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MYCENAEAN CENTAURS AT UGARIT

Abstract: The identification of two Mycenaean terracotta centaurs from the excavations at Ras Shamra-Ugarit suggests a Bronze Age origin for the centaurs known from the historic periods of Greece. The Mycenaean centaurs from Ras Shamra-Ugarit are compared to the later examples from the Greek mainland. No continuous artistic tradition can be identified among the preserved examples. Since writing ceased to be used in Greece in the Iron Age and no artistic trend connecting the different representations of centaurs can be seen, it is suggested here that the concept of centaurs was transmitted by way of the oral tradition.

AMONG the numerous Mycenaean vases and terracotta figurines found in the Late Bronze Age levels of Ras Shamra-Ugarit and its two, nearby towns, Minet el Beidha and Ras ibn Hani, there is a fragmentary terracotta figurine which close inspection reveals to be a centaur (PLATE 3, a-c). The preserved forelegs and fragmentary animal body have the shape of a normal Mycenaean quadruped; attached to this body is a torso of a human figure. This figurine is currently on display in the National Museum of Antiquities in Aleppo, Syria, Inventory no. 8315.[1] It has a preserved height of 0.072 m and a preserved length of 0.125 m. The rear portion of the animal body, the bottom of the left foreleg, and the head are missing. The preserved rounded, tapering forelegs and the round, horizontal animal body of the Ugarit figurine have many parallels among the Mycenaean animal figurines known from the Greek mainland.[2] Most commonly the Mycenaean animal figurines are in the shape of a horned bull (PLATE 3d).[3] These figurines have thick, rounded necks, blunt-nosed, tapering faces and raised, curved horns. Occasionally horses were portrayed, often two in number in chariot groups. Horses have longer necks, frequently triangular in profile, more pointed faces, and small ears. The bodies of the horse figurines are similar to those of the bulls, although occasionally in the chariot groups the horse bodies are more elongated. The heads of these figurines project forward beyond the bottom of the forelegs. Less frequently, Mycenaean animal figurines were made in the shape of dogs, birds or other animals.

In the position where the thick, rounded neck of a bull or the longer, more triangular neck of a horse is usually to be found, there is, in the Ugarit figurine, the torso of a human, male figure. This portion of the figurine was formed by a vertical, roughly rectangular section which is thinner in profile and much taller in proportion than the heads of animal figurines. The vertical upper portion of the Ugarit figurine has rounded sides which were bent forward to form the arms, held in a vertical, downward position next to the torso. The curved outer profile of the arms slopes inward at the top to join the curved outline of the shoulders. On the front the torso was decorated with vertical, painted stripes ending at a horizontal line. One of the vertical lines, probably by mistake, extends below the horizontal line. The horizontal line separates the human torso and the animal forelegs. An unusually thick line runs along each of the front edges of the upper section. This line continues down along the edge of the animal forelegs. The back of the human torso was covered with solid colour. The arms on the back were decorated with roughly horizontal, curved lines. A series of horizontal, roughly parallel stripes runs along the length of the

[1] I wish to express my warmest thanks to Wahil Khayata, Director of the National Museum of Antiquities in Aleppo, for permission to publish these photographs, and especially to Thomas Leisten of Princeton University for providing me with the photographs of the figurine. Unfortunately the Aleppo Museum was not able to provide information concerning the exact provenience of the figurine.

[2] For discussion of Mycenaean animal figurines, see French (1971) 151-67. For additional animal figurines found in some of the more recent excavations, see Iakovidis (1969) 2.268-70, figs 117-18; Tamvaki (1973); French (1985) 252-75; I.M. Shear (1987) 126-31. For the published figurines found in Ugarit, see Schaeffer and Chenet (1949); Courtois (1978); Monloup (1987) 320-4. The figurine of the newly identified centaur was not included in the publication of the other Mycenaean figurines from the area of Ugarit.

[3] LH IIIB2–IIIC bull figurine in the Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece, no. 35267. My thanks to the head of the Benaki Museum A. Delivorrias and his assistant Mrs. Papageorghiou for the photograph of this figurine. The figurine has a height of 0.097 m and a length of 0.104 m.

animal body. The fabric of the figurine is light tan or buff in colour and the decorative paint is reddish brown. Both clay and paint are typical of the Mycenaean pottery found in Ugarit. The shape, colour and decoration of the figurine clearly reveal its Mycenaean origin.[4] The linear decoration on the animal body places the figurine in the late LH IIIA or the LH IIIB periods.[5] This date is confirmed by the Mycenaean vases found at Ugarit which are also dated LH IIIA2 and LH IIIB.[6]

A second Mycenaean centaur from Ugarit can be recognized among the published Mycenaean figurines from the site (PLATE 3e-f).[7] In the publication it was described as a terracotta figurine of a Mycenaean quadruped.[8] The second figurine is slightly smaller and more fragmentary than the figurine now on display in the Aleppo Museum. The painted, decorative lines on the human torso are horizontal, rather than vertical. Solid colour covers the front of the arms. Horizontal curved lines decorate the back of the arms. Each of the forelegs has two vertical, painted lines. The horizontal, animal body is decorated with irregular, vertical, wedged-shaped lines.[9] The form and type of decoration of this figurine are similar to those of the figurine in the Aleppo Museum. They indicate that both figurines come from the same culture and both represent the same type of mythological creature.[10]

In earlier scholarship two examples of prehistoric centaurs were identified. One was on a seal now in the British Museum,[11] but this identification was questioned[12] and it is no longer accepted.[13] The second, a seal from Prosymna,[14] was also questioned.[15] The schematic representation of the figure on the seal from Prosymna makes a certain identification difficult, but the presence of clearly delineated arms supports the original identification. The existence of centaurs from Ugarit strengthens the earlier identification[16] and this seal should be added tentatively to the list of prehistoric centaurs. More recently a centaur was identified on a Sub-Mycenaean pyxis from the Kerameikos.[17] The schematic rendition of this figure once again makes a certain identifica-

[4] There has been some debate concerning the actual place of manufacture of the Mycenaean pottery found in the Near East; see most recently Leonard (1994) 6-10; Buchholz (1999) 397-429, 538-81; Yon, Karageorghis and Hirschfeld (2000) 12-13, 18, 70-1. The shapes and decorative motifs of the vases, however, clearly indicate that Bronze Age Greece was the original source of inspiration for this type of pottery, and testing by spectrographic analysis and optical emission spectroscopy has shown that some of the earlier pictorial vases from Ugarit were made on the Greek mainland; see Langdon (1989) 188 n.10 for references.

[5] This type of decoration was called Linear Type 2 by French (1971) 152-3, 155-6.

[6] Schaeffer and Chenet (1949); Courtois (1978); Leonard (1994) 27-129; Yon, Karageorghis and Hirschfeld (2000). According to Leonard a few of these vases may be as late as LH IIIC, but the vast majority are LH IIIB, and it is usually said that the site was destroyed at the very end of IIIB or at the transition of IIIB to IIIC. A possible very early IIIC date for some of the vases was also suggested by Yon, Karageorghis and Hirschfeld (2000) 17-18, 64-5, 69-71.

[7] Courtois (1978) fig. 55, no. 5. The drawing published here is based on Courtois' published illustration.

[8] Courtois (1978) 351, no. 5, where it was dated LH IIIB (Ugarit Récent 3); the dimensions given are 6.3 x 2.6 x 2.8 cm and the provenience was reported as RS 1966, sector 6.21.

[9] This type of decoration was called Spine Type 2 by French (1971) 153, 157; she dated it to the same periods as the Linear Type 2 decoration of the first figurine. Both types of decoration were used on animal figurines from Ugarit; see Schaeffer and Chenet (1949) 230-1; Courtois (1978) fig. 55, nos 6-13.

[10] Other figurines in this same style from Ugarit can be identified as Mycenaean bulls and horses. For bulls, see Schaeffer and Chenet (1949) fig. 55 nos 2 and 6, fig. 59 nos 9 and 18, fig. 61 top, two animal figurines, fig. 67 no. 8, fig. 97 nos 15-16; Courtois (1978) fig. 55 nos. 6 and 11. For horses, see Schaeffer (1949) fig. 55 nos 3 and 7, fig. 59 no. 19, fig. 72 no. 17, fig. 97 nos 13-14; Courtois (1978) fig. 55 no. 7.

[11] Evans (1894) 343, fig. 69.

[12] Demargue (1929) 123.

[13] Pini (1988) 15 gives a completely different description of this seal; Rombos (1972) 124 specifically denies Evans' earlier identification.

[14] Blegen (1937) 277-8, fig. 589; the seal came from a LH III tomb; the figure on the left was identified as a centaur holding a knife in confrontation with a hybrid creature on the right. The identification of the centaur was accepted by Kübler (1970) 93 n.338.

[15] Boardman (1963) 54-5. Boardman identified the figures as goats, but he did not explain the presence of the arms, which does not fit his identification.

[16] Banti (1954) 310 dismissed the original identification as a centaur because other representations of centaurs from the prehistoric period had not been identified at that time.

[17] Bohen (1988) 12-15, figs 2.1, 3.1, pl. 1.1.

tion debatable, and this figure has not been included in more recent studies of centaurs. It is of interest, however, that the figure stands in front of a tree. In later renditions of centaurs, when they first became popular in vase painting, centaurs were often portrayed carrying branches.[18] The Karameikos centaur suggests that the association of centaurs and branches may have had its beginning in the Bronze Age.

Later Greek centaurs[19] are quite different from the Mycenaean figurines from Ugarit and the other possible Mycenaean examples. In recent scholarship, the tenth-century centaur from Lefkandi (PLATE 4a-b) has been most commonly considered the earliest Greek example of this type of creature.[20] The homeland of centaurs was said to be Mt. Pelion, a mountain in central Greece, which might suggest that the idea of a centaur was Greek and not a concept imported from another country.[21] There is a deep incision on the left kneecap of the Lefkandi centaur, indicating that the centaur had been wounded. The only known centaur in the mythology to have been wounded on the knee was Cheiron, who suffered from an arrow shot by Herakles.[22] The identification of this figure as Cheiron is supported by the fact that the Lefkandi centaur has six fingers on the surviving right hand, an ancient attribute of magicians and men of great wisdom.[23] Cheiron as the teacher of Achilles is known from the *Iliad*.[24] The identification of the Lefkandi centaur as Cheiron suggests that the stories of the individual centaurs were already current in tenth-century Greece. Since writing was not being used in tenth-century Greece, these stories must have been passed from one person to the next by way of oral communication. A tree branch has been restored in the missing left hand, reminiscent of the centaur and tree of the Kerameikos pyxis. Although the Lefkandi centaur is unique in subject matter for its period, this type of vase, with its wheel-made body and hand-made attachments, has been shown to belong to a long series of similar vases from Cyprus and Crete.[25] An elaborately decorated terracotta stag vase from a grave in the Kerameikos indicates that this type of vase was also made on the Greek mainland in the tenth century.[26] These representations of animals, however, were rare in Greek art of the tenth and ninth centuries. Only later in the Geometric period were animals and humans once again commonly portrayed.

Characteristic of the Geometric period is the well-known, eighth-century bronze group of a man with a centaur, probably from Olympia, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New

[18] See n.33 below; especially Fittschen (1969) 93-101.

[19] *LIMC* 8.671-721; Ahlberg-Cornell (1992) 25-6; Demetriou (1989) 51-2; Rombos (1988) 232-42; Schiffler (1976); Arnold (1972); Kübler (1970) 93-103; Fittschen (1969) 88-128; Brommer (1960); Baur (1912).

[20] Photographs courtesy of H. Sackett and the British School at Athens. This figure is 0.36 m in height. *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 20; Desborough, Nicholls and Popham (1970); Popham, Sackett and Themelis (1980) 169-70, 344-5; Arnold (1972) 3, 90-3, no. 29.

[21] Suggested by Desborough (1980) 345.

[22] Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.5.4.

[23] Identified as Cheiron by Desborough (1980) 345.

[24] Hom. *Il.* 11.830-2. See also Hom. *Il.* 16.143 for Mt. Pelion as the home of Cheiron.

[25] Desborough (1980) 344-5; Desborough, Nicholls and Popham (1970) 26-9. Some of these vases from Cyprus and Crete have been tentatively identified as centaurs; see for example Karageorghis (1993) 50-3. Although these composite vases are half-animal and half-man, the early examples from Cyprus and Crete lack the human torso and arms of the Greek centaurs and therefore they seem to represent another type of creature; Desborough, Nicholls and Popham (1970) 28-9; Arnold (1972) 128-32; Demetriou (1989) 51; Kourou and Karetsou (1997) 108, pl. 42c. The painted figure on a Mycenaean larnax from Tanagra, identified as a centaur by Belgiordino (1978) 203-28, follows the tradition of Crete and Cyprus and it seems to represent a composite figure of some other type which differs from that of the typical Greek centaur; Rombos (1988) 239-40. Another type of composite vase, one that came from Kos, was also originally identified as a tenth-century centaur; Kos Museum, no. 1104; Higgins (1967) 20. The Kos example, which has only three legs, has closer parallels to duck askoi; Arnold (1972) 100-2, 127, no. 33. It also resembles vases in the shape of ships and this is probably the proper identification of the vase from Kos; for early ship vases, see Basch (1987) 70, 149, 234, figs 132-5, 313-16, 484.

[26] Kübler (1943) 20, pl. 25; Hampe and Simon (1981) 253, fig. 378. See Nicholls (1970) and D'Agata (1997) for this type of vase and its origins.

York (PLATE 4c).[27] The figures of this group are composed of familiar, Geometric shapes, characteristic of both man and horse found in other examples of Geometric art. The unusual conical caps worn by the figures have been identified as helmets. The helmets and the confrontational pose of the two figures indicate that they were being represented as adversaries, probably intended to portray a specific event.[28] The portrayal of a specific confrontation suggests that narrative tales of centaurs and possibly other types of horse-figures associated with the centaurs were in circulation at the time this group was made. To bridge this gap separating the Lefkandi centaur and the bronze group in New York, during the period when Greece was still illiterate, the spread of stories concerning these creatures who were half-horse and half-man must have been by way of the oral tradition.

Less well known but typical of their provenience are two Boeotian terracotta examples from the seventh century, one in the Goulandris Museum in Athens (PLATE 4d),[29] and a second in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Budapest.[30] These more provincial, Boeotian examples have neither the hollow body of the Lefkandi centaur nor the triangular, more elegant, Geometric shapes of the bronze group in New York. Their upraised hands, in addition to their small heads with pointed noses, elongated beards and unusually thick necks represent a type different in style from the earlier examples. They represent a third type which appears to be related to another terracotta group from Boeotia dated to the end of the seventh century, now in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.[31] The same small head with pointed nose, elongated beard and thick neck can be seen in the centaur of this terracotta group. The confrontational pose of both centaur and human figure in the terracotta group once again suggests that a specific event was being illustrated.

Another, quite different type of terracotta centaur from the seventh century was found in Corinth (PLATE 4e).[32] Although recognizable as a centaur, this small figurine is unique in having horse's ears on top of the head and the beginning of a horse's mane between the ears. The unusually large head has large flat eyes, long pointed nose, and a large mouth with thick lips. The horse's body is unusually small in proportion to the human body. The overall appearance of this figure gives it an entirely new personality. The artist who made this figurine had obviously heard of centaurs, but he had not seen representations of centaurs made in other parts of the Greek world. Having heard of these strange creatures which were a combination of a horse

[27] New York Metropolitan Museum, no. 17.190.2072, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917; photograph courtesy of J.R. Mertens, Curator of Greek and Roman Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The height of this group is 0.113 m. *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 132; Baur (1912) no. 203; Kunze (1930) 141-62, fig. 38; Fittschen (1969) 88-9, 111 SB 1; Schiffler (1976) 153, 320 V 11; Arnold (1972) 27-31, 187-8, 202, no. 3.

[28] Buschor (1934) 129 identified the male figure as Zeus and the other figure as Typhon. Other scholars have identified the male figure as Herakles and the centaur as Pholos: Schweitzer (1971) 150; Hampe and Simon (1981) 253. Ahlberg-Cornell (1992) 25-6 suggested the possibility that the group represented Herakles and Nessos. For further discussion of the identification, see Fittschen (1969) 119, 124; Arnold (1972) 28-9, 127. Snodgrass (1998) 83-4, 86, 154-5, 163 collected a small group of horse-figures in the shape of centaurs who were used to represent monsters; see also Arnold (1972) 5-9. If the male figure of the bronze group is identified as Zeus, then the horse-figure may be a monster and not one of the centaurs known in later mythology. The importance of the bronze group, whether the figure is identified as a monster or a centaur, is that it shows continuation of the concept of a figure which is half-horse and half-man.

[29] Goulandris Museum, Athens, no. 34. Photograph courtesy of D. Plantzos, Curator, and the Nicholas P. Goulandris Foundation – Museum of Cycladic Art. The height of this figure is 0.123 m. *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 22; Papadopoulou-Kannellopoulou (1989) 107.

[30] Musée des Beaux-Arts, Budapest, no. 10; *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 25; Baur (1912) 140; Schiffler (1976) 72-3, 277 B-S 3; Szabó (1994) 30.

[31] Athens National Archaeological Museum no. 12504; *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 133; Kunze (1930) 141-62, fig. 39; Fittschen (1969) 111 n.550; Schiffler (1976) 72-3, 277 B-S 2; Ahlberg-Cornell (1992) 26; Szabó (1994) 29-30, fig. 1.

[32] Photograph courtesy of the Corinth Excavations, American School of Classical Studies in Athens. The height of this figurine is 0.063 m. *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 24; T.L. Shear (1931) 425-6; Fittschen (1969) 100 R 48; Schiffler (1976) 64, 271 K-S 2; Demetriou (1989) 52.

and a man, he added horse's ears to the human head and he joined the proportions of the two forms in a combination unique to this figure. His knowledge appears to have come from hearing the tales about centaurs and not from seeing artistic representations of them. The contrast between the Boeotian centaurs and this example from Corinth makes it clear that the artist in Corinth was not aware of the representations made in Boeotia. They indicate the continuing strength of the oral tradition and of its influence in the Greek world even after the Greek alphabet had been introduced.

In vase painting, the representations of centaurs make it clear that the concept of the centaurs became widespread. The earlier centaurs appear with and without branches in their hands, in antithetical poses, alone or in groups with other centaurs, animals or human figures.[33] In the early period, representations of centaurs with human forelegs outnumber the examples of centaurs with animal forelegs, but both types did occur in this early group.[34] Specific incidents of mythology known from literary sources of the later periods are difficult to identify in the vase paintings, but a few have been identified and the Lefkandi centaur indicates that some of the stories were already in circulation in the tenth century. Most of the early examples of figurines and in vase painting came from Attica and Boeotia, but within a century they were portrayed in a much wider area of the Greek world.[35]

The striking characteristic of these various representations is that each of the centaurs was presented in a style that followed the artistic trends and conventions of its own period, of its provenience, and of the medium in which it was rendered. Since no identifiable artistic continuity can be seen unifying the different types of early centaurs, their repeated appearance suggests that the concept of centaurs and their related stories were communicated from one period to the next by way of the oral tradition. The artistic examples make it clear that the concept of the centaur, in the Archaic period, was known throughout most of the Greek world. Their genealogy, their names and their stories were related by Homer, Hesiod and Pindar,[36] but their origin remains uncertain. The Mycenaean examples indicate that their origin lies in the prehistoric period. It has been suggested that the concept of a centaur came from the Near East,[37] but the Near Eastern examples are winged and have a scorpion tail, characteristics not found on the Greek examples.[38] The absence of these characteristics on the Greek mainland suggests that the Greek centaurs and stories related to them had their origin in some other context. Perhaps more plausibly, stories of horses and mythological figures based on horses began in the period which first saw horses introduced into the Greek world. The first domesticated horses came into Greece

[33] *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, nos 2-5, 81-3, 92-3; Rombos (1988) 232-42; Schiffler (1976); Arnold (1972) 11-139; Kübler (1970) 93-103; Fittschen (1969) 88-128. See also *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 109 for gold band with representation of centaurs.

[34] Arnold (1972) 1, 125-8.

[35] Seventh-century depictions of centaurs have been found in Smyrna (*LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 37), Crete (*LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 38), Dodona (*LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 41), Sparta (*LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 42), and Rhodes (*LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, no. 120). Paus. 5.19.7 reports that centaurs were represented on the Chest of Kypselos.

[36] For synopsis of early references to centaurs, see *LIMC* Kentauroi et Kentaurides, 671-2.

[37] Rombos (1988) 238-9. For the origin of the centaur, see also Demetriou (1989) 51; Arnold (1972) 2-3; Fittschen (1969) 89 n.457.

[38] See, for example, Arnold (1972) 140-50, 160-70, 190-225, who supported the Near Eastern origin of the centaur but was unable to cite any close parallels. Her closest Near Eastern parallel was the Kassite boundary stone from Susa, now in Paris, Louvre SB 28; Arnold 120-1, no. 46. The Kassite figure has an animal body which looks like a bull and it appears to have two heads. The characteristic wings of the Near Eastern centaurs occur on the Greek mainland in only two winged examples: Arnold 21 no. 1, and 82 no. 28. The first is dated *c.* 700, which places it long after the introduction of the Greek centaur, and the two figures of the second have lion's bodies. These examples may have been influenced by the Near East but they are not representative of the centaurs known in the Greek world.

at the end of the Early Helladic and the beginning of the Middle Helladic periods.[39] This is commonly considered too early for the introduction of a mythological subject current in the historical period, since it is often said that there existed a deep, cultural discontinuity between the Bronze Age and the historical periods. The existence of the two centaurs from Ugarit now challenges this concept. Their presence suggests that the cultural discontinuity at the end of the Mycenaean period was not as great as has often been advocated.

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[39] The earliest certain bones of domesticated horses found on an excavation in Greece come from Lerna V, which is dated to the MH period; Gejvall (1968) 37, 54. In addition to the bones found at Lerna, a few bones of horses have also been found at Argissa and Nichoria; Dickinson (1994) 49. Bones from EH III Tiryns and Lerna, classified as equids, may not be domesticated; von den Driesch and Boessneck (1990) 92-3. For the people who came into Greece at this time and current thought concerning the introduction of the domesticated horse, see Rutter (1993) 758-74, with extensive bibliography.

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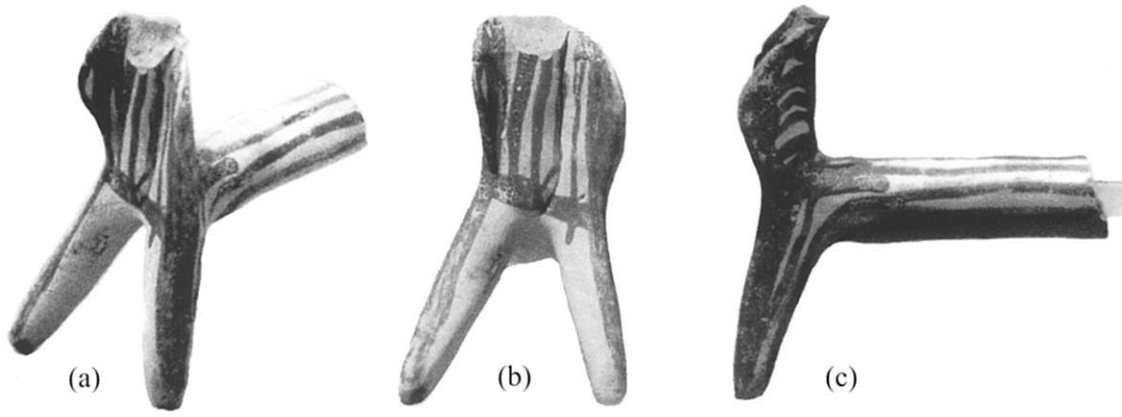
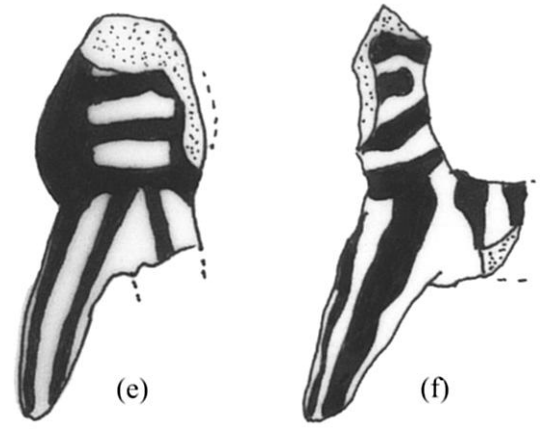
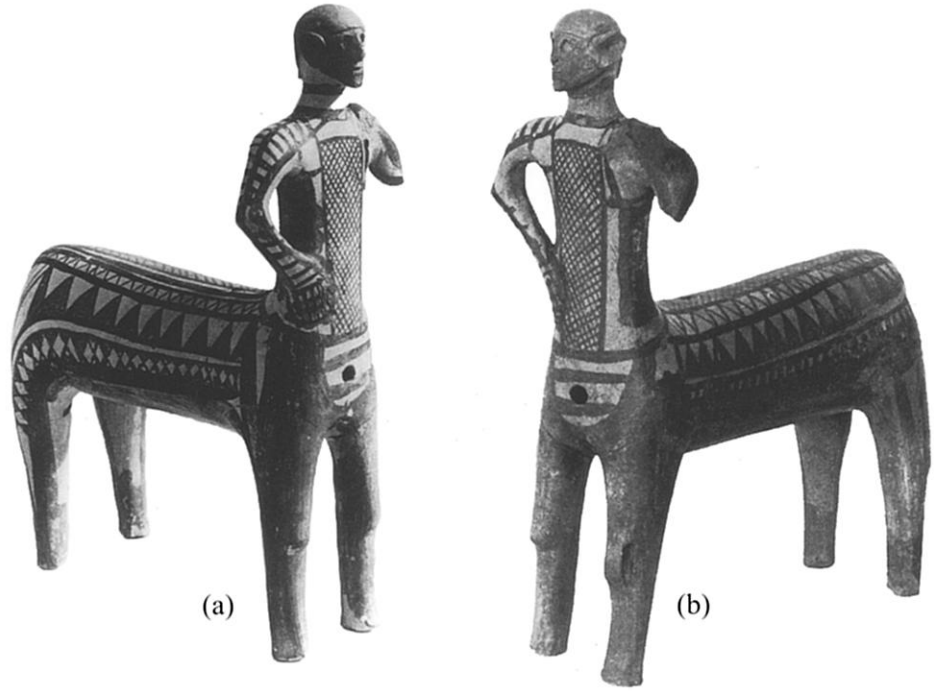


(a–c) Mycenaean centaur in the Aleppo Museum

(d) Mycenaean bull figurine in the Benaki Museum



(e–f) Another Mycenaean centaur from Ugarit



(a–b) Dark Age centaur from Lefkandi

(c) Geometric bronze group in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

(d) Boeotian centaur (seventh century)

(e) Corinthian centaur (seventh century)