

Humans Biting Other Humans in Ancient Greek Mythology as Depicted in Five Works of Art

• **Christos Stavrianos (1), Nikolaos Petalotis (2), Panagiota Stavrianou (3),
Despina Stavrianou (4) Panagiotis Tsakmalis (5) •**

1 - Professor, Department of Endodontology (Forensic Dentistry), Aristotle University, School of Dentistry, Thessaloniki, Greece

2 - Dentist, Health Center of Sidirokastro

3 - Contemporary English teacher, database coordinator

4 - Nutritionist

5 - Dentist, Health Center of Rodopolis, Greece

Address for correspondence:

Christos Stavrianos

Aristotle University, School of Dentistry

Department of Endodontology (Forensic Dentistry)

Thessaloniki, Greece

E-mail: stavrian@med.auth.gr

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Abstract

The evidence for human beings biting other humans is a relatively common occurrence in forensics. In contrast, it is a very rare subject in art. Ancient Greek history is s very rich in myths. In some of them a biting action takes place, either mentioned clearly in a literary source or as an invention of the artist.

The aim of this study is to discuss five works of art, three ancient sculptures and two paintings, where this action is depicted. They span from the 5th century BCE to the 19th century.

Although these sculptures and paintings are not the only that feature this activity, they are good examples. A thorough research may yield further examples.

Keywords: Human Bite; Greek Mythology; Centauromachy; Cronus

Introduction

The trauma caused on the skin from the contact of the teeth with or without the contribution of the soft oral tissues such as the lips and tongue, is defined as a bite mark. They are usually found in two kinds of cases: crimes and homicides, with and without sexual activity. Bite marks can be found on both victims and assailants. In violent mortal combat situations, the teeth are often used as a weapon.

Indeed, using the teeth to inflict serious injury on an attacker may be the only available defensive method for a victim. Human bites may also be used to deliberately inflict pain and take revenge. The act of biting oneself can also be seen as self punishment or as a sign of great anguish and despair (1,2,3). The frequency of bite injuries at specific bodily locations can vary with the type of crime and sex and age of the victim. Human bites tend to occur on the face with relatively high frequency, second only to that of bites of the upper extremity. These injuries are commonly associated with aggressive behavior, most often involving prominent locations of the face, such as the ears, nose and lips (4). Humans are known to have used their dentition as both tools and weapons since the dawn of time. Humans biting other people are not something uncommon or new in forensics (5). Bite wounds are one of the most frequent human traumas (1,4,6,7).

It is obvious that humans biting other humans is not a very appealing subject to represent in painting or sculpture. Therefore its rarity in Art is anticipated. (8).

Ancient Greek history is very rich in mythology, including stories about wars and fights, Gods and humans. In some of them a biting action takes place, which is either mentioned clearly in a literary source or as an interpretative invention of the artist. The aim of this study is to discuss five works of art, three ancient sculptures and two paintings, where this action is depicted. They span from the 5th century BCE to the 19th century.

Discussion

Tydeus and Melanippus

Tydeus was an ancient Greek mythological hero from Aetolia. He participated in the war against the city of Thebes, later known as 'Seven Against Thebes'. The goddess Athena-Minerva protected him. According to the tragic poet Aeschylus, in the final battle Tydeus fought with Melanippus, a Theban hero and defender of the Protid city gates. Melannipus injures Tydeus in the abdomen, but Tydeus manages to kill Melannipus before he dies. Prior to death, Tydeus asks his friend Amphiaraus to decapitate Melannipus and bring the head to him. Tydeus then fractured the cranial bones and ate the brain of his opponent. The goddess Athena went to Mt. Olympus in order to bring a heavenly drug to cure her favorite Tydeus. On her return watching this horrifying scene, she let him die (9,10,11).

This unusual scene is depicted in a terracotta relief dated to the 5th century BCE (Figure 1). It comes from an ancient Greek temple. Its present location is Villa Giulia in Rome. Two warriors are shown in the inferior part of the relief. On the left dying Tydeus sucks the brain of Melannipus. On the left goddess Athena stays petrified watching the unholy scene.

Centauromachy

In Greek mythology 'centauromachy' is the battle between Centaurs and Lapiths at the wedding feast

of Pirithous, king of the Lapiths, to Hippodamia. A centaur is a composite creature, part human and part horse, with the upper half of a human joined at the waist to a horse's body. According to a variation of a myth Centaurus the ancestor of centaurs and Lapithus, ancestor of Lapiths, were twin brothers. Centaurs were living in Thessaly, in the Magensia region around Mt. Pelion. The Lapiths, who were humans, were also living in Thessaly, in the valley of Peneus river and on Mt. Pelion (12,13,14).

The Centaurs had been invited to the wedding feast, but, unused to wine; they easily lost control of their behavior. When the bride was presented to the guests, the centaur Eurytion attempted to abduct her. His example was followed by the other centaurs, who proceeded to abduct women and boys. After a fierce battle the Lapiths with the help of Theseus, won. The defeated Centaurs were expelled from Thessaly.

Centaumachy can be seen as the internal struggle between civilized and wild behavior, the correct use of the water tempered wine, not drunk to excess. The centaurs have also violated xenia-sacred hospitality. Centaumachy is also a metaphor for the conflict between lower instincts and civilized human behavior, and as a symbol of the great wars between Greeks and the Persian "barbarians". The Centaumachy was depicted at Major Ancient Greek temples like Parthenon, the temple of Apollo Epicurius at Bassae and the Zeus' temple at Olympia.

Centaumachy at the Temple of Zeus at Olympia

The Temple of Zeus at Olympia, Greece, was dedicated to the chief of the gods, Zeus-Jupiter. It was the epitome of the fully-developed classical Greek temple of the Doric order and was built between 472 and 456 BCE. It housed the renowned chryselephantine statue of Zeus, masterpiece of the sculptor Phidias and one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The temple was constructed by the architect Libon, with splendid sculptural decoration. Carved metopes and triglyph friezes, topped by pediments filled with sculptures in the Severe Style (Greek sculptural art between 480-450 BCE) feasted the eyes of the onlookers. The sculptors are unknown and are attributed to the "Olympia Master" and his studio. All the sculptural decoration on the temple was made of Parian marble and today, partially mutilated, it is found in the museum in Olympia and at the Louvre in Paris. The unifying theme of iconography of the temple is the Dike (justice based on custom) as represented by Zeus (15).

The west pediment depicted the Centaumachy. Apollo in divine beauty and calmness stood in the centre, flanked by Peirithoos and Theseus, groups of fighting centaurs and male and female Lapiths. On the right side of the pediment we notice a Lapith and a centaur fighting (Figure 2). The Lapith, a young man grasps the neck of the centaur with his right hand. The centaur trying to free himself from this grasp catches the arm of the Lapith with both his hands and bites him ferociously. The severe pain experienced by the Lapith is expressed by his half opened mouth, the flexure of the periorbital muscles and the wrinkles on his forehead (16, 17).

Centaureomachy at the Temple of Apollo Epicurius Bassae

The temple of Apollo Epicurius is located at Bassae in Peloponnesus, Greece. It was built between 450 and 400 BCE. It was designed by Iktinos the famous architect of Parthenon. It was dedicated to Apollo Epicurius (helper) by the local people of Phigalia as a thanksgiving to Apollo for the delivery from the plague of 429 BCE. Bassae was the first Greek site to be inscribed on the World Heritage List (1986).

One of its special architectural features was a continuous Ionic marble frieze around the interior, showing Greeks in battle with Amazons and the Centaureomachy. The Bassae Frieze is a high relief marble sculpture in 23 panels, 31m long by 0.63m high. From the style of the frieze it belongs to the High Classical period, probably carved between 420 and 400 BCE. The frieze cannot be associated with any sculptor, workshop or school and is supposed to be the work of three anonymous masters. An earlier attribution to the ancient Greek sculptor Paionios is not accepted any more. The frieze was removed in the 19th century by Charles Robert Cockerell and finally ended in the British Museum. Today they marble slabs are treasured in the British Museum's Gallery 16, near the Elgin Marbles (the also stolen Parthenon Marbles). Eight fragments believed to belong to the frieze are in the collection of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (18,19).

Of the 23 slabs of the Ionic frieze 11 depict Greeks fighting centaurs and 12 represent Greeks fighting Amazons. On the marble slab BM 527:2 a centaur fights with a Lapith (Figure 3). With his right hand he grasps the hair of the Lapith and with his left tries to immobilize him. At the same time he bites the Lapith's neck. The Lapith uses his sword to kill the centaur, the flexure of his facial muscles showing the severe pain he feels (20,21,22). A plaster cast of the frieze is found in the Greek War museum in Athens.

Cronus

In Greek mythology, Cronus (Kronos or Saturn) was the leader and the youngest of the first generation of Titans, sons of Gaia (the earth) and Uranus (the Sky). He castrated his father with a sickle, overthrew him and together with his sister Rhea ruled the world. The period in which Cronus ruled was called the Golden Age, when there was no need for rules and laws since immortality was absent.

Cronus learned from Gaia and Uranus that he was destined to be overcome by his own son, just as he had overthrown his father. As a result, although he fathered the gods Demeter- Ceres, Hera- Juno, Hades –Pluto, Hestia-Vesta and Poseidon-Neptune, he devoured them all as soon as they were born. When the sixth child, Zeus-Jupiter was born, Rhea, according to the advice of Gaia handed Cronus a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, also known as the Omphalos stone, which he promptly swallowed, believing that it was his son.

Zeus was secretly grown up in safety and using an emetic given to him by Gaia forced Cronus to disgorge the contents of his stomach in reverse order: first the stone and then his two brothers and

three sisters.

Greeks considered Cronus a cruel and tempestuous force of chaos and disorder. As a result of his association with the Roman God Saturn and with the virtuous Golden Age, Cronus continued to preside as a patron of harvest and later became Chronos, the personification of time in general. Cronus is usually depicted with a sickle or harvesting scythe which was both the weapon he used to castrate and depose Uranus, his father and a symbol of harvest (23).

Cronus as depicted by Peter Paul Rubens

Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577 –1640) was the most famous Flemish Baroque painter and one of the greatest Old Masters of painting. He is well-known for his Counter-Reformation altarpieces, portraits, landscapes, and history paintings of mythological and allegorical subjects. He was a classically educated humanist scholar, art collector and diplomat (24,25).

One of his paintings now in the Prado Museum in Madrid represents Cronus devouring his son Poseidon (Figure 4). It was painted between 1636 and 1637. Cronus is depicted as a half naked old man with long gray hair and beard. With his right hand he is holding his symbol the scythe, and with his left he is holding his baby son. He ferociously bites the chest of his son. The pain is obvious on the face and the movement of Poseidon who tries in vain to avoid his father (26).

Cronus as depicted by Francisco Goya

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746 –) was a Spanish romantic painter. He is regarded as the last of the Old Masters of painting and as one of the first of the moderns. Through his works he was both a commentator on and chronicler of his era. The bold handling of paint and the imaginative element found in his art inspired later painters like Manet and Picasso.

In 1819, near the end of his life with the idea of isolating himself, he bought a country house just outside Madrid known as the Quinta del Sordo (roughly, "House of the Deaf Man"). There he created 14 frightening and obscure paintings of insanity, madness and fantasy known as the Black Paintings. The style of these paintings reflects the artist's fear of insanity and his outlook on humanity. They were painted on canvas or directly onto the walls of the house and prefigure the expressionist movement. After his death the wall paintings were transferred to canvas and remain some of the best examples of the later period of Goya's life. Today they are treasured at Prado Museum in Madrid (27).

One of these is the famous work Saturn devouring his son, painted in 1819. It is possibly a reference to Spain's ongoing civil conflicts. Goya portrayed Saturn as a savage, full of ruthless power (Figure 5). His wide open eyes reflect insanity. In contrast to the myth and the traditional iconography, he is not devouring a newborn baby, but an adult man. Saturn is holding the atrociously mutilated body of his victim, his son, with two hands and opens his mouth wide to devour his son's left arm. The title was assigned by others after Goya's death (26,28).

Rubens and Goya did not adhere to the ancient myth exactly, since they presented Cronus devouring his child instead of swallowing it.

Conclusion

A person biting another person is not considered something beautiful. It is associated with primitive instincts like anger, revenge and sexual pation. Consequently, the action of biting is not frequently depicted in artistic works. Although the sculptures and paintings discussed here are not the only ones about this subject, they are good examples. Thorough research in sculpture and the other arts may yield further examples.

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Figure 1 Tydeus eats the brain of Melanippus Terracotta relief (5th c BCE) Villa Giulia Museum, Rome



*Figure2 A Lapith fighting a Centaur West Pediment of Temple of Zeus at Olympia (5th c BCE)
Olympia, Archaeological Museum*



Figure 3 Fight between a Lapith and a Centaur Part of the Bassae Frieze (5th c BCE) Plaster copy at the Athens War Museum



Figure 4 Peter Paul Rubens Saturn devouring his son (17th c) Prado Museum, Madrid



Figure 5 Francisco Goya Saturn (19th c) Prado Museum, Madrid