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## centaurs

Centaurs (Κένταυροι; for the etymology, and their ancestry, see \*Ixion), a tribe of ‘beasts’ (φῆρες, Aeol. for θῆρες, *Il.* 1. 268, 2. 743), human above and horse below; the wild and dangerous counterpart of the more skittish \*satyrs, who are constructed of the same components but conceived of as amusing rather than threatening creatures. In both cases it is the very closeness of the horse to humanity that points up the need to remember that a firm line between nature and culture must be drawn. \*Pirithous the king of the Lapiths, a \*Thessalian clan, paid for his failure to absorb this lesson when he invited the Centaurs to his wedding-feast: The party broke up in violence once the guests had tasted \*wine, that quintessential product of human culture (Pind. fr. 166 Snell–Maehler), and made a drunken assault on the bride (see the west pediment of the temple of Zeus at \*Olympia). ‘Ever since then’, says Antinous in the *Odyssey* (21. 303), ‘there has been conflict between centaurs and men.’ Their uncontrolled lust, violence, and greed for alcohol (see \*alcoholism) challenge the hard-won and ever fragile rules of civilization, which are symbolically reasserted by the victories of \*Heracles (whose wife \*Deianira the Centaur Nessus tried to rape) and \*Theseus (who sometimes fights alongside his friend Pirithous in the wedding-fight) over the savage horde. Centaurs belong to the forested mountains of \*Arcadia and northern Greece, the fringes of human society, so it is natural that in the ‘Centaumachies’ so popular in Archaic art (e.g. on the François vase) they fight with uprooted trees and boulders against armed and disciplined Greek heroes; it is with fir-trunks that they pound the invulnerable Lapith \*Caeneus into the ground. Their savagery in earlier Greek thought is suggested by their varying aetiologies: the most common tradition has them descend from the union of \*Ixion, king of the \*Lapiths, and the cloud-nymph Nephele (Apollod. *Epit.* 1. 20), but an alternative, much later view has them issue directly from the trees and boulders with which they fought, rather than through intercourse (Philost. *Imag.* 2. 3). It happens to be consistent with this latter tradition that all representations of Centaurs in Archaic and Classical culture are male.

But their double-natured ambivalence was already emphasized in traditions which singled out two of their number, Chiron and Pholus, as wise and civilized exceptions to the general rule. Pholus, it is true, eats his steak raw like an animal when entertaining Heracles in his Arcadian cave (Apollod. *Bibl.* 2. 5. 4), but his self-control is shown by the fact that he is capable of holding his liquor—a specially aged vintage donated by Dionysus—until the other members of his tribe scent the bouquet of the wine, go berserk, and have to be shot down by Heracles. Chiron is a more complex character, blurring the human–animal boundary still further: as the son of the \*Titan \*Cronus and the \*nymph \*Philyra, Chiron was depicted in vase-painting with human rather than equine front legs and draped in decorous robes. But his bestial side is demonstrated by the way in which he feeds the baby \*Achilles, deserted by his mother \*Thetis, on the still-warm blood of the hares which in art he habitually carries over his shoulder as a portable game-larder (hence, in turn, the savagery of the hero); at the same time, he is also a source of wisdom on natural medicine (*Il.* 4. 219, 11. 831) and is recorded as an educator of \*Jason (1) and \*Asclepius as well as Achilles.

The ambivalence of the Centaurs at the margin of the bestial and the humanized became less pronounced with the progress of time. By the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE, Centaurs (like \*Amazons) came to symbolize all those forces which opposed Greek male cultural and political dominance; on the \*Parthenon metopes, with their heroically nude boxers and wrestlers, the triumph over Persia is a clear subtext. (See \*Persian-Wars tradition). But later, Centaurs acquired a more idyllic and sympathetic depiction. It is to the post-Classical period that we owe our first depictions of female Centaurs or Centaurides (Κενταυρίδες), including rare examples such as a late 4<sup>th</sup>–early 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE kantharoid-krater showing Nike drawn in a chariot by Centaurides (British Museum 1856,1226.15). Such artistic depictions are wholly absent from the former cultural record: an earlier example, once thought to represent a female Centaur (Boston Museum of Fine Arts 13.206), in fact has the \*nymph \*Callisto as its subject (cf. the Malibu Oenochoe, Getty Museum 72 AE 128). In the \*Principate, female Centaurs for the first time appear as an idealistically stylized literary creation: \*Ovid's *Metamorphoses* gave not only a gory, over-the-top account of the Lapith wedding (12. 210 ff.) but also the first mention of a female Centaur known from any ancient text (12. 393 ff.): the beautiful Hylonome, who cradles her wounded paramour Cyllarus before heroically killing herself.

The bestiality of the Centaurs in Roman Imperial culture (e.g. Hyg. *Fab.* 31, 33; Ov. *Met.* 12. 353) is counterpoised by evocative depictions of the beauty and elegance of their females: \*Philostratus (1) in a bucolic scene has them inhabit the *locus amoenus* of Mount \*Pelion (*Imag.* 2. 3), rearing their own young with maternal care, in contrast to the earlier tradition (see above); they are described as beautiful not in spite of their equine lower bodies but because of them. A 4<sup>th</sup> cent. AD mosaic discovered in Eles (Tunisia) and displaying a pair of nude Centaurides crowning \*Venus, now held at the Bardo National Museum, confirms the Imperial Roman association between female Centaurs and beauty and sexual desire. Thus, while traditional stories of the Centaurs' greed for alcohol and wild nature remained popular into Late Antiquity (e.g. \*Nonnus. *Dion.* 14. 247 ff., 17. 186 ff.), the invention of the female Centaur in post-Classical art and in Imperial literature created scope for further exploring the more humanized dimension of the Centaurs' double-natured ambivalence that had existed since Classical antiquity.

- M. Gisler-Huwiler, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (1981–), s.v. 'Cheiron'.
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- R. Osborne, in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (eds.), *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture* (1994), 52–84.