

## RESEÑAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS / BOOK REVIEWS

DAVID WENGROW, *The Origins of Monsters: Image and Cognition in the First Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. The Rostovtzeff Lectures. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020. xviii + 162 pp. ISBN 9780691202396 (paperback). USD 35.00.

While *The Origins of Monsters* is not by any means a new book (it was published in 2013), its recent paperback re-issue provides us with an excellent opportunity to discuss its contents, especially since the original hardback and e-book printing had such an impact on researchers from various fields and generated a great deal of discussion. Dozens of reviewers published generally positive remarks and a “book club” was organised to debate this book. But however extensive and stimulating this feedback may have been, the new issue is an exact reproduction of the original text. Whilst this may be so for editorial reasons, it also serves as a strong indication that both Wengrow and his publishing house are confident that the original text did not need any revisions. I would like to examine, in the next few paragraphs, if this is indeed the case.

Despite the sensational title, Wengrow makes it clear early enough that he will not be discussing “monsters” nor their “origins,” and is in turn much more interested in how images composed of different animal parts are transmitted between different cultures. There is a simple reason why he prefers to write about “composites”: he sees the creation of visual *corpora* of non-factual beings as an experiment in which body parts of different, real species are combined into images of animals that have no counterpart in the “real” world. These compelling and counterintuitive images are somehow ideal for transmission, and the main concern of his book is to determine how these images are transmitted and why. He realises, following ideas from cognitive psychology, that it has something to do with their status as (minimally) counterintuitive images, but he wants to test this hypothesis and expand it to better suit the data from archaeological and historical sources.

The ideas that make up *The Origins of Monsters* had been brewing for at least a decade, but they were not put to paper until he came across the final influence that cemented his argument. He found this influence in some ideas belonging to Mikhail Rostovtzeff, which he discusses in Chapter 1.

Rostovtzeff, a blatant anti-Marxist historian of culture, first studied how visual representations of monsters crossed cultural boundaries and were received and appropriated in *milieux* so distant as China and Celtic Europe. His approach was one that centred around commercial routes and networks rather than individual communities, hence an adequate point of departure for a study that also pretends to be general in scope.

A century has passed since Rostovtzeff shared his ideas, and new methods have been devised to better study behavioural patterns at the level of populations, rather than of individuals. For this reason, he devotes Chapter 2 to discussing the “epidemiology of culture,” a method based on cognitive science studies and their claim that our perception of the world is shaped by a “modular pattern of cognition.” This modular thinking explains why composites are built from “modules” intuitively known to populations and not through some other procedure that would completely violate the laws of intuitive biology.

At this point, Wengrow sets out to ward off any possible objections, the most obvious being that biologically counterintuitive animal representations have been known to occur millennia before the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, in which he places the origin of monsters. This is dealt with in Chapter 3, where he analyses Palaeolithic “composites,” and decides against considering them in his study due to them not being widely transmitted and also not being common enough. Whereas in Neolithic Mesopotamia and Egypt, composites thrived and expanded rapidly. This is of course his area of expertise, a fact that accounts for a well-informed and documented argument.

From Chapter 4 onwards we begin to comprehend the originality of Wengrow’s account. Until this point, he expatiated on the theoretical tools which he will use to tackle the topic of composites in the Ancient world. It should be noted that not only are there very few scholarly accounts on this particular topic, but he intends to build upon the theoretical foundations on which his work is based. According to cognitive science, as he discussed it in the former chapters, minimally counter-intuitiveness should account for the success in composite transmission, but throughout human history that appears not always to be the case, and Wengrow observes that the expansion does happen in very specific contexts or “cultural ecologies,” as he chooses to call them. These are all urban contexts, so he links composite transference to urban development, a topic much discussed in his other books. With the advent of cities, of course, came commerce, and in this sense it is relevant to point out the use of composites in seal impressions of clear bureaucratic nature, thus (in Wengrow’s view)

proving the point made by Rostovtzeff a hundred years prior. Here he collects a series of later examples of composite transference, such as the adoption of the Egyptian fertility goddess Tawret by Levantine and insular Greek peoples, also related to the development of cities.

Still needing to account for the specific ways in which the transference happens throughout history, Chapter 5 is devoted to the devices that make such images mobile. Following the famous formula by Walter Benjamin, he calls this propitious context the “First age of mechanical reproduction,” and associates it to the same bureaucratic thought he discussed earlier, especially when it comes to cylinder seals and the administration of commerce by an elite. Both technological and political innovations seem to be prerequisites for composite dissemination, but the specific modes in which that transmission is made are discussed in Chapter 6. Here he identifies three modes of transference: transformative, in which traditional conventions are disrupted by the arrival of exotic goods; integrative, which tends to blend diverse visual conventions into an “international” style; and the Protective mode that forms a barrier against external threats through composite imagery. Each of these modes is illustrated with informative and relevant examples.

Before the final notes and an extensive Bibliography that may well serve as an initial approach to whoever is exposed for the first time to the wide range of topics discussed in the book, Wengrow advances some conclusions. He evaluates again the original hypothesis of the book, namely that composites, as minimally counterintuitive images, are fecund for cultural transmission, which he claims to have proved and furthered. He then advances another hypothesis, which stemmed from the examples discussed in the last chapter, and that is that the specific dynamics of elite culture are the fundamental motor in the transmission of composites. It is an interesting proposal, albeit somehow estranged from the cognitive psychology basis that he claimed throughout the book.

The writing in this book is as compelling as a piece of scholarly writing can be, the arguments are presented in an elegant and orderly fashion, and it weaves together ideas drawn from different disciplines rather effortlessly. Wengrow strings them out in a compact yet convincing argument, both for scholars and the general public, boasting a surprising internal coherence throughout. With less than two hundred pages printed in a big, bold typeface, an affordable paperback edition was the only ingredient lacking in order to make a non-fiction best-seller.

As stated above, a volume was compiled in 2016 under the name of *The Origins of Monsters' Book Club*, consisting entirely of discussions around Wengrow's book and published on-line by the International Cognition and Culture Institute. Members of this Institute naturally share certain preconceptions, so only minor, superficial objections are bound to arise. Three main objections are thus eschewed, also explaining why the new edition is an exact reproduction of the old one.

Wengrow does allude to certain "disagreements" with Philippe Descola, but sadly never discloses their nature. A cognitive approach that understands the mind as a machine that uses internal laws to process an outside world in which creation it plays no part is the exact opposite of the interests of Descola, namely to challenge the Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object and between mind and world. In this sense, the idea of "real" animals as opposed to "unreal" is not at all universal. Thus, "minimally counter-intuitive images" would not depend on hard-wired mental and biological capacities but on social conceptions, continually being constructed and reconstructed. Some of this is hinted at in the Conclusions, but in a veiled way.

The second issue that cognitive scientists have overlooked is the absence of human agency in the process of creation, transmission and adoption of composites. Human behaviour, from the standpoint of cognitive psychology, is deeply wired in our brain, and little can we do to change this. And finally, they understand the image as an object of recognition, so the existence of a "real life" prototype is never really questioned, making composites more difficult to understand.

This new edition of Wengrow's book might then provide scholars in the fields of Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian iconography with the perfect excuse for a long due discussion about human agency and imagination in the making of monsters.

SEBASTIÁN FRANCISCO MAYDANA  
*Universidad de Buenos Aires*