Beasts from the East: A Study of the Sphinx, Siren, and Griffin in Greek Art

Meghan Godby
With the abundance of Near Eastern influences evident in Greek art, there is a tendency to discount the innovation of early Greek artists\(^1\). Their fondness of these images is often regarded as imitation and Greek achievement as we know it is associated with much later periods. While the Greeks certainly found inspiration in foreign motifs, they did not blindly copy them\(^2\). The images of the Near East instead acted as a springboard for the Greeks to create their own iconography. Hybrid creatures, namely the sphinx, siren, and griffin, are excellent examples of this trend, and an examination of these creatures, particularly on pottery, reveals the ways in which the Greeks adapted and experimented with Near Eastern influences. The result is three distinct creatures that played a central role in Greek culture and developed their own unique set of characteristics.

During the Bronze Age, there was a great deal of contact with Near Eastern cultures, and consequently hybrid creatures were popular with both the Minoans and Mycenaeans. With the beginning of the Dark Ages, however, Greece became isolated and lost contact with outside civilizations. It is not until the beginning of the Orientalizing period, in the 8\(^{\text{th}}\) century BCE, that hybrid creatures become evident in Greek art. While many Near Eastern motifs had already been popular in Minoan and Mycenaean culture, it is at this time that they experience resurgence in the Greek world. This renewed contact affirms that the Greeks learned of hybrids directly from Near Eastern sources. Growing populations sought new materials such as bronze and ivory from overseas, and an entirely new artistic vocabulary was certainly a by-product of this exchange. In the ancient Near East, composite creatures were popular and existed in a variety of forms. The Greeks were exposed to these creatures and other motifs through several media, from

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\(^1\) Ekrem Akurgal states, for example, “[…]Greek art came into existence as a result of impulses from this [Near Eastern] foreign source.” Akurgal 1968, 223.

\(^2\) John Boardman explains that Greek art is “only superficially conditioned by the influence and instruction of other cultures.” Boardman 1966, 21.
transcriptions to astronomy\(^3\), and emigrant artists most likely played a role in transmission as well\(^4\). The origin of hybrid creatures is complex, and it is clear that not all varieties made it into Greek art. The Greeks were selective in the creatures they did choose, and their choices provide insight into how these creatures functioned and fit into the Greeks’ culture.

Hybrid creatures in Greek pottery should not be regarded as simple reflections of Near Eastern images, but instead as evidence of the complex cultural interactions of the time. While the Near East did in fact lay the foundation for these creatures, the Greeks should be credited for their innovative adaptations of these images. The sphinx, siren, and griffin each began as a decorative element and eventually would be absorbed into narrative contexts. They remained a popular motif for several centuries, illustrating their growing significance in Greek art and culture and the Greeks’ fondness for such images. Rather than moving on to a new iconography, the Greeks found ways to incorporate these creatures into their changing cultural framework. An individual examination of these three creatures will illustrate that they played a significant role in Greek culture. Although these hybrids eventually begin to lose their popularity in Greek art in the 5\(^{th}\) century BCE\(^5\), it is clear that by this time they had been transformed into exclusively Greek creatures, far different from their Near Eastern counterparts.

**Sphinx**

No study of hybrid creatures would be complete without at least a brief mention of the sphinx, one of the most widely recognized creatures of the ancient world. Though its origins are in Egypt, the sphinx also played a role in several other Near Eastern cultures, and its influence would eventually reach the Greeks. The roles it would then assume are significant and multifaceted, and an examination of its depiction on Greek pottery brings to light several departures

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\(^3\) On the transmission of Near Eastern motifs, see Childs 2003, 66.
\(^4\) On Greece’s relationship with the Near East in the 8\(^{th}\) century BCE, see Boardman 1966, 41-47.
\(^5\) Tsiafakis 2003, 98.
from its beginnings in the Near East. A closer look at the sphinx not only provides insight into the use of hybrid creatures, but also the lives of the ancient Greeks and their adaption of Near Eastern motifs. It played an important role in Greek culture and underwent many transformations along the way, illustrating both the innovation of the Greeks and their selective adaptations.

A quick look at the sphinx in Greek pottery will reveal several key patterns, along with a wealth of differences both in style and function. Stylistic differences emerged between different geographic regions, and were also influenced by the changing artistic trends. Yet the changing roles of the Greek sphinx are a bit more complex, as they reflect changing values in Greek culture. Early on, the sphinx can be observed as purely benign and ornamental, depicted amongst animals and other decorative elements, but as time progressed it would come to assume complex roles in narrative, funerary, and religious contexts and eventually become the monster that tantalized the Thebans with its riddles. The significance lies in the Greeks’ ability to continuously adjust this Near Eastern motif and make it their own.

The sphinx was re-introduced into the Greek world during the 8th century BCE (Tsiafakis 2003, 79), and by then the sphinx had already been around for more than two thousand years (Childs 2003, 50). It was familiar to many Near Eastern cultures, as well as the Minoans (Boardman 2001, p. 30 pl. 12.1) and Mycenaeans (Hampe and Simon 1981, p. 219, pl. 332). Although its origins lie in Egypt, it should be noted that the Greeks learned of the sphinx from the Levant, where it existed amongst the Phoenicians. This not only reveals that Egypt’s role was minor6, but also acts as a testament to the wide-spread nature of the sphinx, proving that its origins are anything but cut and dry. The sphinx would remain prevalent in Greek culture until its peak in the Archaic period during the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. Although hybrid creatures as

6 On the origin of the sphinx, see Childs 2003, 64.
a whole were becoming less popular by the 5th century BCE\(^7\), the sphinx can still be observed both on pottery (Louvre CA1705) and other forms of media (British Museum GR 1873.8-20.265) at this time. The sphinx was slow to lose its popularity, and can even be seen on grave stele dated to the 4th century BCE (Met. 48.11.4), making it clear that the sphinx was no passing trend.

Before exploring the role of the sphinx in Greek pottery, it is necessary to take a look at its physical appearance and characteristics. In its original Egyptian form, the sphinx consists of a lion with a human head. However, two other Near Eastern cultures made important modifications to its stylistic features, the Assyrians added wings and the Hittites altered the sphinx’s hairstyle. Similarly, sideburns and a stepped wig, which can be seen on Protocorinthian vases\(^8\), are Syrian in origin (Akurgal 1968, 187). The Greeks were also influenced by the distinctive Cretan sphinxes, which were often helmeted, wore polo headdresses, and had lock-like hair (Tsiafakis 2003, 79). Although the winged sphinx with the head of a human female was the most common form in ancient Greece, variations also existed, such as wingless and bearded varieties\(^9\). The sphinx, unlike the siren, a similar hybrid creature with the body of a bird and a human female head, is rarely shown with human arms. This serves a practical purpose, as the sphinx had no use for arms, since, unlike the sirens, they did not play instruments and could easily carry off youths with their front paws. When they are shown with arms, it is experimental in nature, or done to mimic the form of the siren (Athens, Nat. Mus. A784)\(^10\). Such experimentation and manipulation is important, as it illustrates how the Greeks were able to think abstractly about form and function.

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\(^7\) For more on the sphinx during the 7th-5th century BCE, see Tsiafakis 2003, 79.

\(^8\) Payne 1933, pl. 17.

\(^9\) LIMC 8, 1158-60, nos. 123-54, pls. 801-4, s.v. “Sphinx.”

\(^10\) Regarding arms on the sphinx, see Tsiafakis 2003, 78-79.
The Greeks also made an important change to the sphinx’s behavior. While the Egyptian sphinx is immobile and reclining, the Greek sphinx, in contrast, can be seen in many poses. Like the sphinx in Phoenician art (Lloyd 1961, p. 213 pl. 172), the Greek sphinx is able to get up and walk around. It can not only stand (Louvre CA 2985) or sit on its haunches (BMFA 98.916), but also lie down (Boardman 1998, p. 207 pl. 417), or raise a paw (Francois Vase). Occasionally, the sphinx is seen in two different poses on the same vessel (Met. 1997.36). These animate qualities lay the foundation for the Theban sphinx which would later play an important role in Greek mythology.

The sphinx clearly took on a variety of poses in the Greek world, and it was equally dynamic in its stylistic features. The hairstyle ranges from short to long and from straight to curly. Faces are frequently shown in profile, occasionally with the head looking backwards (Louvre F43, Tampa 86.13). The forward facing sphinx is uncommon, but not unknown, as illustrated on the Chigi Vase; this vase is also unique in that it shows a single headed sphinx with two bodies, a characteristic that can be traced to the Near East (Akurgal 1968, 96). A similar arrangement can be observed on a Corinthian jug (London 1860.2-1.18), in which two bird panthers share a forward facing head, suggesting that the Greeks were experimenting with new varieties of hybrid creatures.

Sphinxes are frequently depicted amongst other animals, both hybrid and natural (Louvre E874), attesting to their use as a decorative element. It is very common for sphinxes to be shown in pairs, often facing each other and maintaining symmetrical poses, an arrangement which can also be observed on relief vessels (Biers 1996, p. 150 pl. 6.23). A notable example of the paired sphinx is the Francois vase, which depicts two sphinxes facing each other, each raising a paw towards a decorative element. It is interesting to note that the reverse side of the vase shows two
griffins in the exact same pose. This is noteworthy not only for its aesthetic qualities, but also because it provides insight into the roles of hybrid creatures in the Greek world; it is clear that during this period the sphinx and griffin had similar functions and were closely associated. The same can be said for centaurs (Wurzburg L778) and sirens (BMFA 98.916), with which the sphinx also appears. Often exhibiting similar poses and arranged in similar patterns, at times they can also be seen standing alone, illustrating their significance in Greek iconography (Copenhagen NM1630, BMFA 10.198).

The wings often differ between sphinxes on pottery as well. Most often they are shown in profile, with only one wing being visible, but occasionally the wings are spread (BMFA 98.916, 1971.343). This awkward perspective may have been entirely experimental, but it is important in the sense that it brings movement to the sphinx, illustrating the Greeks tendency to reinvent their images. The feathers and contours of the wings are frequently shown with lines, but in early examples other decorative elements, such as circles, are used (Louvre CA2985). Hatch marks, a distinguishing hallmark of Phoenician art (Akurgal 1968, 154) and employed in their depiction of sphinxes (Akurgal 1968, p. 144 pl. 36a), can be observed on very early Cretan sphinxes (Boardman 2001, p. 20 pl. 12.1), and much later Greek vessels as well (Tubingen D48). The comparison of these three representations of the sphinx not only emphasizes the endurance of the motif, but also the way in which stylistic differences between regions were transmitted across many thousands of years.

The gender of the sphinx is most often thought of as female, but it was occasionally depicted as male (Padgett 2003, p. 277 cat. 69), a change that did not occur until the 6th century BCE (Tsiafakis 2003, 80). In the Near East, the Egyptian sphinx was strictly male, but the sphinx of the Levant was female (Karageorghis 1990). The existence of both male and female
sphinxes in the Near East may have contributed to variations in the gender of the Greek sphinx, and the fact that the Greeks learned of the sphinx from the Levant may explain why the female gender dominated. As in Egyptian art, the human features of the sphinx are sometimes painted white, emphasizing its female gender (CMA 1974.10). This is significant as it illustrates the Greeks’ ability to combine multiple Near Eastern influences.

The sphinx did not take on a narrative role in the Greek world until the 7th century BCE, where it can be observed amongst human figures (Amyx 1988, 661). Its narrative role would soon take a more sinister turn in the 6th century BCE where it became the Theban monster and tomb guardian11, and it is during this time that the sphinx can be observed carrying off youths (Malibu 85.AE.377). This violent nature of the sphinx would be maintained through the Archaic period, after which it began to decline (Tsiafakis 2003, 79).

The role of the sphinx in the Oedipus myth deserves special consideration as it was frequently depicted on vase painting. In the myth, the sphinx challenges Thebans with a riddle and, after they are unable to solve it, captures and eats them. Eventually, the riddle was answered by Oedipus and, devastated at having been outsmarted, the sphinx committed suicide. Here the Oedipus myth reveals an intelligent and cunning creature, consciously planning to puzzle and then devour human beings. The intelligence and cleverness of the sphinx can be attributed to its human quality; a human head provides the sphinx with not only a brain, but also speech, one of the distinguishing features of mankind. Through manipulation of human speech and thought, the sphinx is able to have its way with the Theban people. The Oedipus sphinx was a very popular mythological scene, and in vase painting it is commonly seen sitting on a column looking down

11 For more on the sphinx’s narrative role, see Tsiafakis 2003, p. 79-80.
at Oedipus or other individuals. Although numerous depictions illustrate the popularity of this arrangement, it is important to note that variations between them still exist. For example, the sphinx can be seen wearing a crown (Vatican Mus.Greg.Etr. 16541), a headband (BMFA 06.2447), or even nothing at all (Munich SL474) on its head. The attitude of the sphinx also appears to be conveyed differently between these examples; on one vessel it seems to be in a confident and somewhat confrontational stance (BMFA 06.2447), but is also seen hunched over, seemingly ready to strike (Louvre G417). It is clear that in this context the sphinx is no longer a passive, benign creature, but an active beast motivated to outsmart its opponent.

Sphinxes were not only a common motif on Greek pottery, but were also observed in other forms of media. The sphinx was used in relief sculpture, one example of which depicts the sphinx face to face with a griffin (Harvard 1980.2). They are incorporated into bronze figurines (Baltimore 54.770), grave stele (Met. 11.185a–d, f, g, x), and architectural elements (Louvre CA1793). Grave steles are of particular importance, as they illustrate the sphinx taking on an active role of guardianship. Although this trend was short lived, it highlights the fact that the sphinx was incorporated into funerary contexts. The sphinx’s association with death is evident in its depiction on funerary vessels (Louvre CA2985). It is also depicted as flanking battle scenes (Munich 2243), and it has been suggested that in this context it represents a transition to the underworld (Tsiafakis 2003, 81).

Outside of the mythological framework, the sphinx was depicted on shields (Malibu 96.AE.1) and armor (Hampe 1981, p. 126 pl. 196), an important detail which suggests the sphinx had an apotropaic role. On pottery, there is a sphinx on the helmet of Athena (London E65), and it is said to have decorated the helmet of Athena’s cult statue in the 5th century BCE (Tsiafakis 2003, 81).

See, for example Vatican, Mus.Greg.Etr. 16541, BMFA.1971.343, BMFA 06.2447, Louvre G417, and Munich SL474.
Furthermore, a stemmed dish from the 6th century BCE (Met. 65.11.14) pairs the sphinx with the Greek goddess Iris (Met. 65.11.14), while an olpe from the same time period depicts two large sphinxes on either side of Hermes (London 1867,0508.1010). The sphinx is also linked with deities through its function as a votive, a characteristic illustrated through such examples as the Naxian sphinx. These associations should not be overlooked, as they indicate the sphinx had clearly achieved a level of importance.

In the Near East, the sphinx is commonly seen on architectural elements such as gates and relief sculpture, suggesting a more symbolic rather than decorative role. Symbolism in one culture may not translate into the same values elsewhere, so it stands to reason that the Greeks would first incorporate the sphinx as a decorative element. As it became more integrated into their culture, its roles would change accordingly to reflect Greek values and trends.

By the time the sphinx reached the Greek world, it had been influenced by an amalgam of Near Eastern cultures, such as the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Hittites. While the origins of the sphinx should not be ignored, it is important to note that each one of these cultures adopted the sphinx into their own cultural framework, and accordingly created several different varieties. A look at the similarities and differences between them reveals a complex web of cultural contact, a web in which the Greeks were certainly entangled. Although the Greek sphinx reflects many of these early influences, it was by no means passively copied. It can be seen in decorative, narrative, funerary, and mythological contexts, attesting to the innovation of Greek artists, and creating a new variety of sphinx that is certainly strong enough to stand on its own.

13 For more on this vessel, see Hemingway 2003, 280.
14 The sphinx’s large size in comparison to the god Hermes suggests a monumental level of significance, as gods were usually depicted as the largest figures.
15 See Akurgal 1968, p. 133 pl. 31, p. 58 pl. 15b.
16 Mythology, for example, was extremely popular in the Greek world, and the sphinx is absorbed into this framework accordingly.
Siren

Long before the sirens lured sailors to their death with their irresistible music, they were pervasive in Greek iconography. The siren, like many other hybrid creatures, was multi-faceted and would undergo several transformations, both stylistically and otherwise. The many roles it would fulfill in Greek culture are a clear departure from the siren’s beginnings in Egypt, which highlights the innovation of Greek artists. Although it is similar to both the sphinx and griffin, an examination of the siren on Greek pottery will reveal a creature that was nonetheless complex and distinct.

The siren makes its initial appearance in Greek art during the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, serving both as a bronze attachment and portrayed on vases alongside the sphinx and griffin. The *ba-birds* of Egypt were the source of the siren image, the body of a bird with a human head. In contrast to the sphinx and griffin, the siren is absent in Mycenaean and Minoan culture17. This is important because it indicates the Greeks were constantly seeking new imagery directly from Near Eastern sources.

An examination of the siren’s physical form is integral to understanding its role in Greek culture. By the 7th century BCE, the siren is often depicted with arms, similar to those on Egyptian *ba-birds* (Tsiafakis 2003, 75), enabling them to hold instruments, objects, and even to carry the dead (Tsiafakis 2003, 78). The siren can also be seen with a spiral shaped lock of “hair” on the top of its head (BMFA 03.784), a characteristic that can be traced to the Near East (see below). The two bird legs of the siren limit the number of poses it is able to make, yet slight variations still exist in its physical appearance. In vase painting, the siren is often seen looking forward (Boardman 2001, p. 45 pl. 53), but is occasionally shown looking backwards (Hampe 1981, p. 168, pl. 257). In early depictions, the hair is often long, but the sirens associated with

17 On the origin of the siren, see Tsiafakis 2003, 74.
myth have often hair which is shorter or pulled into a bun (Berlin 4532). Occasionally, variations of sirens can be seen on the same vessel. On the Sophilos Dinos, for example, multiple sirens are depicted in a variety of positions and exhibit stylistic differences; they appear not only in pairs, but also individually and facing a decorative element. These sirens, while inherently similar in nature, exhibit slight differences in hairstyle and facial structure.\(^\text{18}\)

Much like the sphinx and griffin, the wings of the siren are usually shown in profile, but they are occasionally depicted as spread (Athens 12076+16184). This can be observed simultaneously on one vessel (Hampe 1981, p. 168, pl. 257), suggesting that it was not a time dependent trend, but subject to the artist’s discretion. It also further emphasizes the fact that the siren and other hybrid creatures were not stiff, static images, but instead very dynamic creatures that were capable of assuming a variety of positions. The later addition of arms also enables the siren to interact with its environment in new ways. An “eye-siren,” for example, can be observed leaning and reaching over (BMFA 10.651).

The Greek siren is often thought of as female, but the gender was not always consistent. The Egyptian *ba-birds* appeared as both male and female, something that may have influenced Greek artists (Tsiafakis 2003, 75). Just like the sphinx, a beard indicated a male siren (Munich 419, Malibu 88.AE.105). When a siren is female, however, the flesh is often given a white color (Moscow, Pushkin 1b 1364), a custom dating back to Minoan times. It is clear that the Greeks learned of this practice directly from Near Eastern sources, as the siren was absent in Minoan and Mycenaean cultures. Not only does this provide further evidence of Near Eastern influences, but it also emphasizes the feminine quality of the siren. However, gender is not always clearly indicated. For example, a beardless siren would suggest a female, but beardless sirens are often depicted without white flesh. On the Sophilos Dinos, for example, the siren is beardless with

\(^{18}\) A few sirens appear to be wearing a sort of headdress, for example, while others have distinctive locks of hair.
reddish flesh, even though female human figures are depicted in white. This leads to ambiguity regarding the gender, and suggests that the rules of gender depiction were not strict, especially when it came to the portrayal of hybrid creatures.

As is the case with the sphinx and griffin, the siren fulfilled a variety of roles in Greek art and culture, from decorative to mythological. Early on, it was especially popular as a decorative element, and is frequently observed in animal friezes alongside both natural and hybrid animals (BMFA 98.916). While the later, mythical sirens are described as a group of two (Hom. *Od.* 12.39ff) or three (Lyc., Alex. 712ff), sirens are also depicted in groups outside of a mythological framework. In a decorative context, for example, more than one siren is frequently observed on the same vessel (London 1971.11-1.1). However, as is the case with many trends in Greek culture, there are exceptions. A single siren can be observed taking up a side panel on several vessels with both decorative and mythological subject matter. On an Early Corinthian aryballos, a single siren seems to dominate the entire vessel, alongside a type of bird (Karageorghis 1990). The widely spread wings and the inclusion of a bird suggest that the emphasis was here on the siren’s avian quality. An Attic olpe demonstrates that the siren was also capable of standing on its own (BMFA 01.8051), where it is the only image on the entire vessel. Single sirens can be observed alongside mythological subject matter, and on one example (BMFA 99.540) its arms, breasts, and human torso suggest it was more than a decorative creature. This is noteworthy as it is a departure from the traditional depiction of mythological sirens in groups.

In addition to highlighting the significance and popularity of the siren, singular sirens on Greek pottery can also provide insight into the roles of the siren. On the Burgon amphora, for example, which is inscribed with the words “I am one of the prizes from Athens,” a single siren

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19 Similar imagery can be observed on an Early Corinthian alabastron (BMFA 91.211).
is pictured on the neck. This is significant because the Burgon amphora is an example of a vessel awarded to victorious athletes in the Panatheniac games. Athena is also featured on the vessel, and it is the association with such a major event and mythological figure that suggests the siren has stepped beyond its previously decorative role.

In addition to being a popular subject on Greek pottery, the siren, like the griffin (see below), frequently appears in three dimensional forms, where it lends itself to bronze attachments, engraved gems, and even siren shaped vessels (BMFA 65.566, Princeton y1989-31). Although imitations of an Oriental form, siren-like bronze attachments can even be seen in conjunction with bronze griffin protomes (Hampe 1981, p. 106 pl. 160-163). These types of attachments would eventually yield to the more elegant siren handles, such as those used on hydria (CMA_.1986.23). The siren’s appearance on hydria, vessels used in tombs and funerary rituals, emphasizes its association with the afterlife. It has been suggested that the siren’s inclusion in funerary contexts may derive from their relation to Acheloos and their connection with Persephone, both mythological figures associated with the underworld. The siren can also be observed as an element on grave stele, a role it began to assume in the 4th century BCE (Childs 2003, 64).

In addition to fulfilling roles in both decorative and funerary contexts, the siren also played an important role in Greek mythology. The mythical sirens were creatures that drew sailors in with their beautiful and irresistible music. Upon hearing this song, the sailors were never to return again. These sirens are most famous for their association with the story of Odysseus, who, by tying himself to the mast of his ship, was able to hear the song and still escape (Hom., Od. 12. 200 ff). Devastated that one was able to resist their song, it is said that the

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20 On the Burgon amphora and the Panatheniac games, see Boardman 2001, 58.
21 For more on the Oriental origin of bronze protomes, see Hampe 1981, 113.
22 On the funerary context of the siren, see Barr-Sharrar 2003, 303.
sirens then committed suicide (Lyc. Alex. 712-13)\textsuperscript{23}. With this in mind, a multitude of similarities between the sphinx and siren come to light. For example, both creatures tantalized human beings to their ultimate death, and both committed suicide after being outsmarted by major mythological figures (see above). However, while the sphinx and Oedipus was a very popular theme in Greek vase painting, the mythical sirens were far less so. While rare, there are a few examples, and Corinth appears to have been the first to introduce the mythical siren into Greek artwork. In these depictions, the sirens are usually seen in groups of two are three, perched on cliffs, while overlooking the ship of Odysseus (BMFA 01.8100). There are, however, departures from this pattern (Berlin 4532)\textsuperscript{24}.

As the siren’s role and significance changed over time, so too did the physical characteristics, particularly the human traits. The human head, while at first the only human element, eventually expands to include an entire human torso; breasts are even added occasionally, not only emphasizing the human side of the siren, but also underscoring its feminine quality. After the 5\textsuperscript{th} century BCE, emphasis on the human quality of the siren increases, to a point where the siren becomes almost entirely human (Tsiafakis 2003, 75). These types of changes are appear on both mythological (Berlin 4532) and decorative sirens (Malibu 86.AE.680). The trend can be also be observed on grave markers (BMFA 1973.169) and even jewelry (Met. 08.258.49), where the human form nearly dominates the siren’s figure.

On Greek pottery, hybrid creatures are frequently observed in pairs, facing each other or framing a central, decorative element. In one example, in which two sirens are shown framing a sphinx (BMFA 98.916), the siren and sphinx appear to be present on the clothing of Andromache, Herakles’ opponent; perhaps it is their feminine quality that warrants their

\textsuperscript{23} On the suicide of the sirens, see London E440, the earliest known depiction on pottery (Tsiafakis 2003, 77). In contrast, there is no known depiction of the sphinx’s suicide (Tsiafakis 2003, 82).
\textsuperscript{24} For more on this trend, see Tsiafakis 2003, 75.
inclusion\textsuperscript{25}. Conversely, on an Attic lekane by the Polos Painter (Louvre CA 3059), and an oinochoe by the Vatican painter (BMFA 64.14), two sphinxes are observed flanking a siren. The depiction of sphinx and siren together highlights their similarities in both form and function, at least during this period.

On a Corinthian kotyle by the Samos Painter, two sirens are depicted flanking two warriors in combat (BMFA 95.14). They are slightly larger than the human figures, indicating that their inclusion is significant. This parallels a Near Eastern practice of portraying rulers as being the largest figures, and suggests that in this context the siren served a semi-divine role. Given the siren’s association with the afterlife, it is possible that the sirens here function as guardians to the underworld, much like the sphinx which is often seen flanking battle scenes (see above).

As illustrated above, the siren was a complex hybrid creature that played an important role in Greek art and culture. The Greeks adapted the form of the Egyptian \textit{ba-birds} into an entirely new character that would assume roles in decorative, funerary, and mythological contexts. Considering that siren-like creatures were not used by the Mycenaens and Minoans, it is clear that the Greeks were actively seeking inspiration from the Near East after the Dark Ages, an important observation regarding interaction between ancient cultures. The roles of the siren parallel with other hybrid creatures, particularly the sphinx and griffin. The similarities between the sphinx and siren are quite striking, and extend beyond physical appearances. Both creatures, although quite distinct from one another, had similar roles within Greek culture and fulfilled similar roles in mythology. Considering the role of the siren in conjunction with other hybrid creatures reiterates the fact that the Greeks were not only able to successfully seek out and

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{25} Similar clothing patterns appear on several female figures on the Sophilos Dinos, several of which are deities.
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implement Near Eastern imagery, but they were also able to translate these images into a variety of new, complex and dynamic creatures.

**Griffin**

Although the griffin is not as widely recognized as the sphinx, it still played a significant role in both ancient Near Eastern and Greek culture. Although the griffin’s leonine body and bird-like features echo both the sphinx and siren, it is a distinct creature. Its beginnings in the Near East pave the way for a creature that would assume roles in both decorative and narrative context in the Greek world, roles which are quite different from that of the Near East. From vase painting to bronze protomes, the abundance of the griffin in Greek art illustrates its popularity in Greek iconography. Many of the stylistic features of the Greek griffin can be traced to their Near Eastern origins, but, as I shall argue below, it is the unique combination of these characteristics that makes the Greek griffin a new, distinctive creature with a wealth of complexities.

Prior to examining the physical characteristics of the griffin and its role in the Greek world, we must go back to the griffin’s Near Eastern roots where it can be seen in two distinct forms. There is the griffin-man, which consists of a winged human body with the head of a bird (Akurgal 1968 p. 58 pl. 15a), and a griffin-lion with the winged body of a lion (Padgett 2003 p. 115 cat. 3). Although parallels can be made between their appearances, the roles of these two creatures appear to vary. The griffin-lion, for example, is often depicted as fighting with male gods or heroes in Phoenician art\textsuperscript{26}, suggesting a violent disposition. This is not always the case, however, as is illustrated by other Near Eastern griffin-lions (Met. 64.37.9). In Near Eastern cultures, hybrid creatures frequently serve as genies, repelling evil and cultivating good (Childs 2003, 50). When it comes to this apotropaic role, the griffin-man appears to dominate. Statuettes of the griffin-man, among other figures, were frequently deposited near doorways of buildings

\textsuperscript{26} For a discussion on Near Eastern composite genies, see Childs 2003 p. 59.
such as temples and palaces. Deemed the “Seven Sages,” these types of figures served to protect a person or establishment (Childs 2003, 54).

While two main types of griffins existed in the ancient Near East, it must be noted that there were other hybrids comprised of both lion and bird elements. Two notable examples are the lion-demon, which combined human, lion, bird and donkey features (London WA118912), and the lion-dragon, which combined both bird and lion (Lloyd 1961 p. 246 pl. 205). While each of these creatures is distinct, they illustrate the popularity of not only hybrid creatures, but also leonine and avian elements. Such these lion hybrids may have had an influence on the image of the griffin in Greece, where the leonine griffin dominated. The griffin was a popular motif during the Bronze Age, and it was reintroduced into the Greek world during the 8th and 7th centuries BCE as a bronze protome on imported Near Eastern cauldrons. Debate exists over whether or not the Greeks created the original griffin protome, but nonetheless the griffin becomes fully integrated into their culture and can be observed in a variety of contexts.

The Greek griffin was commonly depicted as a winged lion with the head of a bird, and in contrast to the sphinx and siren, lacked a human element. The absence of a human quality suggests the griffin served as a beast of strength and power. This is intentional, given that the Greeks were exposed to Near Eastern griffin and griffin-like creatures that included a human element. The human quality of the sphinx and siren provided these hybrid creatures with intelligence and reason (see above). As with many other motifs in the Greek world, the griffin varied in its physical appearance. The mouth, for example, is almost always open with a lolling tongue, but occasionally the mouths are closed (BMFA 63.420), a feature which can be attributed to the Neo-Hittite griffin (Akurgal 1968, 112). Additionally, the griffin is sometimes

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27 For more on these creatures, see Childs 2003 p. 50-51.
28 On the origin of the bronze griffin protome, see Childs 2003, 59-60.
shown with teeth, even though it possesses a beak (Berlin 1961.7). These details may be experimental, but they also suggest a desire to portray a more threatening appearance, a message further conveyed in the open jaw. The variance in these features may be explained by the popularity of other lion and bird hybrids in the Near Eastern world to which the Greeks were exposed.

Several characteristics of the Greek griffin can be traced to their Near Eastern origins. The long ears present in many examples (London 1860.2-1.30, Francois Vase) are reminiscent of the long donkey ears of the Near Eastern lion-demon. While the griffins on imported bronze cauldrons do not have these excessively long ears (Childs 2003 p. 59, fig. 12), Greek griffin protomes often do (Chicago 1994.38.1-2). What makes this important is the fact that the Greeks were able to recombine the Near Eastern elements to which they were exposed, creating an entirely new and distinct form. Near Eastern griffins, both griffin-man and griffin-lion varieties, often have a bit of “hair” that extends from the head down the back of the neck (Akurgal 1968 p. 183 fig. 117). One departure from this trend is the Assyrian griffin, which possesses more of a crest instead. The Greek griffin varies in this respect, sometimes shown with a crest (Louvre G530), sometimes with the locks of hair (Francois Vase), and sometimes with nothing at all (BMFA 63.420). The protrusion on the heads of many Greek griffins, particularly popular on bronze protomes (London GR 1870.3-15.16), can be traced to Aramaean artists, along with the open jaw and lolling tongue (Akurgal 1968, 62).

Early on, the griffin assumes a decorative role in Greek culture, similar to the sphinx, siren, and other composite creatures. It is seen in a variety of mediums, such as bronze plaques (Boardman 1967, p. 132 pl. 80), necks of vases (London A547), and even jewelry (Hampe 1981, p. 210, pl. 324). The variety of mediums used suggests the griffin’s versatility and popularity as a

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29 Stearns 1961, pls. 60-64, 70, 75-81.
decorative element, and it appears to be more popular in three-dimensional form than the sphinx or siren. This initial decorative trend is in stark contrast to the Near Eastern griffins, which were usually not employed as decorative motifs.

As mentioned previously, there is debate as to who originally created the griffin protome. Greek artists, however, eventually created a griffin protome which was distinctly their own. Other protomes, such as the lions on imported cauldrons (Hampe 1981, p. 106 pl. 160,) and centaur-like creatures (Hampe 1981, p. 108 pl. 166), can also appear alongside the griffin protomes. The griffin would eventually be used three dimensionally on pottery; one example of this shows the griffin on a vessel depicting a sphinx (Heraklion, Afrati L18a). The griffin’s frequent appearance among other hybrid creatures reiterates the fact that all composite creatures once served similar roles. On vase painting, the griffin, like the sphinx, is often depicted in pairs, many flanking a decorative element (Berlin 1961.7). It also frequently appears in animal friezes, just like the sphinx and siren. While the griffin occasionally appears on the same vessel as other hybrids, such as the sphinx on the Francois Vase, it is more commonly seen in friezes with natural creatures (BMFA 03.90). Considering that the Greek griffin lacks a human element (see above), this association with other savage beasts is appropriate. In a decorative context, it is usually shown on its haunches or on all fours, although occasionally it is depicted as lying down (Alexandria 17047, 17145). The variety of poses exhibited by the griffin illustrate that even as a decorative figure, it was still a very dynamic and versatile beast.

The Greek griffin usually appears rather vicious, even in less violent circumstances, such as a griffin nursing its young (Hampe 1981, p. 100, pl. 170). Portraying the griffin with its young is certainly a departure from Near Eastern practices, and dates back to the Mycenaean age (Boardman 1967, p. 47 pl. 46). This violent disposition appears to continue into the 5th century
BCE, when Herodotus speaks of gold guarding griffins next to the land of the Hyperboreans (Hdt. 4.13.1). It is clear that at this point in Greek history, the griffin has taken on an active role. This is further reflected in vase painting, where griffins and Arimaspians become a popular subject. The Arimaspians, a tribe of one-eyed men, lived near the mountains in northern Skythia, and were constantly at odds with the gold guarding griffins (Hdt. 4.27.1). These stories have their roots in the area of the Black Sea, and these types of vessels were often exported (Boardman 2001, 237). In this context, the griffin is extremely dynamic, seen lunging towards its opponent (Louvre G530) with a long body and outstretched wings (Louvre G529). Not only do these stories of the Black Sea bring us a new variety of griffin, but they also serve to illustrate the frequent and complex cultural interactions that took place in the ancient world. Such interactions are also evident in the Xenophantos lekythos, where griffins, among other creatures, are shown fighting with human figures. While it has been suggested that these figures are Persians, several different interpretations exist. Nonetheless, this elaborate vessel reflects the Greeks’ understanding of Near Eastern culture through the depiction of certain clothing and hunting methods. It also provides insight into the griffin itself, introducing new stylistic features such as a more human-like face and curved horns. The association of the griffin with other wild game indicates that in this case it is not functioning as a gold-guardian. This is important because it portrays the violent nature of the griffin outside of mythological contexts and emphasizes its savage nature. It is significant that the Greeks were able to transform the decorative griffin into an entirely new creature with a distinct set of roles. In the narrative context, the griffin transports deities such as Apollo (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 202) and Dionysus (Louvre NMB 1036), usually by pulling a chariot. This dates back to the Minoan age, where it is seen on the Agia Triada sarcophagus. Although not Near Eastern representations, they illustrate the

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30 For an in-depth analysis of the imagery of this vessel, see Franks, 2009.
endurance of the imagery and the fact that the Greeks were able to integrate this concept into their own mythological framework.

The gold guarding and chariot pulling griffins are quite the departure from the passive, decorative griffins observed several centuries before. It is important to note that the Greeks were aware of the griffin’s association with deities, but this is not reflected in their art until much later, when mythological scenes became popular. Not only is this a great example of how changing artistic trends reflect Greek culture, but it also suggests that the Greeks may have better understood the context of the images to which they were exposed. Rather than blindly copying these images, they instead adapted them to fit with their own values.

Given the multitude of stylistic similarities between Greek griffins and those of the Near East, it is tempting to dismiss the Greek griffin as merely a reflection of its Near Eastern counterpart. Upon closer inspection, however, we realize that the Greek griffin is comprised of stylistic influences from several different cultures. Closed mouths, for example, are traced back to Neo-Hittite culture, while in contrast the lolling tongue is attributed to Aramaean artists. Combining these elements into an entirely new variety of griffin soundly demonstrates the skill and innovation of the Greeks. While they may or may not have understood the context of the images they were borrowing, they by no means mimicked these roles, but instead adapted them to fit within their own cultural framework. Accordingly, the griffin in Greek art can be observed first in decorative and then narrative contexts, where it is frequently associated with deities. The Greek griffin is also observed in a variety of mediums from vase painting to jewelry, making it clear that the Greeks understood how to manipulate and experiment with the griffin in both two and three dimensional form.
The Near Eastern origins of the griffin should not be discounted, for they lay the foundation for the griffin in the Greek world. Understandably, the Greeks found inspiration in their exposure to Near Eastern motifs, and the griffin is no exception. It appears to have taken less of an apotropaic role in the Greek world, a departure from its prime function in the Near East. Instead the Greek griffin is a beast that parades in animal friezes, serves as ornamentation on cauldrons and jewelry, before finally becoming a mythical beast that guards gold and pulls chariots of the deities. The ability of the Greeks to combine stylistic features and adjust the roles of the griffin with their changing culture is worthy of merit. With this in mind, we should not only recognize the influences of the Near East, but also commend the Greeks for creating a new, dynamic creature all their own.

Conclusion

The sphinx, siren, and griffin are composite creatures that not only illustrate the popularity of hybrids in Greek iconography, but also the way the Greeks were able to adapt Near Eastern imagery. While similarities to Near Eastern creatures are certainly evident, these hybrids are not direct reflections of their foreign counterparts. They are instead complex creatures to which the Greeks assigned new roles and placed in a variety of contexts. A wealth of similarities and key differences can be found between the three, which, in addition to their popularity, highlights the significance of hybrids in the Greek Renaissance and the trends of Greek culture.

Near Eastern imagery greatly influenced both the Minoans and Mycenaeans, but hybrid creatures and other motifs were not re-introduced into the Greek world until after the Dark Ages in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. While all three creatures are Near Eastern in origin, only the sphinx and griffin were present in Minoan and Mycenaean art, while the siren was absent in
these cultures. It is during the renewed contact of the Greek Renaissance that the Greeks learned of hybrids directly from Near Eastern sources.

In regards to physical appearance, all three creatures incorporate an avian element which is primarily expressed in the form of wings. The siren possesses the body of a bird and the wings are a natural part of this formation. The sphinx and griffin, however, have wings added to otherwise mammalian bodies. This modification suggests that the inclusion of wings is significant, and is attested by the fact that the Greeks chose not to adapt the wingless sphinx that existed in many Near Eastern cultures. Both the sphinx and griffin have the body of a lion which suggests they are beasts of strength and power. The sphinx and siren typically have female human heads, although they are both occasionally depicted as male. This human element lends them speech and intelligence, and it is the combination of these qualities which allows them to outsmart human beings. The griffin, however, lacks this human quality and consequently is a much more savage creature found in primarily violent contexts. The fact that human-griffins existed in Near Eastern cultures suggests that the Greeks may not have been aware of this modification, as they were fond of human-animal hybrids.\(^{31}\)

When these creatures became popular in Greek iconography, each of them was frequently depicted in animal friezes where they served as decorative elements. While the sphinx and siren were shown alongside both hybrid and natural creatures, the griffin more often appeared with other wild beasts, emphasizing its savage nature. However, these creatures, particularly the sphinx and siren, were fully capable of standing on their own. As time progressed each would take on more active roles and become incorporated into narrative contexts.

The sphinx and siren were frequently depicted alongside female deities, and were even featured on the clothing of goddesses and heroines such as Andromache. Conversely, the griffin

\(^{31}\) This is evidenced by other creatures such as the Centaur and Minotaur.
frequently pulled chariots of the gods, again assuming a role traditionally fulfilled by natural beasts. Regardless of any differences, however, it is significant that all three of these creatures were found in such contexts. The deities were extremely important figures in Greek culture, and for the sphinx, siren, and griffin to earn a spot alongside of them indicates they were more than just decorative images.

The role of the sphinx and siren extended further into mythology, where they both played active roles in important myths. It is in this context that we find striking similarities between these two creatures. The sphinx is best known as the sphinx of the Oedipus myth, where it taunted the Thebans with its seemingly impossible riddle. If a person was unable to solve the riddle, they were devoured. Conversely, the siren became famous in the story of Odysseus, where it sang and played music that no sailor was able to resist. Following the music would lead the sailors to their ultimate death. In both myths, the creatures manipulate human speech in order to outsmart human beings before devouring them. However, the creatures were both eventually outsmarted by major figures. Oedipus solved the sphinx’s riddle, while Odysseus found a way to survive and still hear the sirens’ music. In both of these myths, the creatures then committed suicide. The mythical sphinx is more popular on pottery than the mythical siren, but in both cases the creatures are depicted perched above their opponents. The Oedipus sphinx is shown sitting on a column, while the sirens of Odysseus sit on cliffs. These confrontational poses suggest that both creatures were a step above mankind. Although both creatures commit suicide in myth, on pottery there is no extant depiction of the sphinx’s suicide. Another important difference is the fact that the sphinx works individually, while the sirens work in groups of two or three, suggesting that the sphinx was more iconic.
The griffin also assumed an active role, however, and was central to tales of the Arimasps where it was known as a gold guardian. This was an extremely popular subject on Greek pottery, and emphasizes the griffin’s savage and violent nature. Although the sphinx and siren are both creatures of intelligence and reason, they ultimately yield to savagery when they devour human beings. Although the griffin did not play a role in mythology like the sphinx and siren, it is similar to these creatures in the sense that it dynamically interacted with human beings, and echoes the siren in that it works in groups rather than individually. The griffin’s role in ethnography placed it in the present, rather than in the ancient mythological past like the sphinx and siren.

An additional similarity is found between the sphinx and siren, however, as they were both integrated into funerary contexts, appearing on funerary vessels and grave stele. They served an apotropaic function, a feature of the sphinx further evidenced by its appearance on shields and armor. The apparent absence of the griffin in such circumstances is perhaps due to its more feral nature and the fact that it existed in contemporary time. Outside of pottery, the sphinx, siren, and griffin were popular motifs and were depicted in other mediums from bronze to gold jewelry. Although the griffin was the most popular, all three appeared in three dimensional forms. The fact that the Greeks chose to expand these creatures beyond the two dimensional scenes of pottery not only highlights their popularity and significance, but also emphasizes the skill of Greek artists.

The interaction between ancient Greece and the Near East is irrefutable, and there is no question that the Greeks found a wealth of inspiration in Near Eastern imagery. However, as illustrated above, the Greeks did not blindly copy these images from their Near Eastern sources. John Boardman cautions against over-crediting the Near East for their influence on Greek art,
asserting that “this was no matter of an immature art being overwhelmed by the sophistication of the east […]” As I have illustrated above, the Greeks were selective about the hybrid creatures they did adapt, and, once they had been absorbed into Greek art, frequently experimented with these images. These creatures began to take on new roles and were incorporated into important aspects of Greek culture such as mythological and funerary contexts. While there are similarities between the Greek sphinxes, sirens, griffins and their Near Eastern counterparts, the Greeks combined and modified many Near Eastern influences to create new and distinct creatures. The product is an exclusively Greek hybrid which speaks volumes of Greek skill and innovation.

32 Boardman 1967, 74
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