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The American Centaur: The Afterlives of a Modern Myth

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Abstract

Sixteenth-century Spanish accounts of the invasions of the Americas claimed that Indigenous peoples found horseback riding so shocking that they mistook cavalry for centaurs. Drawing a one-to-one connection between sixteenth-century Mesoamericans and ancient Europeans, a nineteenth-century historian claimed that this must have happened in ancient Greece also, inspiring the centaur myth in the first place. A closer examination of Classical textual and archaeological sources and of the ethnohistory of the contact-era Americas shows this to be wishful thinking by Iberian writers desirous to believe that awestruck American societies saw them as gods or monsters. However, a closer examination of the centaur myth and the responses by contact-era American societies to horses reveals a more complicated reality behind a simple mythology of conquest.

Keywords: intellectual history; ethnohistory; Atlantic world; early imperialism; Spanish empire; sixteenth century; first contacts; anticolonial movements; antiquity; classics; centaur; monsters

1. Introduction: "Pensando Que Era Centauro"

In March 1519, a battle between Spanish invaders and Chontal Maya at Cintla inaugurated a new era of warfare in the continental Americas. Of 250 Europeans armed with steel blades, crossbows, arquebuses, and artillery, 60 were wounded, but none killed, while the Mayas sued for peace after suffering 220 combat fatalities and an uncounted number of wounded individuals. This was also, as participant Martín Vázquez pointed out, the first use of horses in battle on the American mainland, and the ten horsemen who fought the Mayas that day (Thomas 2005, pp. 158–70; Townsend 2006, pp. 30–36) gave rise to a venerable modern myth. At Cintla, wrote Francisco López de Gómara in his 1553 history, a lone horseman charged in twice to give breathing space to a group of Spanish infantry surrounded by Maya warriors. These two charges and retreats were so swift and unexpected that the Mayas "fled in fear and terror, thinking that he was a centaur". Overcoming their panic, the Mayas returned to the fight with "pagan bravado," attacking the Spanish "worse than before". When the horseman charged in a third time, the Mayas retreated "with injury and fear" (López de Gómara [1565] 2007, pp. 44–45). For Spanish writers, the point was not so much that the Mayas were shaken and disturbed by Europeans' bizarre and destructive weapons, or by the size and power of a horse, but that they supposedly expressed those emotions by reference to a monster. In the heat of the moment, the horseman was apotheosized by his enemies into a mythical creature—or, at least, Spanish writers wanted to think so.

The claim that American peoples mistook mounted Europeans for centaurs recurs in sixteenth-century Spanish accounts. Looking back at the Battle of Cintla from his estate in Guatemala in the 1580s, Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote that "the Indians thought that

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the horse and the horseman were all one, as they had never seen horses before" (Díaz del Castillo 2015, p. 105). The Peruvian gentleman Garcilaso de la Vega "El Inca" claimed that early in the conquests, "the Indians had believed that the horse and the horseman were all of a piece, like the centaurs of the poets" (de la Vega [1609] 1829, p. 263). In the account of conquistador Miguel de Estete, later paraphrased in Prescott's bestseller *History of the Conquest of Peru* (Prescott 1847, pp. 253–54), the Pizarro expedition narrowly avoided a battle with Inca vassals on the coast at Atacames (now Ecuador) when a cavalryman fell off his horse "and seeing the division of this animal, which they were certain was one creature, into two parts, they were so afraid that they turned their backs" and fled. Estete could not fault them for their reaction; they had never seen people as strange as Europeans, let alone a creature with metal nails through its feet and a metal bit in its mouth. They should also not be maligned for a supernatural reading of this uncanny event, "especially since in these lands and seas there are great monsters" (de Estete 2009, pp. 349–50). However, a dissenting opinion was logged in the 1530s by the Franciscan missionary Toribio de Benavente Motolinía. He allowed that the initial sight of bearded strangers, horses, and horseback riding could have been so startling to Mesoamericans that "some thought that the man and the horse were a complete person". However, this illusion could only last until they saw the riders dismount "because this people see and observe many things" (Benavente 2014, p. 153).

The Spanish centaur myth was part of a wider claim that horses struck terror in peoples of the Indies. Cabeza de Vaca predicted that slow-loading crossbows and arquebuses would be of little use against the foragers of central Texas, who were used to dodging each other's arrows in battles on the open plains: "Horses are what the Indians dread most, and the means by which they will be overcome" (Núñez 2002, p. 68). Garcilaso the Inca (de la Vega [1609] 1829) said his mother's people "usually have the greatest fear of horses" (de la Vega [1609] 1829, p. 263). In a scene in Oviedo's *Historia General*, Hernando de Soto gave the king of Mabila (now Mobile, Alabama) a horseback ride, and the ruler "felt he was mounted on a tiger or a ferocious lion, because this people held horses in the greatest terror" (Galloway 2006, p. 400). Bernardo de Vargas Machuca wrote in 1599 that "the Indian greatly fears the horse, and the harquebus" (Restall 2021, pp. 142–43). In his account of the conquest of the deserts and mountains of northern Mexico, Andrés Pérez de Ribas observed that while 40 armored cavalry were a small force in Europe, in the Americas, "an armored horse is a castle to which an Indian archer cannot compare" (Pérez de Ribas [1645] 1999, pp. 139–40).

At its furthest extreme, ideas like this played into a historiographical myth that 'Indians' were so awestruck by Europeans' technologies that they took them for demigods (Restall 2018, pp. 56–71; Townsend 2003, pp. 659–87; Amado 2000, pp. 783–811). However, emphasizing Europeans' supposedly overwhelming advantages could backfire by implying that these were unworthy conquests. According to Girolamo Benzoni, when Cortés accompanied Charles V on his ill-fated North African campaign of 1541, Charles' other lords dismissed Cortés as a conqueror of *brutti animali, & proprie bestie Occidentali*, "brutish creatures and typical Western beasts". Benzoni quoted one Italian nobleman's scornful allusion to Cintla: "this beast [Cortés] thinks he is dealing with his little Indians, where ten men on horses are enough to defeat twenty-five thousand" (Roa-de-la-Carrera and Sessions 2005, pp. 21–22; Parker 2020, pp. 270–77).

The idea that the shock of seeing a horse and rider had inspired the centaur myth was first written down in the fourth century BC by a Greek philosopher known only as Palaephatus (his name is a pseudonym, "Teller of Old Tales") as the first entry in his collection of euhemerized myths. Greek mythology placed the centaurs and their human nemeses, i.e., the heroic Greek tribe of the Lapiths, in the northeastern region of Thessaly; here was the

site of the famous Centauromachy ("centaur battle"), when the centaurs got drunk at a Lapith wedding and tried to abduct the bride and female wedding guests. Palaephatus argued that the myth reflected historical violence between Thessalian lowlanders and a highland group called *Kéntauroi* (Greek *Κένταυρος*, plural *Κένταυροι*). Since the etymology of *Κένταυρος* was unclear to the ancient Greeks, Palaephatus offered an interpretation as "Bull-prickers": highlanders who hunted wild bulls in the manner of picadors by throwing javelins at them from horseback. Since the Kéntauroi had independently invented horseback riding at a time when chariot riding was the norm, the uncanny sight of horse and rider fleeing the scene of an attack suggested that these highlanders were some kind of hybrid monster (Scobie 1978, pp. 142–47).

In 1844, in an entry for William Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, the classicist Leonhard Schmitz used Palaephatus' euhemerist interpretation of the centaur myth to argue that its sixteenth-century Spanish version was a historical fact and vice versa. Citing the earliest textual version of the Centauromachy, as told in the *Iliad* (1: 262–68, 2: 738–47), composed sometime before the sixth century BC (Davison 1955, pp. 1–21; Skafte Jensen 2009, pp. 80–93; Knox 2009, pp. 5–29), Schmitz observed that Homer never explicitly described the centaurs as having equine body parts. In fact, Homer's retelling of the Centauromachy never even used the word "centaur," instead calling them *pheres*, "beast," and describing them as "strong," "shaggy," and "mountain-bred". Since the example of the wise centaur Chiron showed them "not altogether unacquainted with the useful arts," Schmitz concluded that the original centaurs were human, although leading "a rude and savage life". Since the ancient Greek lexicographers' use of the term "horse-centaur" (*ἱπποκενταύρος*) would be redundant if the centaurs had always been presumed to be hybrids (Mayor 2011, pp. 239–40), Schmitz argued that poetic exaggeration had turned fierce human rustics into half-horse monsters, with early artistic renditions of centaurs with human legs and feet as an intermediate stage in this evolution (Scobie 1978, p. 142). Using the sixteenth-century "American centaur" trope as a real-world case proving Palaephatus' argument, Schmitz called it "not improbable" that to their chariot-riding neighbors, the horse-riding *Kéntauroi* "made [. . .] the same impression as the Spaniards did upon the Mexicans, namely, that horse and man were one being" (Scobie 1978, p. 142).

Schmitz's use of contact-era American ethnography to reconstruct prehistoric Europe, premised on the idea that historic Indigenous societies were living museum exhibits showing how primitive Europeans had lived and thought thousands of years ago, was not new. In 1724, the Jesuit missionary and anthropologist Joseph-François Lafitau had compared the relationship between Northern Iroquoian peoples like the Wendat (Hurons) and neighboring Algonkian-speaking foragers to the ancient Greeks and the mythical early inhabitants of the Greek peninsula, the "Pelasgians": while Iroquoians and Greeks were town-dwelling farmers, Pelasgians and Algonkians "did not sow" and "lead a vagabond life" (Lafitau et al. 1974, pp. 80–81). Secular nineteenth-century anthropologists drew on Greek myths which justified patriarchy by identifying the feminine with primordial, violent creatures subordinated or destroyed by male heroes and Olympian gods, i.e., Amazon women, man-eating female monsters like the Sphinx and the Sirens, and dangerous goddesses like the Furies. The nineteenth-century anthropologists' new euhemerism, argued that these myths represented the progress within ancient Greece from a primitive, irrational woman-dominated society to a progressive, rational male-dominated society. As evidence, they cited North American kinship systems, such as matrilineal clans among the Northern Iroquoians and Algonkian peoples' totemic clans (Ojibwe *doodem*, English 'totem') to create theories that primitive societies were defined by matrilineality and animal worship ("totemism") (Schenck 1996, pp. 341–53; Bohaker 2006, pp. 23–52;

Bohaker 2020, p. xvi n.7, 8; Davies 2010, pp. 7–48; Wolfe 1999, pp. 69–128). The observation in nineteenth-century Africa that forager groups had been pushed into harsh environments or reduced to forms of unequal exchange by farming societies inspired euhemerist theories that European legends of fairies, trolls, and other liminal beings reflected the historical displacement of ancient foragers by invading Indo-European speakers (Silver 1999, pp. 117–47). As European colonialism in Africa and Asia reached its zenith, the predominant mode of historical and anthropological thought saw history as shaped by not just migrations but also invasions and conquests, and myths of gods in conflict were euhemerized as folk memories of historical struggles between cultural and ethnic groups and their religions (Trigger 2002, pp. 110–47; Arvidsson and Wichmann 2006, pp. 1–12, 124–77, 309–23; Trautman 1997, pp. 190–216; Robinson 2016, pp. 137–61; Te Velde and van Baaren-Pape 1967, pp. 3–12, 77–80). In the case of ancient Greece, the idea that an identifiable ethno-cultural group called "Pelasgians" had actually existed (although ancient Greek writers' accounts of them were wildly inconsistent) was used to reconstruct a Greek prehistory in which rational, patriarchal, Indo-European speakers had conquered irrational, matriarchal, non-Indo-European-speaking Pelasgians—a prototype of European conquests abroad from 1492 onwards (Arvidsson and Wichmann 2006, pp. 165–68, 191–207, 311–20; Gruen 2012, pp. 236–43).

Decades after these theories had fallen from favor in academia, the poet, novelist, and neopagan Robert Graves synthesized them with the "American centaur" myth to create a vivid and bizarre vision of European prehistory in *The Greek Myths* (1955), his two-volume companion to the Penguin Classics series, which has never gone out of print (Graves 1971). Per a style that one reviewer summed up as "inaccuracies, evasions, improbable analogies, and amateur etymologies" in service of "the crudest kind of rationalistic interpretation" (Macpherson 1958, pp. 15–25), Graves proclaimed that the mythical centaurs and satyrs had been historic Pelasgian peoples within Greece, the Centaurs being "horse-totem tribesmen" and the Satyrs "goat-totem tribesmen" (Graves 1971, pp. 9–10).[1] Defining the Pelasgians as a "neolithic race" so primitive that they drew no link between physical sex and conception (Graves 1971, p. 28)[2] he characterized the Centaurs and Satyrs as "primitive mountain tribes in Northern Greece" who were played against each other by the conquering Indo-Europeans. Like other Pelasgians, the Centaurs and Satyrs were obsessed with crop fertility and worshipped earth goddesses with human sacrifice, ritual anthropophagy, and sacred orgies (Graves 1971, pp. 28, 43, 361–62). While Graves' vision of a blood-soaked prehistoric Europe dominated by rites of sex and violence, overseen by cruel goddesses and sadistic priestesses,[3] owed as much to his personal masochistic tendencies as it did to outmoded fertility-cult theories (Boardman 2002, p. 14; Hutton 2019, pp. 43–44, 195–201),[4] his moiety of rational conquering Greeks and irrational conquered Pelasgians echoed the argument that European colonization formed a "civilizing mission" that rescued conquered peoples from their own primitivism. The same sixteenth-century conquistadors who had claimed that "Indians" were so irrational they mistook horsemen for centaurs also claim that they had rescued "Indians" from a perverse precolonial culture centered around idolatry, human sacrifice, man-eating, and sexual impropriety ("sodomy") (Restall 2018, pp. 80–81).

Before progressing further, we must go back to pick apart this chain of analogies and assumptions: Were centaurs a sort of universal monster, as early modern Iberians assumed? Did peoples of the Americas really react with fear and loathing to horses and horsemen? Finally, how and why is the euhemerized centaur myth repeated today?

2. Monstrosity, Hubris, and the Wild Man: Centaurs in the Ancient Greek Imagination

Centaurs in Greek myth and art usually represent a negative mirror image that man should not aspire to have. In Greek myth and art, centaurs represent a dark mirror of the Greek male[5] at his worst, particularly when drunk. Possessing the size and strength of a horse and lacking any sense of morality or propriety, centaurs' main purpose is to commit or attempt transgressive, antisocial acts and then be deservedly killed by heroes like Pirithous or Herakles. According to myth, the centaurs' behavioral and physical monstrousness lay in their ancestry. Ixion, an ancient and evil Thessalian king who murdered his own father-in-law, was absolved of his crime by Zeus and invited to dine on Mount Olympus. Here, Ixion showed his gratitude by attempting to seduce or force himself on Hera, the queen of the gods. Zeus fashioned a decoy of Hera out of clouds to catch Ixion *in flagrante* and then had him dispatched to eternal torment in Tartarus. However, the cloud-woman, Nephele, gave birth to a monstrous son named Kentauros, who followed his father's example by mating with feral mares in the Thessalian mountains. The resulting offspring, the Centaurs, physically embodied the consequences of transgressing the boundaries between moral and immoral behavior and between humans and animals (Aston 2014, pp. xv–xvi; Mitchell 2021, pp. 8–9, 184–89; Padgett 2004).

The earliest textual allusions to the Centauromachy, as noted above, are in Homer's *Iliad*; Hesiod, roughly contemporary with Homer, references the wise centaur Chiron raising a son of the Thessalian hero Jason "up in the mountains" in *Theogony* (Schlegel and Weinfield 2006, p. 54). What can be said is that Schmitz's theory of an evolution (or devolution) of centaurs, from rustic primitives in Homer to hippocentaurs in classical times, has not held up in light of archaeological evidence. Artistic representations of centaurs with human legs and feet and wearing robes represent a period of artistic experimentation during the Geometric (ca. 1050–700) and early Archaic (700–500) periods, when Greek artists were experimenting with depictions of other Near Eastern-derived hybrid monsters; these traits would later be restricted to the "good" centaurs Chiron and Pholus to show their greater degree of humanity. Pottery statuettes of hippocentaurs in Greek art date back to the Mycenaean period of the 12th century BC and are clearly derived from Near Eastern precedents of the Middle Assyrian period (ca. mid-14th century BC to 10th century BC). How far back the historic centaur myths go, and whether ancient perceptions of them differed notably, is unclear (Padgett 2004, pp. vii–xi, 3–46; Tsiafakis 2004; Boardman 2002, pp. 127–56; Burkert et al. 1992, pp. 41–87; Mylonas Shear 2002; Mylonas Shear 2004).

The possibility does exist that the core of the centaur myth, in which beast-men personifying antisocial or chaotic urges are put in their place by heroes, already existed in the Near East prior to its appearance in Mycenaean Greece. A hippocentaur in a seal from the Tell Fekheriye site of northern Syria (thirteenth century BC) instead wears a battle helmet and wields a sword against a humanoid hero (*laḫ͡mu*). Dominik Bonatz dates this image to the reign of Shalmaneser I, when the Assyrians consolidated their control over recently conquered Levantine territories. Per this reading, the hippocentaur personifies Syrian tribesmen resisting Assyrian rule, and the laḫ͡mu represents Assyria's civilizing power over foreign lands and conquered peoples stereotyped as wild and brutish (Bonatz 2019, pp. 106–13). A bronze statuette from the Peloponnese ca. 700 BC, where a battling centaur and human hero both wear helmets, could be an artistic continuity from the Tell Fekheriye site, or it could represent independent artistic license (Padgett 2004, pp. 133–36).

By the fourth century BC, the general consensus among philosophers was that centaurs could never have physically existed, and they regularly appeared in thought experiments and philosophical works (Mayor 2011, pp. 236–43). This climate of skepticism produced

Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (4th century BC), a series of allegorical dialogues imagining the rise of the Persian Empire's founder, Cyrus the Great. In Book 4, Cyrus summons his captains to point out a strategic weakness: while the Persians are great infantry fighters, they need to develop a cavalry.[6] The captains unanimously agree, and Cyrus decrees that once the Persians learn to ride horses, they must go everywhere on horseback "so that people may think that we really are Centaurs" (4.3.22); from that day forward, "no Persian gentleman would be seen going anywhere on foot, if he could help it" (4.3.23) (Miller 1914). *Cyropaedia*, like Herotodus' *Histories*, reflects Greek ethnographic curiosity about the Persians as well as bitter memories of the Persian invasion of Greece in the fifth century; Greeks were enraged by Persian soldiers' enslavement of women and boys as concubines and eunuchs but also flabbergasted by the fine wines and rich meals Persian officers enjoyed on the march. In the Greek mind, the Persians and other 'Oriental' peoples were hedonistic pleasure-seekers jaded by wealth and luxury. Xenophon's comparison between centaurs and Persians is therefore unflattering: both are wine-soaked sexual predators begging for their comeuppance. Xerxes' empire itself, notes Johnson, is an impossible hybrid in Xenophon's allegory, like the centaur: the austere discipline of the first generation of Persian conquerors will inevitably be enervated by the wealth and luxury of their conquests (Johnson 2005, pp 177–207; Gruen 2012, pp. 53–65). So, approximately two thousand years before Spanish writers ventriloquized that Mesoamericans had mistaken them for monsters, Xenophon was putting a centaur misidentification into the mouths of a cultural 'other'—not to claim a naïveté among the conquered but to attribute overweening (and ultimately ineffectual) arrogance to the would-be conquerors.

3. Killing the Centaurs: Mesoamerica and the Andes

The confusion between legendary wild men and the perceived "primitives" of the Western Hemisphere was a recurrent theme in the contact period. Missionaries like Motolinía had to regularly explain to European readers that the "forest people" (*silvaggio*, *salvajes*, *sauvages*) of the Indies were neither physically hairy nor slow-witted (Dickason 1997, pp. 63–70; Friedman 1981, pp. 197–207; Moser 1998, pp. 39–65); Garcilaso The Inca attacked the idea that 'Indians' were "a simple folk without reason or understanding who in both peace and war differ very little from beasts" (de la Vega 1962, p. 157). One point of clarification that recurs is the subject of the war club, denoted in Spanish texts by the Caribbean loanword *macana*. Unlike the sticks that wild men (or centaurs) might pick up in a moment of fury, *macanas* were deliberately manufactured weapons that were just as lethal as metal counterparts: "wooden clubs that they use in the fashion of maces" (Dávila Padilla [1596] 1625, p. 186) or "a sword made of palm wood, extremely hard and very heavy, about two inches thick on all sides" (de las Casas 1875, p. 435). They were also deadly, even to an armored man: a *macana* could "split open a human head with a single blow" (Pérez de Ribas [1645] 1999, pp. 90–91) or "knock in a man's helmet to the brains" (de las Casas 1875, p. 435).

The Mesoamerican variation, known in Nahuatl as a *macahuitl*, was also deadly: shaped like a cricket bat and bladed with razor-sharp flakes of obsidian, it could inflict crippling or fatal blows to the unarmored flesh of a human or a horse. In a fight on the road to Tenochtitlan in September 1519, Tlaxcalteca scouts killed two horses "with blows from their [macahuitls]", which "sliced cleanly through the horses' necks, reins and all" (López de Gómara [1552] 1965, p. 99); according to Bernal Díaz, one of the animals was nearly decapitated. Shortly afterwards, the Tlaxcaltecas' allies, the Otomí, captured a mare that they sacrificed to the gods in the manner of a prisoner of war (Cortés 2001, pp. 58, 462 n.15; Thomas 2005, pp. 236–43; Clendinnen 1991, pp. 65–100). While contact-era Europeans saw horses and other livestock as animate property that could reproduce themselves,

American societies accorded personhood status, volition, and power to many living things (Restall 2021, p. 116; Schürch 2019, p. 33). In Mesoamerica, one expression of this was the war costumes and regalia of predators (coyotes, eagles, and jaguars) and creatures associated with war and sacrifice (butterflies and hummingbirds) that elite warriors donned for battle (Olko 2014, pp. 109–32).

As Inga Clendinnen observed in 1993, contact-era Mesoamericans appear to have considered the horse as a warrior on par with their own king of beasts, the jaguar. Like human enemies slain in battle or captured and sacrificed, the heads of Spanish horses were publicly displayed on skull racks, and their tanned skins were curated in temples. Mesoamericans considered warhorses, who charged into combat with rolling eyes and frothing saliva ("for the Mexicans saliva signified anger"), as worthier foes than the Europeans who fought from a distance with cannons, crossbows, and arquebuses. Some captured Spanish prisoners, notes Clendinnen, had the backs of their heads knocked in as common criminals were executed or were only sacrificed after being stripped naked like dishonorable slaves (Clendinnen 2003, pp. 79–84; Schürch 2019).

The same Spanish texts that describe 'Indians' awestruck or terrified by horses are also filled with accounts of those same people killing and capturing horses. By 1521, the Aztecs were fending off horses and horsemen with showers of arrows and javelins and disemboweling horses with stolen Spanish lances or broken sword blades lashed to poles (Cortés 2001, p. 488 n.51). Durán writes that, in one battle, a Mesoamerican champion stopped a charging horse by cutting its hooves off (Clendinnen 2003, pp. 80–81). In the Spanish campaigns against the Mayans of the Yucatán, fear was similarly short-lived. On the march to Quezaltenango, according to López de Gómara, Cortés' lieutenant Pedro de Alvarado "met some four thousand of the enemy, and farther along thirty thousand more, and defeated them all, for they took to their heels at the approach of a horse, an animal that they had never seen before". However, this initial shock soon wore off, and many Mayan warriors "would lie in wait for one or two horses, [or] seize a horse by the tail and wound it" (López de Gómara [1552] 1965, p. 315). Cortés, in his *Fifth Letter*, describes not only Mayans fleeing at the sight of horses but also the Mayans at Peten Itza agreeing to look after an injured horse and a Chontal Maya lord named Paxbolonacha[7] showing "great pleasure" on his first horseback ride. Gómara echoes this: Paxbolonacha had already "seen other bearded men and their stags (which was their name for horses)" (López de Gómara [1552] 1965, p. 357; Cortés 2001, pp. 364–65, 377–78; Restall 2021, p. 118). During the conquest wars in Yucatan that lasted from 1527 into the 1540s, Mayans dug pit traps to maim or kill Spanish horses, adding to the hazards of a terrain comprising swamps, dense forests, and slippery rocks that left horses "plunging and slithering" for traction (Clendinnen 2003, pp. 26–34; Restall 2021, pp. 40–41).

South American peoples also turned their weapons on horses and their riders, according to both Spanish and Andean accounts. According to Pedro Cieza de León (Cieza de León [1553] 1998), in a speech before the battle of Cajamarca (1532), the emperor Atahualpa had pointed out to his captains that the horses "did not eat men, so why should they be afraid of them?" Instead, he ordered them to "make a solemn sacrifice of the horses", which gave the Spanish their military advantage; in another pre-battle speech, he urged them not to spare any European or horse (Cieza de León [1553] 1998, pp. 205, 211). In Pedro Pizarro's recollection (1571), the Inca soldiers were afraid of the horsemen's advantage in open terrain, as in a skirmish led by Hernando de Soto, but in closer quarters, they did their best to overcome this fear by capturing or killing horses and their riders. He recalled how the enemy made "a very great cry" every time they captured a horse or its rider, how the Inca soldiers learned to lead captured horses by the reins, and how the fate of all horses captured was for their hooves to be cut off (Pizarro [1571] 1844, pp. 225, 291). In the account of Titu

Cusi (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005), the Incas during the 1536 rebellion flooded the fields around Cuzco to bog down any mounted Spaniards trying to flee the besieged city, a tactic later used by his father Manco Inca, the ruler of the Inca rump state of Vilcabamba (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005). Sometime after 1537, Manco Inca—according to his son Titu Cusi—began fighting from horseback as a lancer and seizing horses, arquebuses, and artillery as spoils after battles; the Vilcabambans used high terrain to prevent cavalry charges and used *bolas* and pits to either snare charging horses' legs or break them (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, pp. 111, 119–22, 145 n.69; Renton 2024, p. 114).

Other societies also rapidly lost their fear of horses, if they had ever felt it. On Diego de Almagro's expedition into Chile, the people of Chicoana began waylaying the slaves and servants sent to collect firewood; "Almagro and several horsemen ambushed them in order to kill them, but they were not too afflicted and killed his horse" (Cieza de León [1553] 1998, p. 429). This also entered into the realm of epic poetry: in Part One of Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* (de Ercilla y Zúñiga [1569] 2018), the Mapuches of Chile use spike traps (1.30–31) and swamps to neutralize "the danger and dread of the horses" (1.25), and the Mapuche champion Rengo uses a huge metal-studded war club to defeat seasoned warhorses in battle (9.94–97) (de Ercilla y Zúñiga [1569] 2018).

4. The Metaphysics of First Contact

An anecdote from Martín de Ursúa's conquest of the Yucatán in the 1690s has been cited to bolster the idea that horses (if not their riders) struck American societies with a kind of religious awe. At Peten Itza, the Ursúa expedition found that the horse Cortés had left behind in 1524 had been incorporated into the local pantheon. As recorded by Juan de Villagutierre in 1701, the Mayans told the Spanish that their ancestors had fed the horse "chicken and other meats and had given it garlands of flowers, as they were wont to give their nobles when they were ill". Having seen the Spanish hunt deer on horseback with muskets and identifying the horses as "the cause" of the lightning flashes and thunderous noises, when the horse inevitably died, it became deified as *Tzimin Chac* (Cortés 2001, p. 519 n.65). This name, "Tapir Lightning," combined the local animal the horse most resembled with a celestial phenomenon; subsequent Mayan religion has depicted the Chacs, attendants of the rain god, on horseback (Scobie 1978, p. 143; Thompson 1990, p. xxiv).

A look at Indigenous first-contact accounts from the North Atlantic, Great Lakes, and Pacific Northwest illustrates parallel processes of how the new and unexpected became identified with the familiar and how this process was remembered. In some stories, the identification of ships' cannon fire with lightning and thunder suggested Europeans had come from the sky world, the origin of many peoples' ancestors; in others, European sailors' pallid skins and strange diet suggested they were escapees from the land of the dead (Hamell 1986–1987, pp. 86–90; Thrush 2011, pp. 2, 17–19, 24; Lutz 2007, pp. 36–38, 43). While Europeans may have initially been identified with spiritual beings who travelled between worlds, changed shape, and brought useful gifts and knowledge, these comparisons rendered Europeans not as objects of worship but as recognizable figures who could be understood and negotiated with;[8] early modern Europeans also believed that certain people (like saints and witches) had great personal power to heal or to harm and saw a world imbued with a pantheon of unseen beings (Lutz 2007, p. 38). Indigenous first-contact stories also include the element of prophetic dreaming, or other precontact methods of knowing the future, and the incorporation of European novelties like Christianity into traditional belief systems (Hamell 1986–1987, pp. 89–90; Thrush 2011, p. 25).

Similar concerns of reconciling the precolonial past and the colonized present animate Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's *El primer nueva corónica* (1615) and two texts produced by collaboration between Indigenous elites and Catholic missionaries: Sahagún's

Historia General (or *Florentine Codex*, Getty Research Institute 2023) and the memoir of Diego de Castro Titu Cusi Yupanqui (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005). In these accounts, the question of whether Europeans and their horses were taken as otherworldly or uncanny in the contact period is inseparable from the authors' partisan interpretations of the conquests—and the assignation of blame for them (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, pp. 31–41; Restall 2018, p. 48). A scene from the bilingual text of the *Florentine Codex* (Book 12, chapter 7), where Moctezuma II's messengers report their first meeting with the Spanish, has different emphases in the Spanish and Nahuatl texts. In the Spanish text, the messengers report "of the horses and of their great size, and how the Spaniards mounted them in armor, so that nothing but their faces could be seen". In the corresponding Nahuatl text, Moctezuma's messengers pay much less attention to the horses ("their deer that carried them were as tall as the roof") and much more attention to the Europeans' metal arms, armor, and all-encompassing clothing ("only their faces could be seen") (Lockhart (1992), pp. 270–75; Getty Research Institute 2023, folios 11r and 11v).

Like the peoples of later North America who identified Europeans with tricksters, manitous, and ghosts, the contact-era Nahua use of *teotl* (plural *teteu'*) for Iberians reflects an ontological improvisation to explain strange and disturbing phenomena. As Camilla Townsend has observed, the word *teotl* can refer to a deity's earthly representative, including a captive slated for sacrifice to that deity, or to a sorcerer or other person with great personal power. Identifying the bizarre strangers and their uncanny and unpleasant behavior with sorcerers made them recognizable; until the ethnonym *Caxtilteca* ("Castilian") was coined, referring to these aliens from parts unknown as *teteu'* (in the sense of a deity's representative) fit their repeated self-representation as emissaries of their gods (Townsend 2003, pp. 670–72; 2019, pp. 94–98; Restall 2021, pp. 112–15). As for the influential narrative of the *Florentine Codex*, in which a superstitious Moctezuma is paralyzed by omens and mistakes Cortés for the deity Quetzalcoatl, this jointly created narrative served the purposes of both Sahagún's students from Tlatelolco, a city-state allied with Tenochtitlán who blamed Moctezuma II's poor leadership for their defeat, and Sahagún and the Franciscans, who wanted to believe that the Spanish invasion of Mexico was the culmination of a divine plan (Restall 2018, pp. 40–48, 100–2).

In the Andes, postconquest claims that Atahualpa had lost the Inca empire by mistaking the Pizarro expedition for emissaries of a god served a similar function. At some point after 1532, Andeans began referring to Europeans as *viracochas*, a reference to an Andean deity named Wira Qucha or to his helpers (Rostworowski and Morris 1999, pp. 772–78, 790–98; Hamilton 2009, pp. 90 (ms. 118), 299 n.36, 313 n.232, 313–14 n.241; Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, pp. 139–40 n.9). In Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's history, the coming of Iberians who would be called *viracochas* was foretold in ancient times (Hamilton 2009, pp. 38, 52–53), although not all details were revealed, as indicated by his account of Atahualpa's embassy to the Spanish: the emperor sent offerings, gifts, and slave women not only to the conquistadors but also to their horses, thinking they were "people [. . .] who ate maize" (Guaman Poma de Ayala 1615, ms. 380). (The Incas' association of maize with the sun and the ruling class inferred status and power to the horses.) (Rostworowski and Morris 1999, pp. 785, 822–27; Alconini and Covey 2018, pp. 213, 228–40, 272, 305–15). While Guaman Poma, like Garcilaso The Inca, considered Atahualpa a usurper (Hamilton 2009, p. xxii), the idea of a gullible and fearful Atahualpa deceived by the idea of Europeans and their animals as *viracochas* is much stronger and more hostile throughout Titu Cusi Yupanqui's account. In the reign of Atahualpa, reports came in from the Tallanas of the lowlands of a strange new people who "appeared to be Viracochas". Gold and silver were associated with the sun, ancestor of the Incas, and were signs of status and divine power; the Tallanas reported that the bearded strangers ate from silver

plates and "rode very large animals with silver feet (by which they meant the glittering horseshoes)" (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, p. 60). According to Titu Cusi, Atahualpa dramatically underestimated the horses and their riders—rather than dreading them, as the Iberian centaur myth would have, the emperor and his entourage went to the ambush at Cajamarca without proper weapons or armor, only bearing skinning-knives and lassos "for the purpose of hunting this new kind of llamas" (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, p. 61). Following that defeat, Atahualpa willingly acquiesced to his Spanish captors "because he was afraid of the Viracochas" and hoped to use them against his rivals. The Tallanas repeated the point of horseshoes to Titu Cusi's father, Manco Inca: "Lord, these people cannot be but Viracochas. . . Even their sheep, who carry them, are large and wear silver shoes" (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, pp. 64, 66).

The question of belief, with Manco Inca as a skeptic, allows Titu Cusi to recast his father as a shrewd leader ("the type of man who wanted to know things for certain") (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, p. 64) instead of a Spanish collaborator (as he was from late 1533 until a revolt in 1536). In Titu Cusi's account, his father generously welcomes the Spanish into the Inca realm "since they had come to see him on orders of Viracocha" and treats them respectfully and generously. When the Spanish inevitably betray Manco Inca, he admits that he was wrong and should have killed them when he had the chance and that these impostors masquerading as servants of Viracocha (a stand-in for the Trinitarian god) are actually servants of Satan. However, in his own defense, this was an honest mistake: "Considering their clothes and other characteristics that are entirely different from our own," such as metalwares, huge llamas, and instruments that produce thunder, "this did not seem implausible to you and even to me" (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, pp. 7–11, 60, 66, 72–116). By 1537, according to his son, Manco Inca had learned how to fight from horseback as a lancer, and his seizure of horses alongside firearms and artillery helped narrow the arms gap. The material culture of Spanish horsemanship had become such a part of his life that it even appeared in his assassination: the Spanish fugitives at his court, who sought a pardon from Pizarro for murdering Manco Inca, killed him while they were playing horseshoe toss (*herrón*) (Yupanqui and Bauer [1570] 2005, pp. 7–10, 111, 119–25, 145 n.69).

5. Big Dogs and Magic Elk: Horse Cultures in the Modern Americas

One autumn day ca. 1730,[9] a hunting party of Piegan and Plains Cree on the border of the Shoshone country heard that a lone Shoshone's horse had been shot from under him. Saukamappee, a Plains Cree man who was then a teenager, had heard how their Shoshone enemies rode these animals into battle to great effect, and he and the Piegans "were anxious to see a horse of which we had heard so much [. . .] numbers of us went to see him, and we all admired him [.]"But what to call this animal? Although "he put us in mind of a Stag that had lost his horns," the Plains Cree settled on the name *Misstutim* (big dog), "as he was a slave to Man, like the dog, which carried our things" (Tyrrell 1916, pp. 328–34).

Spanish expeditions into North America in the mid-16th century found that the military advantage of horses could be highly situational, particularly when facing peoples experienced in hunting elk and bison. In *La Florida del Inca* (1605), Garcilaso the Inca's account of Hernando de Soto's disastrous argosy across southeastern North America (1539–1542), a conquistador's horse is killed under him in the first skirmish after landfall at Tampa Bay; by the time the expedition reaches the east bank of the Mississippi, those few horses that remained were wiped out by buffalo hunters (de la Vega 1962, pp. 59–60, 103–05, 122–23, 175–81, 234–36, 454–66). "Despite a common misconception that Native peoples uniformly regarded the Spaniards and their horses as immortals," writes Michael Wilcox, the Coronado expedition (1540–1542) met similar resistance: at Hawikuh pueblo in

July 1540, the mounted Coronado was targeted by the Zuni with rocks and arrows during a day-long battle, and shortly afterwards, the Hopi fought with Coronado expeditionaries on horseback (Wilcox 2009, pp. 107–12). In the Tewa country, where the Coronado expedition settled in for the winter of 1540–1541, the Iberians and their Mesoamerican allies behaved as hubristically towards their hosts as the mythic centaurs: seizing Tewa food and winter clothes for themselves and grazing their herds on the cornstalks used as winter fuel. The last straw was when a conquistador ordered a Tewa man to hold his horse's bridle, while he went into the town to attempt to rape that man's wife. As a prelude to revenge, the Tewas drove some of the expedition's horses and mules into their barricaded towns, where the animals were "chased as in a bull fight and shot with arrows" (Flint and Flint 1997, pp. 1–21; Hoig 2013, pp. 72–82; Castañeda de Nájera [1540] 1896, pp. 495–96).

In Spanish and Portuguese colonies, the widespread use of enslaved prisoners of war as herders, stablehands, and grooms set the stage for the creation of American horse societies (Baretta and Markoff 1978, pp. 587–620; Weber 2005, pp. 52–90). By the 1550s, horseback riding was noted among the Chichimecas of northern Mexico; the Mapuches were fielding cavalry by the 1560s, and one contemporary observer in 1566 described a Mapuche warrior killing a Spanish officer in battle, stealing his horse, and managing it as skillfully "as if he were a horseman from Andalusia" (Renton 2024, pp. 107–42, quotation 131). In the seventeenth century, horses spread further among unconquered peoples through preexisting trade routes; horse cultures allowed Indigenous societies to regroup and resist European expansion, in some cases, until the end of the nineteenth century. However, this was a decidedly mixed blessing: horse ownership increased wealth inequalities between families and individuals, horses competed with game animals for forage and water, and societies unable to access or keep large horse herds were at a marked disadvantage (Anderson 1999, pp. 9–54, 67–92; Hämäläinen 2003, pp. 833–862; Taylor et al. 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Vander Velden 2020, pp. 71–106).

The incorporation of horses into American societies is reflected by the new names coined for them. In a survey of 105 languages, Cecil Brown found that 52% used a variation of *caballo* or *cavalo* as a loanword, while 44% used a neologism based on the word "dog," reflecting how the horse supplemented and surpassed the dog as a baggage animal; horses were also identified as new types of deer or elk in North America, llamas or tapirs in South America (Brown 1999, pp. 53–54; Vander Velden 2020, pp. 92–93; Mitchell 2015, pp. 150–52). Horses' great endurance and ability to increase personal or familial wealth and power were reflected in origin stories and new religious rites. In North America, sacred ceremonies or ritual objects like medicine pipes are gifts from the peoples of the sky and underwater worlds, and five Blackfoot stories collected in the twentieth century identify horses as having similar sacred origins (Ewers 1955, pp. 291–98). From the northern Great Plains to Patagonia, Indigenous societies saw horses as divine gifts from the sky or underwater worlds and invoked horse spirits to bring rain and to cure injury, disease, and sorcery (Mitchell 2015, pp. 109–10, 130–33, 170–74, 200, 226–27, 259–60, 284–86, 347, 358).

6. Conclusions

While Europeans were initially identified, in first-contact situations in the Americas, with spirits, ghosts, sorcerers, and other supernatural beings, they were never actually mistaken for centaurs, and neither were their horses. However, the myth that Indigenous peoples mistook mounted Europeans for centaurs, at least at first, continues to be repeated. In 1993, Hugh Thomas wrote that the warhorses at Cintla "had a sensational effect [. . .] The Indians really thought that they were dragons" (Thomas 2005, p. 169). David Johnson's 2005 remark that "Cyrus could not have really expected anyone to mistake the Persians for centaurs" includes a footnoted observation from an anonymous manuscript reviewer: "In

the Americas, on the other hand, the appearance of Europeans on horseback was quite a shock" (Johnson 2005, p. 179 n.4). Even an excellent 2015 scholarly survey repeats the myth that the horses at Cintla "caused a sensation as their Maya opponents found it difficult to distinguish horse from rider" (Mitchell 2015, p. 76).

The linkage of the centaur myth with imagined primitives within Europe has also appeared in historical fiction. Mary Renault's euhemerist novel *The Bull from the Sea* (1962) reconstructs the centaurs as a relic population of Neanderthals surviving into the Bronze Age in the Thessalian mountains, with the half-human Chiron as their emissary to modern humans. The first time the novel's protagonist, Theseus, sees one of Chiron's fur-clad pupils on the back of a shaggy pony, he initially takes them for "a beast with four legs and two arms" (Renault 2015, p. 60). In Jean Auel's *Earth's Children* series, the Ice Age polymath Ayla is not only the first person in history to figure out (eventually) that conception is linked to sexual intercourse but also the first to domesticate wild horses, leading to constant uneasy first encounters: "Talut watched Ayla riding back [. . .] looking like some strange animal, half-human and half-horse. He was glad he had not come upon them unknowing. It would have been. . . unnerving" (Auel 2010, p. 5). While inventive, such approaches make clear the continued existence of nineteenth-century stadial theories and their associations between centaurs and nineteenth-century theories of contemporary Indigenous peoples as living exemplars of "Stone Age" primitivism.

Another variant of the centaur myth persists: Palaephatus' notion that horse riders only seemed monstrous when chariot warfare was the norm. In a 2010 issue of the long-running graphic novel series *Age of Bronze* (1998–), the Trojan prince Hector introduces "a very unusual warrior" sent from the Black Sea to help fight the Greeks: a horse archer with a painted face and in a strange fur costume. "He's riding right *on* the horse!" gasps his shocked brother Troilus; "I didn't know that was even *possible!*" The Greeks nearly rout as the horse archer strikes down Greek soldiers left and right: "Run! A *god* fights for the Trojans!" "Not a god—a *monster!*" (Shanower 2013, pp. 99–101). In Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson's *Hercules* (Ratner 2014), Thracian cavalry with the rising sun at their backs are initially mistaken by Hercules' credulous squire and herald, Iolaus, for centaurs (Ratner 2014). The designers of the computer strategy game *Troy: A Total War Saga* (2020) deliberately played up this concept of euhemerism as a product of ancient Greek naïveté and ethnocentrism when interpreting, within the game's "realistic" Bronze Age setting, centaurs and other mythic creatures like harpies and minotaurs as "foreign tribes" of "peculiar appearance and customs" (Creative Assembly/Sega 2020a). As explained in the in-game encyclopedia, centaurs within the game are conceived as hill tribes "lacking the technological means or resources to build [chariots]" who have "developed a crude form of horseback warfare instead" (Creative Assembly/Sega 2020b). On the one hand, this appears to be the nineteenth century all over again: the game's art designers borrowed heavily from images of North American horse peoples,[10] and some centaur units wear bison-horn headdresses. However, one of the centaurs' prerecorded responses when players select them—"We are the future of war!"—speaks to the implicit irony in this neo-Palaephatian perspective: the unpredictability of history and how quickly the conquered can turn the tables on their would-be conquerors.

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Notes

[1] Graves added his theories of Pelasgian 'totemism' in a new foreword in 1960, containing his "second thoughts" written after a psilocybin retreat in Oaxaca; this included a new theory that ancient Greek religion revolved around *amanita muscaria* and other hallucinogenic mushrooms, the evidence encoded in a way that only Graves could decipher (Graves 1971, pp. 9–10).

[2] The idea that the most primitive human societies did not link sex to conception had been posited by Bachofen in 1861 and was attributed to indigenous Australians in the 1890s (Wolfe 1999, pp. 9–42).

[3] E.g., Graves' claim that in the Pelasgians' "archaic religious system" there were neither gods nor priests "but only a universal goddess and her priestesses, women being the dominant sex and man her frightened victim" (Graves 1971, p. 28).

[4] "What is really remarkable to a liberal humanist reader is how unattractive a picture of matriarchy Graves actually seems to present [. . .] the classic, hostile, Old Testament vision of ancient paganism, but applied to a religion of which Graves seems to approve" (Hutton 2019, pp. 197–98).

[5] There were no depictions, in art or literature, of female centaurs until the Hellenistic period (Mayor 2011, pp. 236–43).

[6] In reality, the Persians had been an equestrian people from an early period, but Xenophon exercises creative license here. (Johnson 2005, pp. 177–207; Briant and Daniels 2002, pp. 19–20, 536–39).

[7] I use Restall (2021) orthography of 'Paxbolonacha'; Cortés (2001) calls that lord 'Apaspalon,' Gómara (López de Gómara [1552] 1965) 'Apoxpalón'.

[8] These identifications were double-edged: Europeans might be uncanny in some ways and familiar in risible, unsavory ways. (Lutz 2007, p. 38): the Secwepemc of British Columbia named Europeans after "the Old Ones," "tricksters with lusty sexual appetites and the full range of human frailties that constantly caused them trouble."

[9] David Thompson, a Canadian fur trader who spent the winter of 1787–1788 with Saukamappee, estimated his age as "at least 75 to 80" and these events to "about 1730" (Tyrrell 1916, p. 328).

[10] As well as the Dothraki from *Game of Thrones* (fur coats and black eyeliner) to denote a generic barbarian-horseman.

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