

1. INTRODUCTION

... imagination is more active in our picture of reality than we previously acknowledged. The monster, of course, is a product of and regular inhabitant of the imagination, but the imagination is a driving force behind our entire perception of the world.¹

Aegean Bronze Age seals and sealings have preserved a plethora of creatures and ‘monsters’ that puzzle the modern viewer. Some of these, such as the griffin or the sphinx, are still recognizable today while others are difficult to comprehend, and some perhaps even impossible to understand. The pictorial representations of Bronze Age ‘monsters’ offer us insights into the minds that created them. We must, however, be aware that what we infer from the study of their iconography can only throw spotlights on the cognition of the past people that created them. Just as “the imagination is a driving force behind our entire perception of the world,”² so is the perception of the world by an individual or a social group a driving force of their imagination, creativity, and, ultimately, craftsmanship. It is only the result of the latter – in the case of this study: the seals and sealings – that is preserved today. These are taken as the starting point to re-construct the human cognition as regards non-natural, fantastic creatures.

This study intends to construct a first approach to the question of what the phenomenon of ‘monsters’, hybrids, or composite creatures occurring on Minoan seals and sealings can tell us about the minds that produced them. It should be pointed out that these motifs constitute only a fraction of the extant seal images from the Bronze Age Aegean – all in all less than 10%.³ To the aims of this study, it is necessary to begin with a systematic structuring of the iconographical material. In an initial step, the material is categorized into two main types called *occasional hybrids* and *fixed hybrids*. While the first seem to be ephemeral occurrences, the latter were long-lived and evolved with the Bronze Age societies that produced them. On a second level, the various types of creatures will be scrutinized and ordered by typological criteria. After a discussion of the extant hybrid representations on seals and sealings, their role in the social cognition and perception in their time and place of use will be assessed. This will be supported by theoretical models derived from anthropological and neighboring disciplines that are outlined in the introductory chapter.

¹ Asma 2009, 14.

² Asma 2009, 14.

³ Blakolmer 2019, 127: “[...] they comprise not more than 9.2% (311 out of 3,361) of isolated (non-anthropomorphic) beings represented on Aegean seals. In multi-figural seal-images supernatural creatures occur in combination with other hybrid beings, animals or anthropomorphic figures 83 times, while in the case of animals this is a total amount of 573 examples.”

While this study cannot possibly answer the abundant questions concerning 'monster' depictions and the role of fantastic creatures in Bronze Age societies, it hopes to establish a basic structure for future enquiries by organizing the material under typological and chronological aspects, providing a catalogue of all extant and published composite creatures, and by looking beyond the mere seals and towards the society that produced them.