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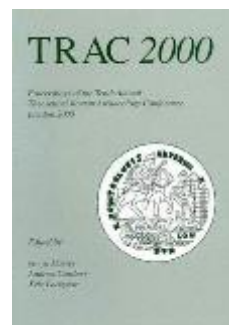
Animal Iconographies: Metaphor, Meaning and Identity (or *Why Chinese Dragons Don't Have Wings*)

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> What comes after them is the stuff of fables — Hellusii and Oxiones with the faces and features of men, but the bodies and limbs of animals. On such unverifiable stories I will express no opinion. (Tacitus *Germania* XLVI)

7.1   Introduction

This paper is concerned with an idiosyncratic group of images occurring principally in Roman Gaul but which — unlike most forms of 'religious' iconography — clearly have their genesis in the Iron Age. The images in question take the form of semi-anthropomorphic, semi-cervid beings. They are frequently, though questionably, identified under the name 'Cernunnos' because of a single Parisian carving of an antlered human head, of early Roman date, accompanied by an inscribed dedication 'Cernunno' (Espérandieu 1911, no. 3133; Green 1989, pp. 89–90, Fig. 36). Images like these, appearing in Gallo-Roman or, occasionally, in Romano-British contexts (as on a small stone relief-carved plaque from Cirencester in the Cotswolds: Green 1989, Fig. 39; Henig 1993, no. 93 — see Fig. 7.1), are generally assumed to represent indigenous, non-Roman divinities whose theriomorphic features endow them with symbolism associated with nature and abundance. This enquiry seeks to explore other possible avenues of meaning contingent upon the metaphoric significance of hybridity or monstrance, on the one hand (Green 1999), and of deer, especially stags, as liminal (or boundary) motifs, on the other. It may even, in some circumstances, be appropriate to challenge the divine status of antlered images and to propose alternative models of interpretation.

Before examining these questions in detail, it is important to emphasise the context-dependence of any semiotic interpretation: the images were imbued with a set of meanings that were consonant upon their social, cultural, artistic and cosmological context (Hodder 1987). Indeed, we will see later that the historical context of colonialism and Roman imperialism is crucial to at least certain aspects of iconographic interpretation. Antlered images belong to a later prehistoric and early historic western European tradition wherein figural images break the rules of realism in a manner evincing a stark contrast with Graeco-Roman mimetic schemata (Green 1998b). Antlered anthropomorphic depictions should be viewed in precisely similar ways to a number of other Iron Age and Gallo-Roman forms of representation, such as exaggeration (heads, horns, dorsal bristles, hands, eyes) or multiplication (heads, faces, genitalia or whole figures) (Green 1997b, 1998a). More closely analogous still

Figure 7.1: Romano-British relief-carving of an antlered being accompanied by two ram-headed snakes; Cirencester, Gloucestershire. Ht. 23cm. ©Corinium Museum.

are other examples of human/animal hybrids in Gallo-British iconography of the Iron Age and Roman periods: human-headed horses prance on the reverse of Breton late Iron Age coin-issues (Duval 1987, pp. 45–6; Green 1998c, Figs. 88, 90), highly reminiscent of an earlier image on a bronze flagon-lid from a grave at Reinheim of the fourth century BC (Green 1996, Fig. 87); a human-faced bronze dog-figurine was offered to the British god Nodens at the late Roman temple in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire (Wheeler & Wheeler 1932, pp. 89, 119, pl. XXVI; Green 1997b, Fig. 7).

7.2 Gallo-Roman stag-human images

Images exhibiting a blend of human and stag characteristics are particularly common in the east of Roman Gaul, though they occur elsewhere in the western Roman provinces. Although Pan, the slightly disreputable Greek nature-god, was depicted with goat-legs and horns (Virgil *Georgics* 2: lines 490-94; Ferguson 1980, pp. 17, 32), antlered images do not occur within the repertoire of the Classical world. Such iconography seems to originate in the pre-Roman Iron Age: the earliest such images occur in the rupestrine art of Val Camonica, near Brescia in North Italy, during the seventh to fourth centuries BC (Priuli 1988, p. 78, nos. 134, 136–7; Priuli 1996, p. 29, Fig. 51) particularly on the Naquane (Capodiponte) and Paspardo rocks (Fig. 7.2), where several standing human figures wearing antlers are represented. Other figures include the well-known image on the Danish Gundestrup Cauldron (Fig. 7.3), which
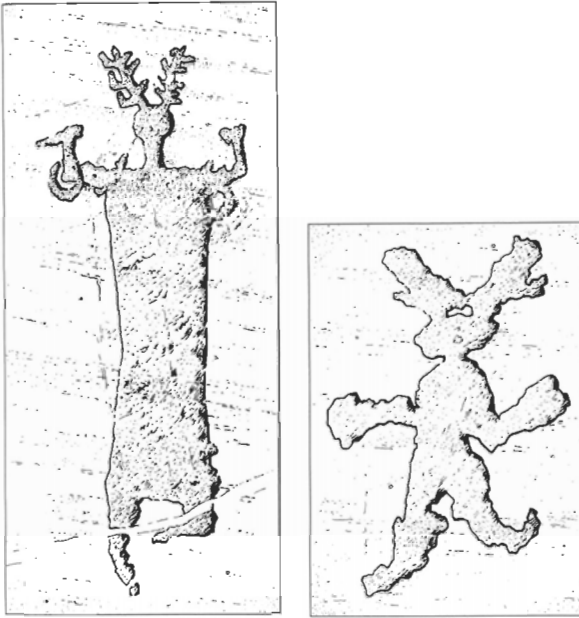
Figure 7.2: Iron Age rock-carvings of antlered anthropomorphic figures from Capodiponte and Paspardo, Camonica Valley, Italy. ©Anne Leaver.

Figure 7.3: Image of an antlered being on the Danish silver cauldron from Gundestrup, Jutland. 2nd–1st century BC. ©Anne Leaver.
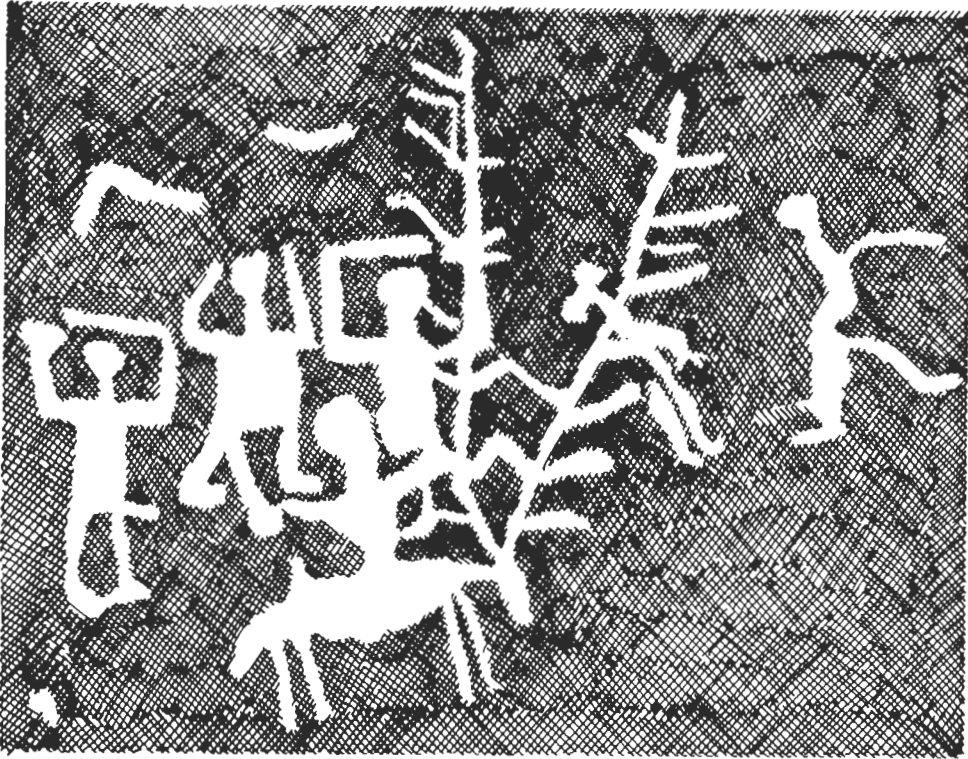
Figure 7.4: Iron Age rock-carving of a half-human, half-stag figure, from Camonica Valley, Italy. ©Paul Jenkins.

probably dates to the 1st century BC (Olmsted 1979, pl. 2A; Taylor 1992, pp. 66–71; Kaul *et al.* 1991, Fig. 221), whose cross-legged posture resembles several of the Gallo-Roman images (below). A similar attitude is present on the bronze late Iron Age torc-wearing figure from Bouray (Essonne, Seine-et-Oise) (Joffroy 1979, no. 78; Green 1989, p. 91, Fig. 37) who has no antlers but whose feet are in the form of stags' hooves, The Camunian iconography includes a variation on the standing antlered human figures, in depictions of stags bearing on their backs centaur-like riders whose lower bodies merge with those of their mounts (Priuli 1988, p. 77, nos. 133 & 135, p. 84, nos. 140-142; see Fig. 7.4).

Although, as explained above, there is limited evidence that stag-antlered iconography has its genesis in the pre-Roman Iron Age, it is not impossible that hybrid imagery such as this drew on new, creative ideas. According to this alternative model, Gallo-Roman sculptors gained inspiration not only from their Iron Age ancestors but also from the repertoire of the Classical world, which had a fascination with the grotesque and the monstrous (Garland 1995). This certainly might, at least, have contributed to the great increase in the depiction of fantastic creatures, with horns, antler, extra heads and exaggerated body-parts.

In Roman Gaul, stag-human depictions appear more frequently than in the Iron Age: sometimes they are triple-headed, as at Bolards (Devauges 1974, p. 434; Planson & Pommeret 1986) and Savigny (Thevenot 1968, pp. 144 9; see Fig. 7.5), both in Burgundy; some wear torcs, as at Reims (Espérandieu 1913, no. 3653; Green 1989,

Figure 7.5: Gallo-Roman bronze image of a triple-headed being with holes in the main head for the insertion of antlers, and holding two ram-headed snakes; from Savigny in Burgundy. ©Paul Jenkins.
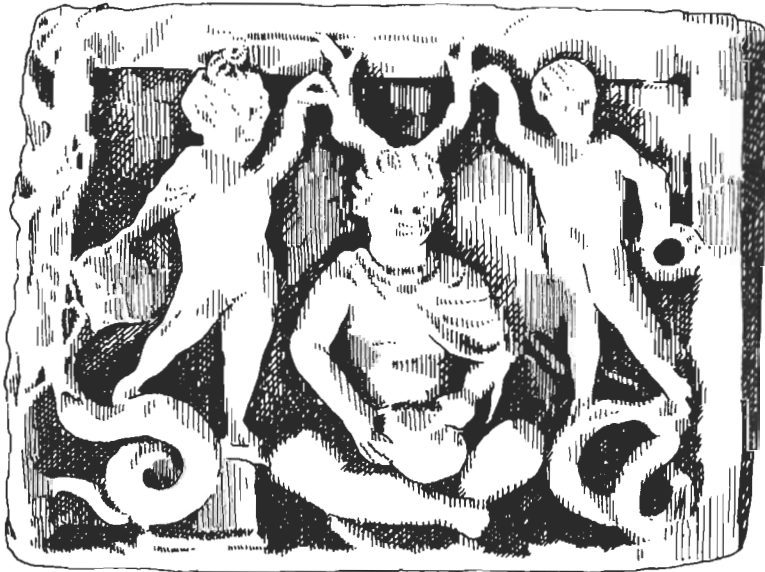

Figure 7.6: Gallo-Roman relief carving of an antlered being, flanked by two youths; from Vendoeuvres (Indre). ©Paul Jenkins.

Fig. 38), Paris (Espérandieu 1911, no. 3133)) and on the Savigny bronze image, just as they do in pre-Roman representations at Camonica and Gundestrup. They may be represented alongside other beings, as on the stones from Vendoeuvres (Indre) (Espérandieu 1908, no. 1539; see Fig. 7.6) and Reims (Fig. 7.7); this latter stele depicts the antlered image seated centre-stage and flanked by the Classical deities Apollo and Mercury.

7.3   Gods or humans?

It is probably the case that at least some of the antlered images from Gallo-Roman contexts should be identified as deities. It is, for instance, difficult to interpret the Reims figure as other than divine: he is accompanied by two members of the Classical pantheon and the treatment of his image displays parity with them, if not superior status. But scrutiny of certain other depictions inclines me to the view that they may, instead, represent people in the guise of deer: the reverse of a late Iron Age silver coin from midland Britain (Boon 1982; Green 1986, Fig. 88; see Fig. 7.8) displays the head of an antlered being, wearing a curious wheel-shaped device: the treatment of the eyes and nose, with their clearly delineated outlines, may represent a mask; the physiognomy of the Gundestrup also suggests that the figure might be wearing a mask and an antler headdress. The ten skull-caps of antlered deer with holes pierced in the frontal bones, as if for attachment, from an Iron Age sanctuary at Digeon, Somme (Meniel 1987, pp. 89-100), and the single set from a Roman context — in a pit with second century AD pottery, at Hook's Cross in Hertfordshire (Fig. 7.9; Tony Rook *pers. comm*; Green 1997a, p. 58), lends credence to the notion that ceremonial antler headgear was sometimes worn by people. It may be that this is the interpretation we should put on the curious bronze images of women wearing antlers from Roman Gaul (Green 1995, p. 168; Boucher 1976, nos. 317-8; Deyts 1992, p. 40 — Fig. 7.10). With the exception of reindeer, female deer do not grow antlers any more than human females do! In this context, it is significant that, with a few notable exceptions, it is only the head of these dyadic stag-human representations that exhibit zoomorphic characteristics.

If the divine status of certain human-stag depictions under consideration can be challenged, then it is necessary to propose alternative meanings for these images. One possible interpretation is that the depictions represent shamans, holy men or women who adopted animal features in order to facilitate the soul's transference between earth and spirit worlds, as is the case in some hunting/herding societies, particularly in circumpolar regions, such as Siberia (Anisimov 1963, pp. 84-123). Before exploring this theory further, we should consider reasons why, if this is so, the stag was selected as the particular beast to represent shamanistic boundary-crossing.

7.4   Stags and liminal symbolism

Deer, especially stags (Fig. 7.11), lend themselves readily to liminal or boundary symbolism. Their physicality is changeful: the annual shedding and re-growth of their antlers would be recognised as contingent upon the seasons, and may thus have provided powerful sacred metaphors in some early cosmologies. Indeed, certain of the antlered human images from Roman Gaul — for instance the images from Savigny (Thevenot 1968, 144-9) and Sommerécourt in Haute-Marne (Espérandieu 1915,
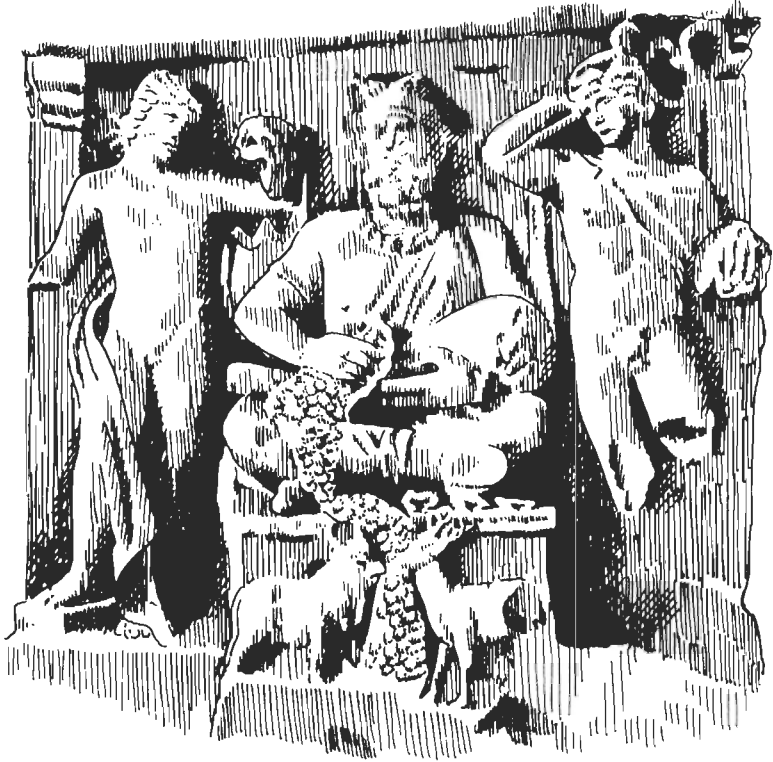
Figure 7.7: Gallo-Roman relief carving of an antlered being, seated on a throne, flanked by Apollo and Mercury; Reims. ©Paul Jenkins.

Figure 7.8: Iron Age silver coin (*c.* AD 10–20), allegedly from the British Midlands, bearing an image of an antlered human head wearing a wheel-shaped headdress.©Anne Leaver.

Figure 7.9: Pair of red-deer antlers, the frontal bone pierced, as if for attachment as a headdress; from Hooks Cross, Hertfordshire. ©Anne Leaver.

Figure 7.10: Bronze figurine of a woman wearing antlers; from an unprovenanced Gallo-Roman context. ©Anne Leaver.

Figure 7.11: Oak carving of a stag; from an Iron Age Viereckschanze at Fellbach Schmiden, Germany (dendro-dated to 123 BC). ©Paul Jenkins.

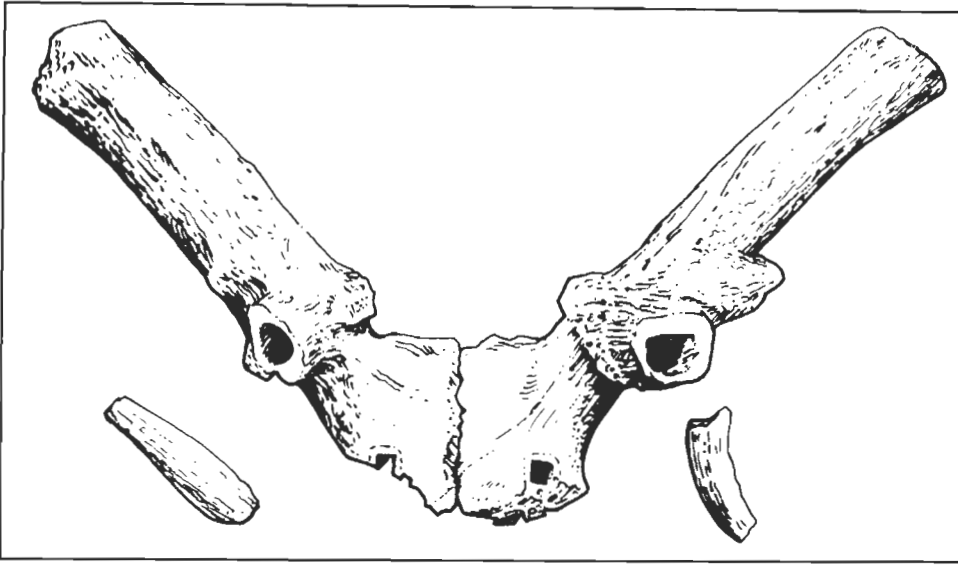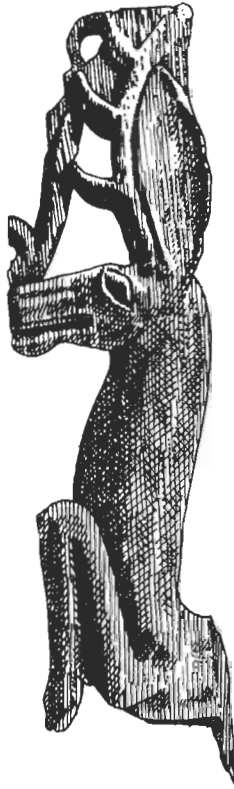no. 4839) — appear to reflect seasonality inasmuch as the antlers were clearly detach-able, perhaps being inserted or removed for ceremonies taking place at different times of the year. But, apart from this obvious mutability, deer are associated with other liminal perspectives, notably in respect of their relationship with human communities.

In certain societies, both past and present, deer occupy an ambiguous position, hovering between wild and domestic worlds and on the fringes of each. In traditional circumpolar reindeer-hunting communities, there exists a contradictory connection between animals and people; the ambivalent attitude to the reindeer relates to the paradox of hunting and predation, on the one hand, herding and nurturing, on the other (Loring 1997, pp. 185–220; Aronsson 1991, p. 5). Among the Innu of Labrador the animals are hunted in the context of respect for their spirits (Loring 1997). In some North American communities, the collective spirit of the caribou herds is perceived as possessing immense spiritual power (Ingold 1986, p. 247). Hunting itself contains metaphoric paradoxes inasmuch as the hunt is associated with violent destruction but its result is nourishment for the hunters; furthermore, deer-hunting by sedentary agriculturalists may relate to crop-protection, and thus the killing of the animals may be linked — both in practical and symbolic terms — to the prosperity of farming communities. In European antiquity, there is some evidence that deer possessed liminal symbolism, perhaps associated with similar ambiguities of relationships with people. Faunal assemblages from Neolithic and Iron Age sites in parts of Britain, on Orkney, for instance, seem to indicate that red deer had a special symbolic significance associated with their closeness and separation from the humans that exploited them: they were, perhaps on the boundary between wildness and domestication (Jones 1998,

pp. 301–24; Sharples 2000; Parker Pearson & Sharples 1999, p. 21; Parker Pearson *et al.* 1999, pp. 149–52). In prehistoric Orcadian communities, where farming land was scarce, there is evidence that red deer were tolerated close to settlements, even though they competed with domestic animals for grazing; whilst signs of butchery are not necessarily common, deer bones were carefully curated and deliberately deposited. J. D. Hill reminds me (*pers. comm.*; 1995, p. 108) that on Iron Age sites he has studied in Wessex have produced bone and antler 'weaving' combs of which only those made of antler are decorated. Where wild species, deer in particular, were deposited on sites in Iron Age Wessex (Hill 1995, pp. 102–4), their presence may well be the result of ritual activity. Deer were perhaps considered as important boundary symbols, partly because they were neither fully wild nor domesticated, because of their complex social organisation (which resonates with that of humans) and, maybe, because they behave differently in woodland and open environments: in forests they are solitary, in open country they live in hierarchical groups (Sharples 2000).

7.5   Metaphors of transition

The ambivalence of relationships between deer and humans may be sufficient for the adoption of stag motifs by people in order to present symbolic transitionality or boundary-transgression. One way in which this can operate is in the realm of the shaman, who seeks to negotiate pathways between the human and spirit dimensions. We have seen that stags may have occupied a liminal position in rural communities such that their imagery may have been perceived as an enabling agent, facilitating transference between worlds (Alekseev 1997, pp. 153–64; Anisimov 1963, pp. 84–123; Vitebsky 1995). In addition to the particular significance of the stag as a symbol of transience, consideration should be given to the more general meaning of monstrous, hybrid iconography (Green 1999). The shamanistic experience in rural hunting/herding communities, for whom the natural world and natural phenomena are numinous (among the Saami of northern Scandinavia, *e.g.*, Bradley 2000, p. 8), is associated with double consciousness; the shaman's vision involves looking at both inward and outward realities (Ascott 2000); during movement between earthworld and the spirit domain, there is a constant shifting of persona, of perception. Hybrid, monstrous images may themselves reflect such restless and disturbing instability; the viewer of such a depiction is thrown into uncertainty, confusion, with oscillating realities, and is faced with the need to engage in interactive discourse with the shifting meanings engendered by such immersive (Nechtvatal 1997), open-ended symbolism. We should perhaps be seeing these liminal images as 'freeze-framed' between worlds, the shaman — perhaps — in the midst of shape-shift and consequent transference between states of being.

I do not, for one moment, suggest the presence of direct linkages between the tradition of circumpolar shamanism and religious constructs that obtained in Iron Age western Europe, However, I would argue that the Gallo-Roman images under scrutiny may be the product of an essentially similar kind of 'cosmovision', where the act of shifting between worlds was represented by hybrid human/animal beings. Additionally, the deer was perhaps perceived as a special metaphor for boundary-crossing because the animal itself was charged with of a particular grammar of meaning, predicated upon the relationship between deer and people, on the one hand, and characteristics specific to the animal, on the other.

7.6   Contested identities

There is a further, not unrelated, manner in which hybrid human-animal images may
be perceived, that is as metaphors of identity. I suggest that the semiotics of changing
physicalities, that are presented in essentially shamanistic imagery, might have been
adopted by Gallo-Roman communities, who may have seen themselves as in conflict
with *romanitas*. Contra-normative iconography may be associated with the troubled
disturbance engendered by cultural change, with resistance to a new set of cosmologies
and with contesting identities. If mimetic, life-copying iconography was viewed as
reflective of the Roman way, one method of resisting the colonial presence, in Gaul or
Britain, might be to challenge verism. In such a context, monstrance should be seen
as simply one of many ways of eschewing realism: it is possible to point to other kinds
of contra-normative iconography, such as gender-ambiguity, exaggerated or multiplied
somatic elements, sinistrality or schematism. In the Roman world man (in the sense
of both the generic *homo* and the gender-specific *vir*) was the measure of all things;
any departure from mimetic realism or from the proper attribution of masculinity or
feminity could, therefore, be considered as 'other', as a challenge or even a threat to the
even tenor of 'right-thinking' (Roman) society. In provincial situations, which involved
a degree of cultural disjunction, however peaceful the process of absorption into the
empire may have been, it could be deemed necessary to reassert indigenous identities
using a range of methods which avoided direct conflict with the *status quo*. I have
argued elsewhere (Green 1998b, pp. 17–30), as have others (*e.g.*, Webster forthcoming)
that the reassertion of *gallitas* under Roman rule may have found a voice through
the development of alternative panthea of deities and sacred images These divergent
symbolic constructs might be presented through alternative schemata, like schematism
and monstrance, that constituted a deliberate shift from the grammars of 'realism'
obtaining in the Mediterranean world and expressing discrepant realities associated
with shamanic vision and the supernatural world. The desire to challenge or contest
romanitas may also be evoked within the schema of monstrance itself: Shanks (1996,
pp. 368–81) has argued that monstrous depictions may reflect conflict by means of
the display of tension between equivalent opposites engendered by merged, hybrid
images.

7.7   Conclusion

In considering a discrete and idiosyncratic group of images, I have proposed two dis-
tinct but interconnected ways of seeing hybrid, monstrous iconography in the western
Roman provinces. On the one hand, it is possible to cite anthropological comparanda,
for instance among certain circumpolar and indigenous North American hunter/herder
communities, which point strongly in the direction of shape-shifting shamans, assum-
ing animal personae by donning animal costume, in order to transgress boundaries and
move between earthly and otherworld dimensions. On the other hand, it may be valid
to view the blending of human and stag in sacred image- making within a broader con-
text of contra-normative representation which both reflects shamanistic transference
and, at the same time perhaps, develops the metaphoric symbolism of shape-shifting
into the adoption of hybrid religious depictions in order to present expressions that
deliberately countered *romanitas* and *humanitas* (Woolf 1998, pp. 206–37). Indeed,
the formation of animal-rich iconographies in Roman Gaul may well have originated
in shamanistic visions, in which reality and fantasy mingled in a surreal grammar
of perception. In any case, animals are good to think with, and their symbolism is

capable of exploring socio-cosmological issues associated with people's worldview and perceptions about themselves in relation to their physical and spiritual environments (Wolch & Emel 1998, p. xiii).

Whatever the precise nature of hybrid representations like the stag-human images of Roman Gaul, the contingency of meaning upon context must always be acknowledged. Images can be 'read' meaningfully only within their socio-cultural matrix. Figural depictions can function as metaphoric windows on the societies that made and consumed them, and currencies of iconographic value are wholly embedded within the perceptions, symbolic mindsets and cosmologies of those societies. To illustrate the importance of cultural context, I end with the analogy of the dragon as the motif pertains to two totally divergent cultures, Wales and China, in each of which the dragon shares a basic reptilian form, but only the Welsh dragon has wings. The specific physicality of the dragon is dependent upon its evolutionary context. The same is true of the equally fantastic creatures of Gallo-Roman religious art.

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