

The Beast Within, the Beast Without Zoomorphic Armour Ornament and the Human-Animal Divide in the Material Culture of Renaissance War

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Abstract Drawing on and accentuating classical motifs, the surfaces of Renaissance armour are inhabited by an impressive variety of animal exuviae: leonine protomes and paws, ram's horns, shells, tails, beaks, and wings. This essay examines the role of zoomorphic armour around the period of the Italian wars (1494-1559) and brings into focus early modern ideas about the behavioural and morphological proximity of living beings, illustrating the period's fluid perception of the human-animal divide. It argues for the centrality of ornament in military material culture and concludes by establishing armour as the period's main figurative stage for experimenting with the permeability of bodily boundaries, and the mixing of human and animal forms.

Keywords Armour. Ornament. War. Animality. Zoomorphism. Grottesque. Monster.

Summary 1 Zoomorphic Ornament as Weapon. – 2 Zoomorphic Ornament in Battle Painting. – 3 Zoomorphic Ornament as Expression. – 4 Zoomorphic Ornament as Paradigm.

The Venice Biennale Arte 2022 – *The Milk of Dreams* paraded the human-animal hybrid as a defining feature of our times, in opposition to early modern Western anthropocentrism. Presenting the species divide as a culturally and historically determined distinction, the exhibition featured contemporary artists who celebrate the permeability of bodies and their metamorphosis with non-human alterities. The idea, wrote curator Cecilia Alemani, was that their works would “challenge the Renaissance notion of the human being [...] as motionless hub of the universe and measure of all things” – an obvious allusion to Leonardo da Vinci's so-called *Vitruvian man* (c. 1492) conserved in the nearby Gallerie dell'Accademia. In place of this conception, “they [the artists] propose new alliances among species, in worlds inhabited by porous,

hybrid, manifold beings”.¹ But artworks like Cecilia Vicuña's *Leoparda de ojitos* (1977) (fig. 1), a human-feline female hybrid in a coat of fur spotted with eyeballs, draw their power from a playful gender reversal of a long tradition: that of using animal forms on warrior bodies and adapting animal exuviae (skin, eyes, claws, beaks, snouts, etc.) to the human form as a way of appropriating their strengths and virtues.

Zoomorphism is an extremely long-lived feature of art and material culture. It is geographically widespread and chronologically persistent: the forefathers of Vicuña's she-leopard are fighting on the sixteenth-century walls of the Augustinian church of Ixmiquilpan in Mexico, among exuberant emerald-green foliage and against the same orange background; only their hands and

1 Alemani 2022, 26.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-08-31
Accepted 2023-10-24
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

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Citation Borgo, F. (2023). “The Beast Within, the Beast Without. Zoomorphic Armour Ornament and the Human-Animal Divide in the Material Culture of Renaissance War”. *Venezia Arti*, 32, 35-50.

feet emerge from the jaguar skin [fig. 2].² Despite its ubiquity, zoomorphism as a figurative phenomenon is surprisingly little studied by art historians; attempts at broader analysis of its place in the decorative and visual arts are few and far between.³ The reasons for this neglect may lie in zoomorphism's apparent universalism, which escapes the logic of formal and artistic development and points to anthropological implications that lie beyond the comfortable boundaries of the discipline.

Focusing on zoomorphic armour ornament from the sixteenth century, this essay recovers a less anachronistic view of human exceptionalism and shows that human-animal hybridity was at the core of Renaissance war culture. As many have demonstrated, thinking and imagining the transmutation of identities and bodily forms across taxonomies and orders of being was common in early modern Europe.⁴ The malleable classification of human versus nonhuman animals endured at

least until the eighteenth century, when scientific taxonomies definitively closed the door on hybridity, consigning the human body to a static existence. Up until that point, though, animal forms were a constant feature of ornament and a design strategy, spreading over not just the human body but everywhere, on domestic objects, walls, facades, furniture legs, and handles. Yet despite its considerable diffusion, neither a definition nor a grammar or theory of zoomorphic ornament was ever explicitly formulated during the period. In the modern historiography, the reading of animal features tends to oscillate between two opposing poles: either they are assimilated into the wider category of the grotesque, and so their specificity and metaphorical power are neglected; or they are interpreted iconographically, as a reference to source texts (Ovid, or alternatively the fabulist, bestiary, and chivalric tradition), and as a result their autonomy is downplayed.

1 Zoomorphic Ornament as Weapon

While animal parts are a common presence in the premodern visual vocabulary, military material culture in particular is steeped in them. In the early modern period, zoomorphic ornaments found their way onto a wide range of objects associated with war: shields and helmets, suits of armour and horse barding, standards and insignia, rostra and tents, on weapons and the accoutrement necessary for their use (powder flasks, cartridge boxes, etc.), as well as on the large commemorative apparatus of trophies, triumphs, and spolia.⁵ Early modern manuals on the casting of artillery pieces included instructions on how to decorate guns with “full relief figures of men and animals”, while military treatises recommended “bringing images of animals into battle”.⁶ In Roberto Valturio's *De re militari* (1483), siege artillery towers are decorated to look like fire-spitting dragons, battering rams are modelled in the shape of a ram's head, and the siege shed known as *testudo* looks like a tortoise.

The depiction of predatory animals on standards and banners, Valturio goes on to write,

has been in use since the beginning of the world, when men were themselves animals, living in the woods in a constant state of war and eating human flesh.⁷

These ornamental tropes speak to the relevance of animality in the context of war and the praxis of attributing power to objects by means of figuration, mimicking animal forms to exercise the agency associated with the animal represented.

In his magnum opus on ornament theory, *Der Stil* (1860-63), Gottfried Semper devotes an entire section to weapons – “true ornaments for man”, as he calls them – and notes that they “provide us with a greater opportunity to study the decorative arts than almost any other genre”.⁸ The striking centrality of ornament in a field where one would expect

² Cf. Gruzinski 2002, 84-90. The Biennale catalogue bizarrely identifies the inspiration for the image in “sixteenth-century paintings made by Incan artists in Cuzco, Peru”. Cf. Weisburg 2022, 60.

³ For premodernity, recent and methodologically rich exceptions are van Eck 2021; 2023, esp. 95-121; Hammeken, Hansen 2019.

⁴ Cf. Bynum 2005; Kemp 2007. For further references see note 24.

⁵ For a classic sixteenth-century Florentine example, see Silvio Cosini's unfinished trophies of arms (c. 1524-26) in the New Sacristy of San Lorenzo in Florence, after Michelangelo's designs. See Campigli 2007.

⁶ Biringuccio 1540, fol. 87r-v: “Ma perché sempre mi son molto piaciute le cose ornate, et ho sempre nelle artiglierie che ho fatte [...] addatato figure, teste, sì umane come d'animali di tutto rilievo”; Valturio 1483, 238v: “Portando in guerra figure di animali”.

⁷ Valturio 1483, fols. 215r, 234v, 236v, and 238v: “Dal principio del mondo, li homini radunandosi insieme dalla vita silvestre e fera primeramente mangiavano carne humana e comabetevano insieme [...] imparando a far le squadre se metavano avanti il signo d'uno animal del qual da possa fusse sta consecrate”.

⁸ Semper [1860-63] 2004, 864-5.



Figure 1 Cecilia Vicuña, *Leoparda de ojitos*. 1977. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin. New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, London. © Cecilia Vicuña, by SIAE 2023



Figure 2 Jaguar warrior from the Church of San Miguel Arcángel. Mid sixteenth century. Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo, Mexico. © DeAgostini Picture Library/New Picture Library/Scala, Florence

functionality to reign supreme hints at a compelling but overlooked paradox. *Ornamenta* and *armamenta* have more in common than it might seem at first. In Latin, the term *ornamentus* is used to describe the weapons and apparatus of war. It has less to do with embellishments, adornments, and accessories, and more to do with the soldier and his wear: to be *ornatus* is to be equipped for battle, to be powerfully armoured. This usage is still attested in the Italian vernacular of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: “le schiere ornate” are prepped for battle, not parade; a knight is, accordingly, “ornato di tutte l’arme”.⁹ Encoded in the original meaning of the word is the idea that, for warriors, ornaments are armaments. For artists, all armaments have the potential to become ornaments: in this same period,

objects of war (helmets, cuirasses, shields, standards, weapons, etc.) artfully heaped together enjoy great success as ornamental motifs in architecture, whether on pillars, friezes, finials or facades.

While animal features are common to a variety of early modern war-related media and objects, my argument is that when inscribed on the surface of a living, breathing body via the metal skin of the armour, this imagery is differently activated. Normally thriving on the periphery – on the margins of pictorial representation, the borders of manuscripts and the parerga – ornament moves via armour to the centre of the scene, where it coincides with the centre of the *historia*: the heroic male nude. When the animal is worn on the armour, the body acts not just as a support or vehicle

⁹ *Tesoro della lingua italiana delle origini*, s.v. “ornato”. <http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/>. Cf. also Ong 1958, 277; Vickers 1989, 314-15.

of representation but as an agent of embodiment.¹⁰ As a second skin, the animal protects the inner human body while communicating its internal state to the external world, displacing the self onto the exterior and thereby revealing its true image. This is different from the desire to be like animals and

appropriate their qualities. It is about revealing a truer image of the self. On the surfaces of Renaissance armour, the conceptual boundaries which today segregate humanity from animality and interior from exterior reveal themselves to be a permeable membrane.

2 Zoomorphic Ornament in Battle Painting

The tight interplay between anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements in the context of war is perfectly encapsulated in the foundational episode of Western battle painting, the Florentine Sala Grande commission and the ensuing confrontation between Michelangelo and Leonardo (1503-06). While the emphasis on the unperturbed heroic male nude firmly roots Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* in the tradition of *all'antica* battle scenes, Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* radicalises the animality of his warriors. In Leonardo's work, human-animal proximity plays out simultaneously within and outwith the armour, via ornament and pathogenic alteration, on the accoutrements and facial expressions of Leonardo's soldiers.

Sixteenth-century sources insistently referred to the Anghiari group as "a knot (*groppo*) of horses and men".¹¹ Their limbs are intertwined in a tangle of flesh and arms, blurring the distinction between human and animal forms. In the many copies after the lost mural, this meshing effect governs the whole composition and is evident especially in the leftmost horseman [fig. 3]. Crouched low on his mount, the rider hides his horse's neck, creating the impression of a centaur's body. His armour is populated by an array of animal elements: a ram's head on the chest, fur on the back, a shell as a shoulder-piece. The zoomorphic decoration extends to the horns on his helmet and the lion's paw on the sword's pommel. This aspect of Leonardo's invention was not lost on period viewers, who praised the variety of the soldiers' garments, their helmet-crests and all other *ornamenti*.¹²

Battle painting is, perhaps unexpectedly, an exceptional opportunity for ornament. Leonardo makes this clear in a contemporary passage

(1500-05) later copied in the *Libro di pittura*, in which he specifies that such scenes always show in great detail all of the soldiers' movements, their limbs, and ornaments.¹³ Indeed armour ornament is as essential to the expression of belligerent intent as the figures' own motions. This differs from his recommendations for other pictorial genres. Elsewhere in the *Libro*, Leonardo advises against the over-ornamentation of figures in narrative scenes, as this impedes the perception of bodily forms and attitudes.¹⁴ This passage first appears in the *Madrid Codex II* and dates from 1503-05, so it is perfectly contemporary with the Anghiari commission. If ornament plays such a prominent role here, it is because the specific category of armour ornament was considered neither subsidiary nor marginal in the economy of the image, but rather inseparable from the bodies it protected.

While the prominence of zoomorphic armour ornament places it in a category of its own, human-animal proximity does not play out exclusively on the surface of the armour. These fighting horsemen are locked into a morphological and behavioural unity with their mounts, as the horses, similarly to their riders, partake in the fight by furiously biting each other. A sense of underlying unity of expression animates the composition and its preparatory sketches, where profiles of neighing horses, roaring lions, and screaming men are set side by side.¹⁵ Art historians have interpreted the analogies in the expression of human and animal rage as manifestations of Leonardo's definition of war as *pazzia bestialissima* or "most beastly madness" – the idea that, in the raging fury of battle, overwhelmed by violent passions, man becomes beast.¹⁶

¹⁰ Bodart 2018, 15-32.

¹¹ Cf. Doni 1549, fols. 47v-8r; Varchi 1564, fol. 17; Borghini 1584, fol. 371; Vasari [1550, 1568] 1966-87, 4: 32. On the commission more generally see Barsanti et al. 2019.

¹² Vasari [1550, 1568] 1966-87, 4: 33: "Né si può esprimere il disegno che Lionardo fece negli abiti de' soldati, variatamente variati da lui; simile i cimieri e gli altri ornamenti".

¹³ Leonardo [c. 1540] 1995, fol. 6v (ch. 15): "Li movimenti degli operatori di tale guerra, e le parti delle membra e loro ornamenti".

¹⁴ *Codex Madrid II*, fol. 25v and Leonardo [c. 1540] 1995, fol. 60v (ch. 182): "Di non fare nelle istorie ornamenti alle figure. Non fare mai nelle istorie tanti ornamenti alle tue figure e altri corpi che impedischino la forma e l'attitudine di tal figure, e l'essenzia de' predetti altri corpi".

¹⁵ Cf. Windsor, Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 912326, ca. 1503-04.

¹⁶ Leonardo [c. 1540] 1995, fol. 59v, (ch. 177).



Figure 3 Study of a horseman after the *Battle of Anghiari*. Sixteenth century. Paris, Louvre, Cabinet des dessins, Fonds des dessins et miniatures, inv. no. 2559r. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)/Michel Urtado

3 Zoomorphic Ornament as Expression

Leonardo's work is representative of the period's conception of the human body as a dynamic entity, shaped by frequently recurring expressions. Building on the ancient pseudo-Aristotelian physiognomic doctrine which takes facial resemblance to animals as a sign of temperament (the leonine man is irascible as a lion, etc.), pathognomic theories accordingly maintained that bodies could be moulded by repeated and prolonged exposure to environmental, physiological, and psychological factors. Bodily appearance was believed to change not only for the natural process of ageing, but also for the occurrence of diseases, recurring movements, and passions, which over time could mark and modify figures. While at work on the Anghiari commission, Leonardo became especially interested in how the body of a warrior, constantly and repeatedly engaged in violent actions, conserves the memory of past battles through the permanent alteration of its morphology. War's fury leaves an animalesque mark on the warrior's face so that, even when depicted in a state of rest, his appearance is permanently marked by past and repeated outbursts of rage, a passion that manifests itself similarly in both man and beast.¹⁷

As a result, the soldier's physiognomy and the animals on his armour have common origins and effects: both are forged by prolonged exposure to war and both externalise and make visible the warrior's inner bestial traits. As two complementary ways in which the warrior displays his experience and temperament in battle, they often come to resemble each other. The growling lion-head ornament on the cuirass of Leonardo's belligerent *Warrior* (1475-80), paired with the soldier's leonine appearance, reiterates his aggressiveness by echoing his scowling face [fig. 4]. This physiognomic type - originally invented by Andrea del Verrocchio and memorably termed "nutcracker man" by Kenneth Clark - is reflected in several workshop versions and variants in marble and terracotta. It even makes its way into popular prints. One example is the frontispiece of a late fifteenth-century chivalric poem illustrating the battles fought by one of Charlemagne's paladins, Ogier the Dane [fig. 5].¹⁸ The kinship between

the warrior's formidable frown and those of the animals on his pauldrons and helmet mutually reinforce their shared bestiality.

Fury unmakes the human. The willing animalisation of men in conflict is a recurring theme in the early modern debate on the brutalising effects of warfare, rekindled between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries against the backdrop of the Italian wars.¹⁹ Leonardo's expression *pazzia bestialissima*, often taken to be a sign of his apparent pacifism, is in fact a conventional indication of war's violence. It derives from Dante's *matta bestialitate*²⁰ and corresponds to an extreme form of rage that falls outside the confines of the human and is first outlined in Aristotle's *Ethics*.²¹ In Renaissance chivalric and epic poems too, human animality finds its suitable domain in matters of war. Animal metaphors and similes likening soldiers to predatory beasts and their prey (a hungry wolf around sheepfold, a hound after a stag, etc.) are established features of the genre, where knights harness the aggressivity of bears, wolves or lions in the service of victory and leadership. The expansion of animalism also applies to princely comportment. In *The Prince* (c. 1513), Niccolò Machiavelli suggests aspiring leaders emulate lions and foxes, or even strive to become a hybrid "mezzo bestia and mezzo uomo" when circumstances require.²²

Quintessentially Aristotelian in its assumptions, the interpretation of brutishness as a reduction of humans to beasts also implied a continuous line rather than a binary opposition between the human and the animal. Following old Aristotelian and Galenic views, anatomists were dissecting animal bodies to draw more general comparative conclusions about human anatomy, in the belief of a fundamental underlying unity between the two.²³ Mediated through the language of metaphor and analogy, the permeability between human and animal bodies has been recognised as a key feature of Renaissance thought, that was then obliterated in the seventeenth century by Cartesian dualism and its rigid divides. Its locus classicus is Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1496), where the capacity to slide

¹⁷ Gombrich 1976, 57-79; Laurenza 2001, 127-55; 2000; Kemp 2007, 40-51.

¹⁸ Tura 2016, 116-17. On Verrocchio's physiognomic type cf. Clark [1939] 2005, 42; Caglioti 2011.

¹⁹ Hale 1960, 94-122; Fournel 2004.

²⁰ *Inf.*, XI, vv. 82-3.

²¹ Cf. Borgo 2015, with bibliography. On Leonardo's pacifism cf. Versiero 2009.

²² Machiavelli [1531] 1984, 72. Cf. also Lukes 2001; Versiero 2004. On epic and chivalric literature cf. Boehrer 2010; Lonsdale 1990.

²³ Cf. Laurenza 2012, esp. 28 ff.



Figure 4 Leonardo da Vinci, *Warrior in Profile*. 1475-80. London, British Museum, inv. no. 1895,0915.474. © The Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 5 Frontispiece from Girolamo Tromba da Nocera, *Libro de la bataie del Danese*. 1513. Milan. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, *35.S.70. © Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

along the continuum between animality and divinity is framed as a quintessential trait of the human and the only legitimate ground for any claim of exceptionalism.²⁴

As “*plastes et factor*”, sculptor and maker of himself, man may transform at his own discretion, either degenerating into lower forms of life or regenerating into higher ones.²⁵ Contemporary armour provided solutions for both of these options. Highly imaginative zoomorphic armour ornament originated in Florence in the second half of the fifteenth century, when artists’ newly won license for *fantasia* turned the combination of animal exuviae

into an emblem of artistic invention and its combinatory powers.²⁶ Before the 1530s this armour existed principally as a fiction, portrayed in drawings, prints, and sculptural reliefs [figs 4-5]. Animal wings, horns, and heads were executed in lightweight, perishable materials and applied to helmets for tournaments and pageants, but very few examples have been preserved and none is in integral condition. Between 1530 and 1560, however, embossed armour with prominent animal features became the hallmark of the Milanese armourer Filippo Negroli and his workshop. Negroli’s armour is famed for the pageant of zoomorphic

²⁴ Cf. Bynum 2005; Fudge 2006; Raber 2013; Schiesari 2013; Freccero 2021; Tarugi 2012.

²⁵ Pico della Mirandola [1496] 2012, 116: “Nec te celestem neque terrenum, neque mortalem neque immortalem fecimus, ut, tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque *plastes et factor*, in quam malueris tute formam effingas”.

²⁶ Cf. Payne 1998; Kemp 1977; Summers 1981, 103-43, 196-97.

inventions it depicts: an assortment of fangs, horns, fins, scales, and wings, all embossed and chiselled with striking precision.²⁷

Looking at Negroli, Carolyn Springer has extended the traditional reading of anthropomorphic armour as a self-fashioning device to its grotesque, zoomorphic counterpart. While classical anthropomorphic armour augments the body of the *condottiere*, projecting an ideal of symmetry and proportion, zoomorphic armour employs a strategy of distortion of the human form. This type of armour

reverses the valence of the classical thorax by implying a descent in the chain of being – not transcendence of one’s physical nature but a willed identification with lower animal forms.²⁸

Through the disruption of stoic and civilised masculinity, zoomorphic ornaments establish a correspondence between outside and inside, essence and appearance, externalizing on the surface of the body the otherwise invisible characteristics of the inner self.

In the so-called *Lion Armour* (c. 1545-55), for example, a royal harness that might have belonged to the French King Henry II, the decorative scheme is dominated by lions’ heads. They reinforce the body’s knee, shoulder, elbow, and wrist joints, but also extend to the chest and head, creating a rhythmic repetition that helps hold this collective body together [fig. 6].²⁹ The pseudo-classical design

is more imaginative than archaeological. Leonine (and more generally zoomorphic) shoulders and knee defences are absent in classical precedents, but become a requisite feature of Renaissance armour *all’antica*. The lions on the armour – whose expressions are varied and individualised – have their brows furled, their mouths open and fangs bared; that on the helmet is depicted with the jaws opening around the face aperture, an invention that recalls Hercules, who wore as a headdress the pelt of the Nemean lion. The wearer of the armour presumably saw himself as an embodiment of leonine qualities. To him, the armour offered a promise of metamorphosis and transformation: it embodied the desire to exceed the limits of the human, transgress its boundaries, and merge man with animal.

This is not just a camouflage aimed at making the warrior’s appearance more terrible to the enemy, or a way of harnessing animal agency, as might be the case with military material culture more generally. It is instead the uncovering of the self – a much more specific and radical act. Victor Stoichita and others have compared the Renaissance armoured body to a ‘superhuman’ or ‘posthuman’ body where the inside has turned into the outside. With the creation of this second skin, the true self of the warrior hiding underneath is finally revealed.³⁰ The specificity of Renaissance zoomorphic armour ornament lies in the double-sidedness of this metal skin, which protects the human body while communicating its internal state to the external world.

4 Zoomorphic Ornament as Paradigm

Both compositionally and conceptually, armour pushes ornament onto the autonomous male body and drowns it in animal parts, breaking down traditional hierarchies between figure and attribute, ergon and parergon. It is now no longer ornament but rather armament: making a bold claim about what lies inside, it takes command of the body and turns its own newly minted hybrid into the narrative’s protagonist.

Offering a prominent surface on which to visualise man’s alterity, armour thus becomes the period’s main figurative stage for enacting the animalisation of the human. Challenging the organicity of the human body with hybrid assemblages, all three examples illustrated below – the fencer, the

monster, and the primitive – draw from a shared vocabulary of mixed human and animal forms that recalls zoomorphic armour ornament. Taken together, all three cases point to the rise of the armoured body as paradigm of human-animal intermingling, a structuring device for conveying the notion of human animality in the context of war; together, they present armour as a promise of metamorphosis with three distinct outcomes.

Contemporary fencing manuals demonstrate this point well. Fiore dei Liberi’s *Flos duellatorum* (c. 1410) first introduced to the fencing manual tradition a diagram summarising the four main virtues of the swordsman, embodied by animals borrowed from medieval bestiaries. These

²⁷ Cf. Pyhrr, Godoy 1998.

²⁸ Springer 2010, 63.

²⁹ Pyhrr, Godoy 1998, 309-16. On Hercules’s lion-skin as armour cf. Stoichita 2012.

³⁰ Cf. Quondam 2003; Stoichita 2012 and more recently Koos 2021.

illustrations would undergo a significant evolution over the course of the fifteenth century, revealing an increasing acceptance of hybridity. More than being mere attributes, in later illustrations animal features are grafted onto the body of the swordsman, following the formal articulation of contemporary armour. In early fifteenth-century copies of the *Flos duellatorum*, a lynx (*prudentia*), tiger (*celeritas*), elephant (*fortitudo*) and lion (*audacia*) are arranged around a standing, front-facing fencer. Each animal speaks individually, in the first person, about its own unique qualities [fig. 7].³¹

In a slightly later derivation, Filippo Vadi's *De arte gladiatoria dimicandi* (1482-87), the animals have grown more complex. They no longer represent just virtues, but also types of fencing movements. They have moved closer to the body, in some cases relocating from its surroundings onto its surface. A bear and a ram, for example, are awkwardly affixed to the fencer's shoulders, while an eye is placed on his chest [fig. 8].³² The fencer in Paulus Kal's *Fechtbuch* (c. 1468-79) has instead turned into a fully hybrid body, with hawk's head, deer's legs and a lion's heart [fig. 9]. The transformation promised by the armour is here effectuated. All animals are now speaking in a single, unified voice: that of the fencer. His words are recorded in the scroll:

I have eyes like a hawk, so you do not deceive me. I have a heart like a lion, so I strive forward. I have feet like a hind, so I can spring back and forth.³³

Now that the animal parts have been fully subsumed into a unified, organic whole, has the swordsman become a monster? Both ornament and monstrosity, it has been argued, engage with the body and challenge its autonomy. But while the first remains subsidiary, the second invades the human figure with foreign parts. The ornamented body of the warrior and that of the monster differ only in the degree of their mixing:

Ornament is the supplement that beautifies the body with small doses of matter which do not belong intrinsically to the body proper, typically what we will term *less complex* materials - from plants to minerals, or naturalistic or abstract patterns derived from such materials. Monstrosity, on the other hand, signifies



Figure 6 Lion Armour. 1554-55. Leeds, Tournament Gallery, Royal Armouries Collections © Royal Armouries Museum

a distorting, uglifying, and typically scary invasion of the body by the same sort of matter which does not properly belong to it.³⁴

31 Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 11269, fol. 1v. The tiger, for example, utters: "Sum celer in cursa subitosque revolvem in orbem / Nec me currentem superabunt fulmia tigrim". See Mondschein 2011.

32 MS Vitt.Em.1324. Rome, BNCR, fol. 15r.

33 Munich, BS, cgm 1507, fol. 6r "Ich hab augen als ein falk das man mich nit beschalk / Ich hab hertz als ein leb das ich hin czu streb / Ich hab fues als ein hind das ich hin czu und dar vor spring".

34 Wamberg 2019, 245-6.



Figure 7
Fiore dei Liberi, *Flos duellatorum*. 1415-25. Paris,
Bibliothèque nationale de France.
Département des Manuscrits. Latin 11269. fol. 1v.
© gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

The dramatic emergence of the so-called ‘prodigy complex’ in the years around 1500, during the most destructive phase of the Italian wars, produced a whole new array of human-animal hybrids which were predominantly interpreted as omens, most typically as harbingers of upcoming battles.³⁵ Monsters were generally thought to have been created to foretell disaster, hence the etymological links to *monstrare* (to show) and *monere* (to warn). Their connection to military events was originally established by classical authorities such as Cicero, who remarked on monsters’ frequent appearances in times of war.³⁶

In their composite nature and connection to battles, monstrous prodigies recall the configuration of contemporary zoomorphic armour: both

combine forms that are not normally found together, and they do so in an effort to create a convincing organism. The composition of these hybrid forms remains remarkably consistent in both its individual parts and formal patterns of organisation, as the monster said to have appeared in the city of Cracow in 1547 clearly shows [fig. 10]. Beastly protomes cover its shoulders, elbows, and knees, much in the same way as the pauldrons, couters, and poleyns of contemporary plate armour.³⁷

By the second half of the sixteenth century, another possibility presented itself. Zoomorphic parts would claim residency on the bodies of savage warriors who increasingly populated the European imagination. Animal forms are here still arranged as the plates of an armour but these

³⁵ Daston, Park 1998, 177-90; Niccoli 1990, 30-59.

³⁶ Cicero, *De divinatione* II. XXVII. 58.

³⁷ Cf. Aldrovandi 1642, 590. “Equus cute lacera” mimic the dress of mercenary landsknechts with its characteristic ‘puff and slash’ decoration.

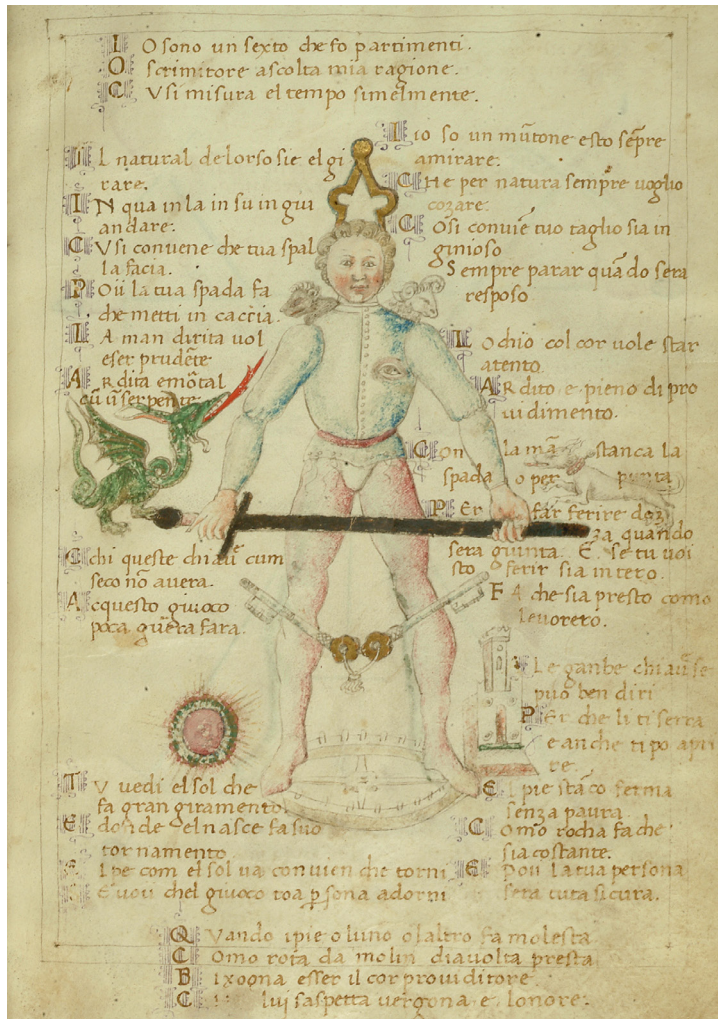


Figure 8
Filippo Vadi, *De arte gladiatoria dimicandi*. 1482-87.
Rome, Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Roma.
MS Vitt. Em. 1324, fol. 15r.
© Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Roma

bodies, unlike those of monsters and prodigies, were considered still redeemable by way of conquest and civilisation. Animal features identify wild men hailing from horizons that remain distant either geographically or chronologically. The latter is the case for the Pictish warriors portrayed by John White (1585-93) and later engraved in Theodore de Bry's *America* [fig. 11].³⁸ White and others like him were not making new claims about the bodies of these ancient Scottish savages and their animalistic inflections: classical sources describe in great detail the beasts (birds of prey, lions, griffons, serpents) painted and tattooed onto their bodies; they were fearful to behold, and appeared to live on the Picts' skin and die with them in battle.³⁹

The swordsman of fencing treatises, the prodigy of broadsheets and natural histories, and the

savage warrior from travel narratives all illustrate the same preoccupation with the coupling of diverse forms of life and their implications in terms of creative ingenuity – be it artistic, natural, or, in the case of monsters, demonic. In order to structure such hybrid couplings and reiterate the martial, belligerent nature of their transgressions, their creators look towards armour. Tracing more precise patterns of influence and stricter formal relationships may or may not be possible, but it is beside the point. What matters here is recovering the generative role of armour ornament as a liminal space caught between human and non-human animals: a space of multiple agencies, of intercorporeality, and a space in which to imagine what becomes possible when the species divide fades.

The recent outpouring of animal studies scholarship dedicated to rethinking the human-animal

³⁸ Cf. Fleming 1997; Smiles 2009, 106-12. On racial difference and animality cf. Seth 2003; Davis 2016.

³⁹ Cited in Fleming 1997, 41.



Figure 9
Paulus Kal, *Fechtbuch*.
1468-79.
Munich, Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek,
cgm 1507, fol. 6r.
© Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek München

divide has examined the early modern understanding of a boundary that was neither fixed nor stable in this period, but in the process of being established. The zoomorphic beings that inhabit the plates of Renaissance armour are an especially fruitful – if overlooked – field for assessing the permeability of that boundary and visualising animal alterity in warfare, be it innate (the warrior), performed (the fencer), prophetic (the prodigy), or ethnographic (the savage). The discourse on *pazzia bestialissima* or human animality and the relevance

of hybridity in the culture of war (manifested in military treatises and weapons, pathognomic alteration, epic similes, monstrous prodigies and wild men) made the warrior's armour a privileged site for experimentation with the mixing of human and animal forms. Armour signified the warriors' animality but it also reiterated the role of ornament as weapon, and at the same time declared itself to be a document of the artist's *fantasia*. While the warrior took care of the beast within, it remained the artist's task to craft the beast without.



Figure 10 A monster born at Cracow in 1547 with animal faces at its joints, illustration to Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia*. 1547-52. London, British Museum, inv. no. 1982,U.2343. © The Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 11 John White, *A Pictish Warrior*. 1585-93. London, British Museum, inv. no. 1906,0509.1.24. © The Trustees of the British Museum

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