

New Interpretation of Master of Animals Figures

Before you read on I need to mention that **Bruno Overlaet**, the expert on all things from Luristan, is "not a fan" of what follows. That means that I'm probably wrong, fully or in parts. However, my hypothesis pursued here seems to be the only one that accounts for, e.g., the face on the center of MoA figures, the chicken heads, or the obsession of the dragons with the ears of the central human. So I let you have it - but consider yourself warned.

Recently (spring 2022) I have run across two quite unusual "Masters of Animals" that suggested a completely different **interpretation** from what I have stated above..
Here they are:



These two bronze figures are about twice as big as the "normal" MoA's, more primitive and somewhat archaic. We might thus assume that they belong to the older varieties, i.e. dating to 1100 BC or even earlier. They are, as I could convince myself, no fakes.

I have not seen anything like these figures in museums or in the literature, except for the one below found in the Grassi Museum in Leipzig, Germany. Here it is:



Source: Photographed in the Grassi museum in Leipzig, Germany, in July 2022

Looking at these figures I had an epiphany best expressed in the words of the Bible, Genesis 1,2;7:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. [2\)](#)

The "vicious beasts" don't eat the persons here. Their snouts merge with the head and form a kind of crown on the head of the humans.

Could it be that the "vicious beasts" actually symbolize some godheads that pull human(oid)s out of the primordial swamp (or form them from earth) and then **breath life** into them?

I certainly don't know. But I consider it possible. The Genesis part of the bible is believed to go back to about 600 - 700 BC (captivity of Jews in Babylon), according to Wikipedia. The figures are most likely considerably older, they thus cannot illustrate Bible texts. The Bible, however, is to some extent based on older texts and traditions and a quick search in the Internet reveals that the forming of men from earth / dust / clay followed by "breathing" life into him in one way or other, is quite common in old mythology.

If you look for details, however, the topic gets murky rather quickly and I therefore leave further speculations to specialists.

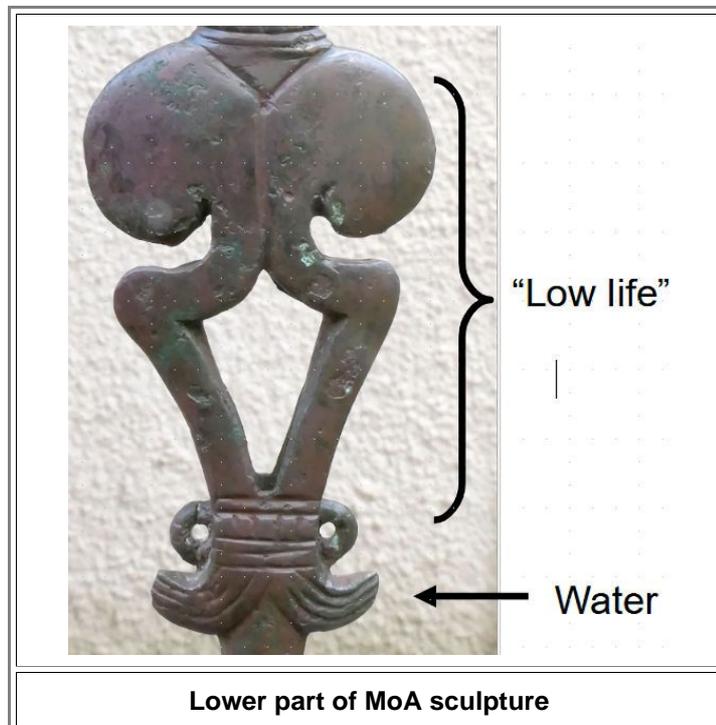
This "creation hypothesis" got me started. There is a lot more to these figures, after all. A few more small epiphanies later I arrived at the following new way of looking at the Master of Animals figures.

Looking at the Master of Animals in a New Way

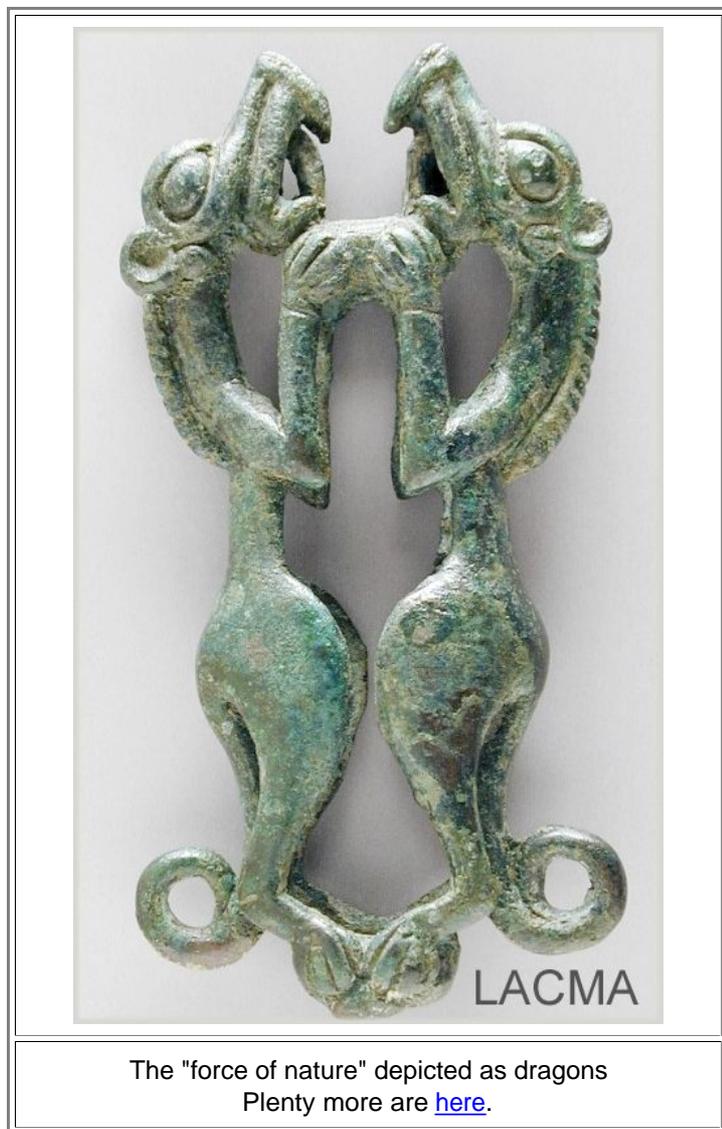
- Enlarging somewhat of what is stated above; I now give you a comprehensive interpretation of the meaning of the fully developed Master of Animals sculptures.

They express several stages of a creation myth

- In a *first step*, life emerged from water. The water is depicted by the wavy lines quite often found at the bottom of the sculpture. This is of course pure speculation but not unreasonable. It is also, as I believe, the first interpretation of what this part of the sculptures might mean.
 - This is highly speculative, however, and not true in many cases were the “wavy” or pratfall lines clearly show the feet (with toes) of the mythical beasts, just scan through the [pictures provided](#). It is not important for what follows, though.

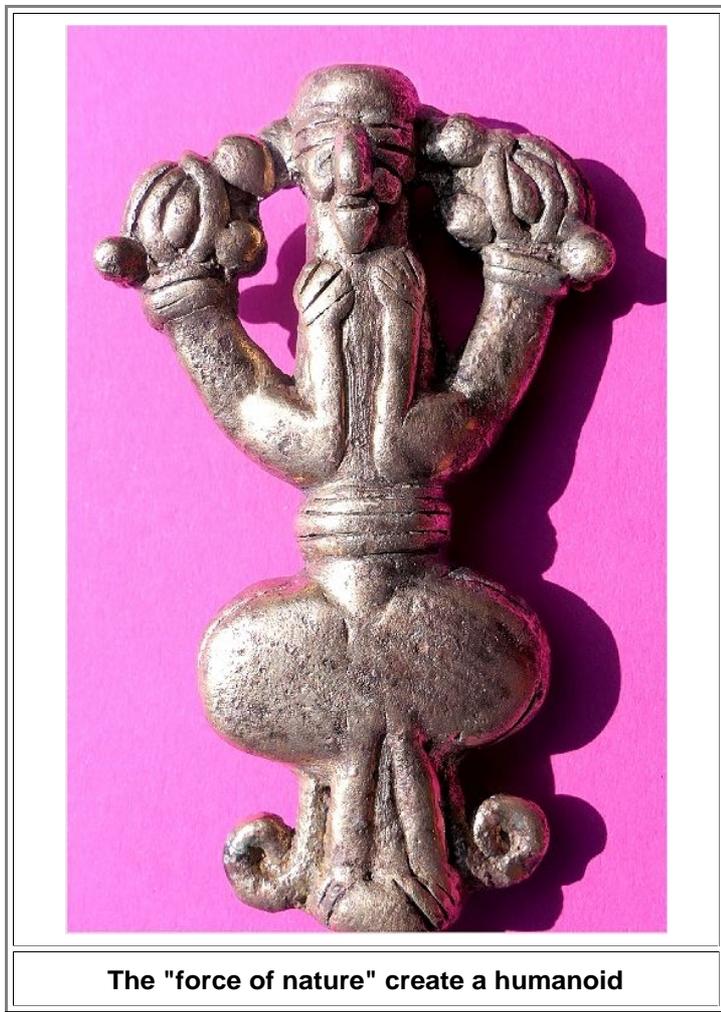


- This first life consisted of what I call “low” life. It may contain everything you like, up to mammals, but not yet “intelligent” life in the form of humanoids. The “low life” is portrayed as the back part of some antelope or whatever. It could be the back part of the beast (there are some sculptures that seem to show this) but the massive back part then does not go with the fine and slender arms of the many beasts. This part of the sculptures is mostly rather simple and without the fine details that we find on the rest of the sculpture.
- In the next step we encounter what I like to call “forces of nature”. In modern lingo it is the evolutionary principle that generated “higher” life forms out of the vast gene pool embodied in the “low” life. In the old times you needed a Godhead, spirit, mythical being, or whatever, that had some power over creation but was not necessarily benevolent. If it came into being as a kind of sublimation of the low life, or if it was there in the beginning and created the low life we don’t know; it also doesn’t matter here.
 - In Luristan this entity was embodied in the shape of a dragon or mystical beast:



● From this sculpture we might conclude that the "low life" embodiment as discussed above actually shows the back part of the mystic beasts - up to the loop always there that are formed by their tails.

▸ Next we have the creation of the first humanoids by the "dragoon gods"



The "force of nature" create a humanoid

● In my [old interpretation](#) I saw this guy a victim of the animals, suffering greatly from being about to be eaten. You just as well could see him as a not yet alive humanoid who still needed to be given the breath of life by the dragons.

▀ The next picture shows how it goes on:



The first generation of humanoids subdued and settled

- The first humanoids are settled and still firmly under the thumbs of their creators. The big question is: what is the meaning of those chicken heads? Well, it could mean that these guys have “chickend out” (American slang; to fail to do something through fear or lack of conviction). 3000 years earlier, when chicken were domesticated, people might have looked at these funny birds in a similar way. In any case, I may not be completely wrong with associating these chicken heads with domestication. You are domesticated when some Godhead keeps you comfortably in his garden of Eden but denies you the outside world or the acquisition of knowledge. Alternatively, the chicken heads maybe show that the first humanoids were give power over the “low life” as long as they behaved and stayed - quite literally here – below their creators
- ▶ Many of you know a story relating this: Some God created all the land and the “low life”. He also made a kind of walled-in garden where he intended to keep his pets. Then he created a human by sculpting him from clay, and finished by breathing life into him through his nose. The guy was a bit lonely, however, so God created a female from one of his ribs to give him something to play with. Note that God hadn't invented gendering yet. These two first humans were supposed to stay within the walled garden and to refrain from acquiring knowledge, i.e. going into Math and Physics. They were meant to be fully domesticated, just some kind of pets. However, some demigod or spirit or whatever – a snake able to talk – had made it into the garden and incited Eve to rebel by acquiring knowledge via eating a special apple. And so on. Note that it was Eve who wanted to become a physicist, knowing everything, and not Adam. God kicked Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden but the deed was done. Their offspring became quite knowledgeable and God is fainting ever since. Scientific insights, as the saying goes, are the gravestones in the cemetery of the Gods.
- Note that I have now given an explanation for that “second head”, always found on what one would identify as the stomach of the top guy, and the chicken heads. Also note that the chicken heads a re nearly always to the left and right of the “lower” head. It is thus likely that they are related.
- ▶ Now to the he top person, the “Master of Animals”. Plenty to look at can be found [here](#). If we “read” the sculpture literally, he (or sometimes she) actually emerges from the head of his father / mother. Not an unusual thing in old mythologies; witness the birth of Athena ³. But the “Head birth” could also be seen as purely symbolic here. The artist, after all, could hardly include a natural birth scene in the kind of MoA sculpture we are convened whit here. There is, however, a rather graphic birth giving scene on a “[needle](#)”.. The point is that the first tier of humanoids generate a second tier of uppity offspring that greatly annoys their progenitors by unruly behavior. Just consult the [Enûma Eliš](#), the creation myth of the Babylonians from around 1500 BC. And they don't stop at just annoying their parents.
- These guys do not own their existence tot the old gods / dragons / forces of nature and feel free to tackle the old gods / dragons for supremacy. They are not afraid of the old dragons / spirits but able to keep them at a safe distance, eventually eclipsing them.



The second generation of humanoids springing up from the first and subduing the “dragons”

- Look at the facial expressions of the actors involved. The self-satisfied smirk on the now “*Master if Gods*”, the resigned expression on his progenitor, and the desperate faces of the dragon gods!

Now I want to draw your attention on the problem with names. Our Luristan bronzes have been named “Master of Animals” almost automatically because their general looks fit the expectation. People had found plenty of animal masters from other culture, consult [this module](#) for examples. However, the “animals” here are clearly not animals but gods, demons, spirits, ... whatever. Just look at the human-like arms with hands of those “dragons” as seen in many of the “victim of animals” sculptures shown here to appreciate that these guys are not animals. The central figure might be some godhead, too, but definitely is rather human. What we see is thus not a Master of Animals but a

Master of Gods

With this assignation we have a different, and as I believe, better outlook on what these figure mean.

A long and complex creation myths condensed in a rather small sculpture that must follow rigid format rules. There must be a lot of symbolism by necessity. You just had to know how to “read” it. It is not unlike medieval art, where sculptures of saints and picture of Mary and company contain a plethora of (coded) information for those who can “read”.

Of course, my interpretation might just be major BS. There is no way, now or later, to prove any of this with scientific rigidity. But that is also true for all other interpretations as far as they exist. I do believe that my point of view given here is not too far off the truth. Nobody has the faintest idea of what kind of creation myth the old Luristanis subscribed to; they did not leave any writings. We might reasonably assume, however, that it was not fundamentally different from the ones we know (Babylonian, Greek ...). The evolution of humanity then progressed in several stages with rebellion against the parents / creators / gods, being part of it.

The people who created these sculptors were major artists, indeed. To encode that much information and beauty into a small statue, always within the constraints of the available technology and format (long, slender, rather flat, symmetric, must fit on a pole,...), does require a true artist and a lot of work. Don't forget that every Master of Animals sculpture is unique. The mould for casting was destroyed in the process
A lot more could be said, However:

I rest my case.

Well – not quite. [Here is a link](#) to a collector of more stuff and speculation relating to the Masters of God from Luristan.

- 1) Bruno Overlaet: LURISTAN BRONZES - THE FIELD RESEARCH Encyclopædia Iranica , online edition, 2016. [This link](#) opens a copy of the paper
- 2) No, I'm not religious at all and I don't know the Bible by heart. Aber man hat halt eine gute Schule besucht....
- 3) After a time, Zeus developed an unbearable headache, which made him scream out of pain so loudly it could be heard throughout the earth. The other gods came to see what the problem was. Hermes realized what needed to be done and directed Hephaestus to take a wedge and split open Zeus's skull. Out of the skull sprang Athena, fully grown and in a full set of armour. Due to the way of her birth, she became the goddess of intelligence and wisdom.
Source: https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/The_Myths/Birth_of_Athena/birth_of_athena.html