people of Argos claimed that the lethal prize, which retained the power to kill by its stare, was buried beneath their marketplace: a shrewd insurance policy against future ruination, as well as a potent foundation myth. Pausanias's *Description of Greece* credited the building of Tiryns's walls to another race of monsters, the one-eyed giants, or Cyclopes, who undergo a marked transformation in Greek literature, from Homer's "idle and unruly" troublemakers to the diligent artisans and builders of culture—masters of sculpture and metalworking—that are found in classical sources.

Dating to the thirteenth century BC, the remains of a multimedia workshop are among the recent finds from a destruction layer in the Lower Citadel of Tiryns. The workshop specialized in producing composite faience and sheet metal objects: exotic techniques, imported from the east, and conceivably practiced here by foreign craft-workers. Its products included a distinctive range of head-shaped vessels, the basic forms of which were achieved by pressing successive layers of faience into an intaglio mold. The resulting container was fired to a dark glaze, painted, and ornamented with inlaid eyeballs and perhaps also gold foil attachments. Composite vessels of this kind are rare in Bronze Age Greece, but good parallels are known from urban centers on Cyprus and the Levantine coast, whose trade links to the Argolid are attested in a variety of luxury imports at Tiryns and other Mycenaean palaces.

Having no base, the cups were designed for rapid drinking, probably of wine, in which the act of consumption—from a spectator's point of view—replaced the face of the drinker with that of the creature depicted on the cup. As practical objects, they united the ritual techniques of drinking and masking, both of which imply submission to a public act of metamorphosis. One particular vessel from Tiryns is distinguished by a grotesquely furrowed face, and an unusual aperture in its gaping mouth which could be blocked with a finger while drinking, or used for theatrical effect to emit a gory stream of red liquid, perhaps accompanied by a gurgling sound. Parallels have been drawn with a contemporary series of terracotta masks that were found on Cyprus, and these in turn echo Near Eastern depictions of the ogre Humbaba, whose head (bleeding heavily, no doubt, from the mouth) was taken in combat by Gilgamesh, and transformed into a protective image.

There's a pseudo-involuntary element to this because one is transforming themselves temporarily.

80-81

From the standpoint of an "epidemiological" approach to culture (see chapter 2), the close association between mechanical techniques of image production and the spread of (minimally) counterintuitive forms is puzzling. It implies a strong element of redundancy—a kind of superfluous cultural prosthesis to cognitive predispositions that are already biased towards the reception of such images. The paradox becomes more acute when we take into account that Mesopotamia, the heartland of composite animals, is also the region where mechanical methods were first widely applied to the reproduction of images, via stamp and cylinder seals, initially, and then also via the terracotta mold (see chapter 4). Moreover, the subsequent proliferation of composites during the Bronze Age follows closely the spread, to neighboring parts of the Old World, of mechanical modes of image production, and of the palace and temple institutions where they were used to promulgate officially sanctioned signs.

Within large-scale social formations (where the origin of commodities was increasingly mysterious and remote), the use of image-bearing seals to mark and secure the containers of goods, taken into the body and household, provided evidence of elite claims to secure the materials of life and wellbeing. For millennia, in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, sealing devices formed the "canvas" on which an ever-evolving imagery of power and protection unfolded: the comings and goings of gods and goddesses, fabulous animals and kings, intricate scenes of industry and travel, feasting and worship, conquest and defeat—all the dazzling visual innovations of the urban state, harnessed to the most elementary social activity of them all, the sharing and distribution of food and drink. Sealing practices created extended webs of accountability between producers and consumers, while the highly specialized techniques of seal manufacture (using intaglio carving and, from the second millennium BC, wheel-cutting of miniature designs) ensured centralized control over the circulation and modification of designs.

Can the seals be thought of as a form of mediation?

Is there a connection here between the seal and the buell surfaces in Graeber.

82

We are on the verge of a seductive hypothesis, which must be considered if only to be immediately rejected: is mechanical replication in some way a necessary supplement to our innate capacities for recalling and faithfully reproducing counterfactual images on an extended spatial and temporal scale? Let us admit that the idea has its attractions. It provides an economical, if only partial, explanation for the sparseness of composites in the prehistoric visual record, and it tallies reasonably well with their observable spread in later periods. Gombrich, however, offered no evidence—experimental or otherwise—to support the notion that pictures of imaginary creatures might be more difficult to remember and replicate than pictures of living species, and no such evidence has to my knowledge been supplied before or since [and there is a counterexample.]

86-87

From a comparative perspective, and within the wider terms of my discussion, what stands out is the systematic avoidance by Chinese bronze casters of mechanical techniques for the replication of complex visual designs, despite the availability of such methods in other media of lower status. Decorative images were painstakingly carved by hand either onto the core from which casting molds were formed or onto individual mold sections. The overall system of manufacture was modular but not mechanical, and reflects the wider principles on which urban crafts were organized:

For decoration the bronze makers developed a modular system that allowed them to assemble countless combinations from a limited repertoire of motifs and compartments. They also devised a modular technical system for casting their vessels. These systems offered the best solution to the task that the ancient Chinese had set for themselves: to produce high-quality bronzes in sets. . . . To have religious and political life function properly, the Shang aristocracy may have needed in, say, the twelfth century BC, sets of ritual bronzes totaling several thousand units. The bronze makers met the demand by devising modular systems. Modular products lend themselves to a division of labor. They are most smoothly and efficiently fabricated in a production system in which the work is compartmentalized.

Only from around the eighth century BC onward were clay pattern blocks, such as those discovered at the Houma foundry in Shanxi Province, used to impress designs mechanically onto the mold sections from which bronzes were cast. [...] In no way, can the earlier avoidance of mechanical replication techniques in bronze casting be said to have impeded the dissemination of standard templates for the visualization of imaginary beings, and the overall impact of mechanical reproduction upon this long-established tradition appears to have been quite minimal.

Do composite imagery on seals represent a prefiguration of mass media?

Key words/phrases

Modular, gorgon, mold, mechanical, replication, copy

David Wengrow

The Origins of Monsters

Chapter 6

Excerpted by Andrew

The distribution of composite figures in the visual record raises a number of intriguing problems for the study of cultural transmission, for which only partial and unsatisfactory solutions have so far been offered.

[What must be accounted for is the reason for] the recurrence of the same imaginary figures in different cultural settings. [I will address the problem], focusing on the institutional role of externally derived images within centralized (or centralizing) societies. I will suggest that the macro distribution of composites follows two distinct but regular modes of transmission and reception, to be termed 'transformative' and 'integrative.' The fact that both modes can be exemplified from more than one region and chronological period provides a measure of confidence that the patterns observed, while contingent ... are not simply random. (88, 89)

Throughout much of Greece, the seventh century BC was a period of heightened competition between local elites, whose authority was based on personal ties of loyalty, underpinned by kinship obligations and claims to ancestral status. Since the commencement of the Iron Age ... this aristocratic ideal had been sanctioned through a restricted set of ritual practices, in which the selective display of exotic trade items signaled the attainment of rank and status. Grave goods at that time show a hierarchical pattern of distribution in the archaeological record, and imagery ... was carefully rationed on ceramics, metalwork, and ivories. With the exception of centaurs, which first appear on Late Geometric pottery, composites are absent from the decoration of these and other display media.

[By] the late eighth century ... this established social order was disrupted and transformed through the arrival in increasing quantities of foreign trade goods and through the emergence of a cosmopolitan elite, membership of which was defined and signaled primarily through the use of non-Greek objects, images, and practices. The incorporation into local idioms of display of foreign ... visual designs, and their percolation across multiple levels of Greek society, is reflected in the increasing popularity of orientalizing motifs—including a variety of composite animals—on painted and incised ceramics, whose decoration emulates the appearance of more prestigious metalwork. For local elites, orientalizing objects were both sought after and potentially threatening, [an ambivalence that has been interpreted as] an attempt to circumscribe the symbolic potential of foreign trade goods within established codes of ceremonial display. (91)

An association between composites, introduced from outside sources, and the reformulation and efflorescence of elite culture can be similarly traced for earlier periods of Mediterranean history. ...

The incorporation of composites, originating outside the established boundaries of a given cultural milieu, is a consistent feature of [cultural fusion or *transformation*], from proto-dynastic Egypt to Archaic Greece. In no instance can any simple causal relationship be posited between institutional change and the adoption of a foreign bestiary in art or ritual. It is notable, however, that in each of the cases described, exotic composites are associated with the material culture of social elites in the process of self-fashioning, and were accorded discursive prominence through their incorporation into important rituals and ceremonies. The cumulative unfolding of this cultural pattern across an ever-widening area created a common fund of fantastic imagery, shared by Bronze Age elites from the Near East to the Aegean. The growth of this common reservoir of images, connecting elite worlds via the otherworldly, was a precondition for my second mode of cultural transmission: the 'integrative' mode. (92, 94)

The transmission of images in the integrative mode corresponds closely to the development of what are often termed 'intercultural' or ... 'international' styles in the art of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean—that is, elite visual styles blending elements of diverse cultural origin, and resisting identification with particular craft centers or 'schools.' ... During the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC, luxury goods took on common forms across cultural boundaries, working to consolidate otherwise fragile commercial and political bonds through their circulation as gifts and counter-gifts. At this time of intense inter-regional diplomacy between the royal courts of the Eastern Mediterranean, imaginary landscapes ... reveal, in their distribution, the cosmopolitan face of courtly

The common reservoir of images connect to the buillion conversation later.

life—the desire for mutual recognition and integration across often tense cultural boundaries, negotiated amid the ever-present uncertainty of dynastic politics.

It is within this ostentatious and fissile world that [one locates] the decoration of ‘international style’ objects. Composite animals typically feature there in scenes of predation where they are incorporated, either as violent opponents or protective allies, with images of real wild animals such as lions. [In turn, these artifacts suggest] that both composite creatures and imaginary plants serve to locate this imagery ‘outside the realm of the physical world and into ‘otherness’ that could be either threatening or protective.’

On intercultural-style vessels of the Early Bronze Age, as on international-style objects of the later Bronze Age, composite animals are rarely accorded the kind of discursive prominence that they achieved in transformative modes of transmission. Within the integrative mode, they are usually incorporated into vibrant pictorial landscapes, interacting on an equal footing with real animals as predators or protectors—a more muted visual status, in keeping with the sensitive decorum of inter-elite exchange. Having defined the essential features of transformative and integrative modes, a third mode of image transfer can now be identified. It is attested through an unusually rich body of evidence from Mesopotamia, casting light on the mobilization of composite animals as vehicles of protective magic, directed against the spread of disease and misfortune. (94-95, 99)

To the Neo-Assyrian period in Mesopotamia, corresponding to the first half of the first millennium BC, belong cuneiform documents containing detailed instructions for the manufacture and use of composites. [The documents] prescribe ‘rituals for the defense of the house against epidemic diseases, represented as an army of protective intruders.’ The rituals comprise a series of technical acts, some perhaps more symbolic than real, which resulted in the production of a small militia of composite figures, accompanied by images of armed deities and guard dogs.

Like the demons they were intended to repel, the powers of those supernatural agents invoked in the ritual texts were ambivalent. The purpose of the rituals, and of the technical process of forming a miniature figure, was to obtain a degree of control over them, harnessing them to the domestic realm as a kind of spiritual fortification against outside threats and pollution. The texts make it clear that this could be achieved only with the aid of the gods, which was called upon through the observance of cleansing and sacrificial rites during the making of effigies, and by the consecration of their wood and clay with purifying materials: gold and silver tools for the (symbolic) cutting of wood, and precious stones such as carnelian, to be cast into the pit from which clay was extracted. The choice of materials is never explained, but it seems significant that all originate in distant highlands beyond the familiar world of cities, extending the spatial logic of an official worldview in which mountains constituted not just the margins of a civilized, lowland world but also its ontological opposite.

Neo-Assyrian composites came in standard sets and assemblages, and the rituals gave precise instructions as to their appearance and proper locations around the house. Every detail of manufacture was clearly set down: the various components of the body (including model wings, horns, and incised scales); its outer treatment with colored pastes; the written incantations to be inscribed on its surface; the weapons and instruments of purification that it was to carry; to which hand each should be attached; and in what order all these acts were to be carried out. The counterfactual properties of the resulting image were thereby constructed through a whole series of explicit ritual and technological procedures extraneous to its cultural form.

Making a magically effective composite was then no ordinary technical act, but one guided by strict and preordained regulations, requiring access to special (and often exotic) ingredients and skills, including literacy. While the miniature clay composites of the Neo-Assyrian period may appear, on first inspection, to belong to the same general class of ‘popular’ imagery as prehistoric figurines, their conditions of production are therefore worlds apart. Behind each composite form lurks the complex cultural apparatus of the imperial state, with its carefully administered and ever-expanding archives of occult knowledge, its stores of exotic and magical materials, and its concentration of ritual, medical, and technological expertise. [This] centralized management of the spirit domain is surely less a proof of ‘terrible superstition’ than of ‘trust in the exorcists, the ‘men of science’ of the day who had libraries of protective rituals at their disposal.’ (99, 100, 101-103)

Community Quote Sheet

Metaphor Key: ★ (recurrent); ⊥ (contradictory); Z (abstruse)

The integrative mode is associated with the tense theater of courtly diplomacy, with its fragile alliances and fateful transgressions. And the protective mode, shading into the other two, is a direct response to threats against household and person, in which preemptive ritual attacks are launched upon the demonic carriers of illness and misfortune.

Against this backdrop, the cultural ecology of the composite figure comes into clearer focus. It can now be defined not only in terms of morphology—that is, the ‘fit’ between composites and the technological milieu of the first cities—but also in terms of institutional dynamics. Time and again, these otherworldly anatomies provided the locus for a heightened cultural interplay between ‘self’ and ‘nonself,’ condensing some anticipated danger into an image that could be fixed and managed within existing structures of meaning. The cosmos occupied by composites was a fragile and fissile one, presided over by the threat of uncontrolled transformations, and confronted by the prospect of immanent corruption, marginalization, or disintegration. If we are seeking a biological analogy for their properties of transmission, then we might best look not to the field of epidemiology but to that of immunology, which centers on the procedures available to the body (and, by extension, to the body politic) for discerning and neutralizing outside threats. (106-107)

We project what is known
onto the unknown to control it.

Key words/phrases

David Wengrow

The Origins of Monsters

Conclusion

Excerpted by Zach W.

109– An archaeological perspective allows us to release the composite figure from the
 110 spell of the primordial, which surrounds the more vague concept of the
 “monstrous.” *Its origins as a stable and widely transmitted type of image belong to the first age of mechanical reproduction, beginning around six thousand years ago. And its underlying logic of figuration—based on the extraction of standard subunits from their given frames and their recombination into composite wholes—expresses modes of practical and abstract reasoning that underpinned the growth of large-scale social formations.* Within such contexts, the counterfactual properties of composite figures were offset against two distinct forms of intuitive knowledge, one universal and the other historically contingent.

The first type of knowledge allows properties of vitality and movement to be attributed unreflectively to artificial composites, based on the mind’s innate tendency to compensate for gaps and absences in the visible world, conjuring organic-seeming wholes out of ill-fitting parts. This capacity is presumably universal and can be considered a part of “intuitive biology,” but it was little exploited in the pictorial arts of early hunter-gatherer and farming populations, which focused on the representation of living things that can be seen in the world. The second type of intuitive knowledge, within which the counterfactual properties of composites were grounded, is a historical product of technological and institutional environments that came into existence at a relatively recent point in evolutionary time, with the emergence of the first cities and state-like systems of organization. *Such settings fostered the cultivation of an otherwise latent mode of perception that confronts the world, not as we usually encounter it—composed of unique and sentient totalities—but as a realm of divisible subjects, each comprising a multitude of fissionable a recombinable parts (“seeing like a state,” as James C. Scott might have it).*

—

110– The embedding of composite figuration within this kind of
 112 “double-intuitive”—comprising both universal and historical aspects of cognition—laid foundations for the enhanced orders of cultural receptivity predicted by an “epidemiological” approach. The specific distribution of composite figures in the visual record must be further situated, however, within the institutional dynamics of elite culture, and within particular strategies of governance that first took root during the Bronze Age, including the dissemination of officially sanctioned images through mechanical reproduction. What then remains of the basic hypothesis with which I began: that as minimally counterintuitive images, depictions of fantastic, composite animals should exhibit special properties of cultural transmission?

I suggest we can still accept, with the evolutionary psychologists, that the transmission of cultural imaginaries within a given population is grounded in frameworks of inference that are intuitively shared by most of its members. But it

These two forms of knowledge — one has an innate quality and the other has an institutional quality — are distinct because one is biological and the other created through communal practice and shaping the world in concert.

The bigger argument is that the concept of the monster is very often attributed only to the innate and never to the synthetic or institutional environment. In other words, it is the idea that monsters have always been a product of human cognition is false. Instead these figures cannot exist without the creation of the institutional world.

Community Quote Sheet

Metaphor Key: ★ (recurrent); ⊥ (contradictory); Z (abstruse)

is only in view of the unique plasticity of human cognition—its embedding within forms of practical reason; its ability to shape and be shaped by institutional environments constructed over historical rather than genetic timescales—that the value of this insight becomes clear. [...]

The early history of composite figuration demonstrates how... “formative elements” of cognition [“in both historical and ontogenic time that intervene between the human genotype and phenotype”] may result from complex conjunctures of social, technological, and moral processes. Conjunctures of that sort cannot be replicated in a modern experimental setting. They belong to the irreversible flow of historical time. It is partly in reconstructing such emergent properties of cognition that an archaeological—rather than laboratory-based or ethnographic—approach remains fundamental to the understanding of cultural transmission and cultural change.

David Wengrow

“Beyond kingdoms and empires” (Aeon)

Supplemental

Excerpted by Zach W.

A

Empires have always created vivid and disturbingly violent images of tribal life on their frontiers, placing in a different, paternalistic light the violence at the heart of their own political projects. In such ways, we convince ourselves that these things are somehow deeply related, that violence and domination are the necessary substratum of ‘civilisation’, or that Europe after the fall of Rome achieved something unique – unnatural even, on a global scale – by breaking decisively from ancient cycles of empire and forging a singular path to liberty and prosperity. Once entrenched in our imaginations, such ways of thinking are fiendishly difficult to reverse. Even experienced scholars of empirically grounded disciplines may find themselves advancing such arguments based on the flimsiest of sources.

An articulation of an expression of this: a disturbingly violent images.

B

It is worth reflecting on what it means to talk of the ‘competitive advantage’ of states governed by extractive elites. At the least, this introduces questions about the long-term strength and viability of certain types of society, and the endemic weaknesses of others. Only the ‘winners’, one assumes, get to forge viable paths to the future. These, however, are matters of opinion, not statistics. They brush over irritating questions like ‘How many benefited from living in imperial structures?’ or ‘What is a viable path into the future?’ What ‘advantages’, we might ask, accrued to a girl captured by Cilician pirates, and sold in the slave markets of Roman-era Delos, over one living freely in the Nuba Hills of southern Kordofan? Slaves were said to change hands at a rate of 10,000 per day in Delos, and the total

number of slaves in the early Roman Empire could have been between 6 and 10 million. In what sense can their numbers be added to the side of the ‘winners’?

Thinking ‘in quantitative terms’ doesn’t really allow us to bypass these issues, or at least it shouldn’t. Questions remain. What, exactly, were ancient empires ‘successful’ at, if extraordinary levels of violence, destruction and displacement were required to keep them afloat? Today it seems very possible that another 2,000 years of world governance by ‘powerful extractive elites’ could lead to the destruction of most life on Earth. Many experts think it could happen far sooner if we simply continue with the status quo. Looking back from such a vantage point, if anyone will even be able to do that, who then will seem to be the ‘winners’ of history? Will history have made losers of us all? Would the ‘fittest’ have found an exit route, a way to terraform other parts of the solar system, founding colonies on Mars or Venus that resemble Palo Alto, or even Massachusetts? If there are schools (or at least, TED talks), then perhaps future generations will look back and ask if we might have learned something from the faded traditions of those who lived otherwise. What if there is no Planet B? Or maybe, by then, none of it will really matter very much, because the past will itself have been automated. Instead of historians, we’ll have ‘history machines’ based on algorithms and databanks: more facts on file, designed by survivors of the final bureaucratic assault on what was once fondly called ‘the humanities’.

—

C

The world we live in today is not just the one created by the likes of Tiberius of Rome, or even Emperor Wu of Han. **Until surprisingly recent times, spaces of human freedom existed across large parts of our planet. Millions lived in them. We don’t know their names, as they didn’t carve them in stone, but we know that many lived lives in which one could hope to do more than just scratch out an existence, or rehearse someone else’s script of ‘the origin of the state’** – in which one could move away, disobey, experiment with other notions of *how* to live, even create new forms of social reality.

Sometimes, the unfree did this too, against much harder odds. How many, back then, preferred imperial control to non-imperial freedoms? How many were given a choice? How much choice do we have now? It seems nobody really knows the answers to these questions, at least not yet. In future, it will take more than zombie statistics to stop us from asking them. There are forgotten histories buried in the ground, of human politics and values. The soil mantle of Earth, including the very soil itself, turns out to be not just our species’ life support system, but also a forensic archive, containing precious evidence to challenge timeworn narratives about the origins of inequality, private property, patriarchy, warfare, urban life and the state – narratives born directly from the experience of empire, written by the ‘winners’ of a future that may yet make losers of us all.