

6. The world of the sacred



Centaur figurine, *ca.* 800-700 BC

Ayia Irini sanctuary, Department of Antiquities, Cyprus

Religion was the field where interaction with other civilizations had the most complex and long lasting impact on Cypriot culture. This is clearly reflected on the transformations of the Great Cypriot Goddess. A major female deity of fertility and regeneration was venerated in the island from prehistoric times. The goddess changed appearances and styles many times, as she was variously assimilated with Near Eastern Astarte, Egyptian Hathor and other deities, often borrowing iconographic elements from their own traditions. By the end of the 4th c. BC, the Cypriot goddess was fully assimilated with Greek Aphrodite, gradually adopting nude representations which emphasized her erotic aspects.

Other examples of religious syncretism include the fusion of the Greek hero Herakles with the Phoenician god Melqart, Zeus with Baal, Apollo with Reshef, Athena with Anat, etc.

Rather than direct transfers from foreign religious systems, however, these fusions reflect selective adaptations of elements from other Mediterranean traditions into local ritual practices. As people from different cultural backgrounds came into contact, their beliefs were gradually fused into shared ideas, which expressed common concerns through a diverse and fascinating artistic vocabulary.

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Wall bracket with figures of Bes, ca. 600-475 BC

Athienou-Malloura sanctuary, Department of Antiquities, Cyprus



Statue of Asclepius, end of 2nd c. AD

Paphos, House of Theseus, Department of Antiquities, Cyprus