MUTATING MEDUSA: THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE GORGON MEDUSA

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Abstract

Medusa is one of the most recognisable figures in Greco-Roman mythology: the snake-haired monster who turns her victims into stone until the hero Perseus cuts off her head. While this story's exact details may vary among Greek and Roman authors, Medusa is consistently portrayed as an adversary to men. Used to personify a range of societal anxieties and fears, Medusa's death serves as an allegory for the triumph of masculine order over the threat posed by the disruptive female Other. Yet, this was by no means the only role ascribed to the Gorgon, nor was it the first. There is a wealth of iconographical evidence illustrating the protective, or apotropaic, use of the Gorgon's image that predates the emergence of Monstrous Medusa. Sharing similarities and influences from a wide range of protective figures throughout the ancient world, this Protective Medusa was a pervasive symbol that did not fade away with the popularity of Monstrous Medusa but instead continued to endure alongside her in the Greco-Roman world. While these two representations of Medusa might initially appear to embody opposing principles – a monstrous threat versus a protective force – they are, in fact, extensions of one another. The duality of the Gorgon, as a balanced and encompassing figure, stems from her origins. A remnant of the powerful Mother goddess figures that were co-opted and diminished during the transition to a patriarchal society, Medusa was shaped by the fractured associations and powers inherited from the cultural and religious landscape that existed prior to the Greeks. By investigating the Gorgon, her origins, myths, uses, and

associations, this research aims to foster a greater appreciation of how the Gorgon has accumulated a variety of cultural beliefs, fears, and symbols across the centuries, preserving them in the figure of Medusa. A figure that has maintained this capacity to adapt and transform, shifting as the needs of society have influenced the perception of her symbolism through time.

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The work of universal nature is to translate this reality to another, to change things, to take them from here and carry them there. All things are mutations…

Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*. VIII. 6.

Introduction

Medusa was a prominent figure from Greco-Roman mythology. The most well-known version of the Medusan myth is from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Roman collection of mythological stories interconnected through the theme of transformation. In this version, Medusa was a desirable maiden, renowned for her beautiful hair, until Neptune raped her in the Temple of Minerva.[1] Since Minerva could not punish her fellow god for this sacrilege, she punished Medusa instead: transforming Medusa's hair into snakes and cursing her so that she turned all men who dared to look directly at her to stone. To avoid this petrifying gaze, the hero Perseus later slays Medusa while she sleeps.[2] Ovid's version presents Medusa as a terrifying monster whose primary function is to be overcome by a valiant hero. This representation of Medusa – which will be referred to as 'Monstrous Medusa' – came to be prevalent within Greco-Roman literature, where she typically adopts the role most ascribed to women in myth: an obstacle that "restrain[s] and inhibit[s] men from the assertion of their *arete* ['masculine virtue']".[3]

The representation of Monstrous Medusa, however, is by no means static. While she retained her role as an adversary for men, the Monstrous Medusa figure underwent several crucial transformations over time. In some versions of the myth, Perseus does not feature at all; in others, Medusa is an Amazonian queen; in another, she is the lover rather than the victim of Poseidon.[4] Over the centuries, male authors used Monstrous Medusa, altering and adapting her figure for each retelling, to illustrate such key

[1] The Greek names of gods will be used when referring to Greek versions of the myths, and the Roman names when dealing with the Roman versions.
[2] Ov. *Met.* IV. 1045-1094.
[3] Gould 1980: 56.
[4] Hom. *Il.* V. 741-742; Diod. Sic. *Hist. Lib*. III. 54. 1-3; Hes. *Theog*. 270-283.

themes as male domination, the inherent danger of the female 'Other', and the 'male gaze' in Greco-Roman society.

The female 'Other' is a persistent theme in Greco-Roman mythology. Greek thought was based on an inherent belief in binary dualism, a philosophical view that categorised and divided the world into distinct, opposing categories such as male and female, and ideal and non-ideal.[5] According to this logic, Greek women were set up as the antithesis of the ideal represented by elite male citizens.[6] Men and women were identified through their opposition to and differences from one another. The female 'Other' is thus the categorisation given to women who illustrate the ideal male and societal norms through their very contrast. In Greek literature, women are always portrayed vis-à-vis men, whether through their male relatives, lovers, or rulers.[7] What is more, women were expected to embody certain qualities such as submission, silence, and subjugation.[8] Any women who dared to transcend their societal roles or rebel against this worldview were condemned.[9]

In the Perseus myth, Medusa is a transgressive woman who poses a threat to men. Her power, the ability to turn men into stone, represents a 'monstrous' version of the 'male gaze', a gaze that aims to objectify and dominate that which it views.[10] Medusa not only possesses this power and uses it against men, but also holds it in a petrifying and fatal form. Medusa's gaze has another dangerous association: the peril of the feminine sexual gaze. Eye contact between men and women in Greco-Roman society

[5] Lee 2015: 33.
[6] *ibid.*
[7] Lauriola 2012: 29. Cf. Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*; Euripides. *Medea*; Sophocles. *Antigone*; Sophocles. *Oedipus the King.*
[8] Lauriola 2012: 29.
[9] *ibid.* 31.
[10] Mulvey 1988: 63.

was restricted due to the sexual power women could wield against men through their gaze.[11] Medusa's allocation of these powers and the threat she embodies were displayed in the works of multiple authors. Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Palaephatus, Apollodorus, and Diodorus Siculus all played an important role in the evolution of Medusa's story, each portraying their version of the myth, until Ovid's account became the standardised version in 8 CE.[12]

These literary representations of Medusa can, however, differ significantly from the iconographical depictions of her character. Rather than being solely a monstrous figure, the visual Medusa could also serve as a protective symbol, a means of warding off malevolent forces. In addition to being commonly depicted on temples,[13] there are also examples of amuletic jewellery featuring Medusa. Her image was even painted on mummies or depicted on gravestones to avert evil or invoke specific powers.[14] The depiction of this 'Protectress Medusa' varies greatly: sometimes she is winged, at times beautiful, and occasionally hideous; there are even depictions of her as a centaur.[15] Since this representation of Medusa appears to directly contradict her monstrous form, it follows that her figure was by no means confined to one form and function within the Greco-Roman world.

In the ancient Hellenic world, snakes were associated with healing. Scholars such as Antoniou et al. argue that since Medusa had snakes for hair, she was also linked to this restorative capability.[16] Asclepius is known to have used Medusa's blood from the

[11] Rabinowitz 2013: 201.
[12] Hom. *Il*. V. 741-742; Hom. *Od*. XI. 635; Hes. *Theog*. 270-283; Hes. *Sc.* 220-237; Pi. *P*. 12. 11-17; Palaeph. *Peri Apiston*. 31; Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 1-4; Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist*. III. 52-55; Ov. *Met*. IV. 836 - V. 269.
[13] Dexter 2018: 474.
[14] Müller 2010: 195-202; Marino 2004: 14.
[15] Müller 2010: 195; Karoglou 2018: 3-48; Jooste 2018: 66-76. For examples of Protective Medusa's differing portrayals, see Fig 8, Fig 10, Fig 11 and Fig 24 of the appendix.
[16] Antoniou et al. 2011: 217-221; Weappa 2018: 32.

right side of her body to bring the dead back to life.[17] However, the blood from her left was used to cause death.[18] Medusa's connection to death is further emphasised not only by the fact that, unlike her two Gorgon sisters,[19] she is mortal, but also because her decapitated head is wielded to inflict death on Perseus' enemies. Paradoxically, however, Medusa's protectress function also extends to shielding the dead: Gorgons were depicted on tombs and funerary monuments to guard graves.[20]

These are just a few of the different contexts within which Medusa's figure was utilised: a monster, a protectress, a force for healing, and a symbol of death. Medusa also became a symbol of the 'dangerous female Other' in epic poetry and tragedy, wherein deadly female figures such as Medea and Clytemnestra are often compared to her.[21] The broad scope of her characterisation, with its varied usages and meanings, reveals her as a powerful and significant figure. For male heroes, she is a deadly threat – a formidable monster that must be overpowered; on amulets, temples, and shields, she serves as a defence against enemies; in healing, she is a force of life and death; for the dead, she is both a guardian and a symbol of mortality.

This notion of the 'Dual Medusa', a figure who appears to embody such opposing personas, is a direct consequence of her character's origin, which comprises a blend of mythologies and religions. Several goddesses were worshipped in pre-Hellenic times and were later co-opted and transformed to fit Hellenic ideals. Some of these goddesses are the source for various aspects of Medusa's character: the Great Mother Goddess, the Mistress of Animals, and Neolithic Bird and Snake goddesses.[22] These

[17] Apollod. *Bibl.* III. 10. 3.
[18] *ibid.* 3-4; Weappa 2018: 32.
[19] Karoglou 2018: 8.
[20] *ibid.* 28.
[21] *ibid.* 5.
[22] Frothingham 1911: 349-377; Marinatos 2000: 48-70; Dexter 2018: 463-482.

goddesses were variously associated with death, healing, and rebirth. Several Hellenic goddesses and monster figures inherited traits from these deities and were demonised or praised depending on which qualities they exhibited. Protectress Medusa seems to have also been significantly influenced by figures such as Bes[23] – an Egyptian god whose frequent protective portrayal on amulets[24] strongly recalls Medusa's grotesque depictions. The Roman literary Monstrous Medusa also bears numerous parallels with the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*[25] (c. 2100-1200 BCE), where both literary and iconographical representations of Perseus' slaying of Medusa echo Gilgamesh's destruction of the monster Humbaba. By investigating and understanding the influences that constructed the figure of Medusa – her Neolithic, European, Indo-European, and Semitic roots, along with the external influences on her characterisation from Egypt and Mesopotamia, as well as her multiple associations with various deities such as Apollo, Asclepius, Metis, Hekate, Artemis, and Athena – her conflicting Monstrous and Protective characterisations can be reconciled into this figure of the Dual Medusa.[26]

Classical scholarship on Medusa has typically focused on only one specific aspect or function of Medusa. Mack (2002), for instance, has examined the depiction of Medusa in iconography, investigating the visual consumption of a figure so perilous to gaze upon in myth.[27] This focus on iconography can also be observed in Marinatos (2000), who explores the protective and fearsome nature of Gorgon iconography; Topper (2007), who investigates the relation between Classical red-figure vase depictions of Medusa and abduction narratives; Jooste (2018), who analyses various depictions of Gorgons in ceramic art; and Karoglou (2018), who focuses on Medusa's depiction in

[23] Zolla Luque et al. 2019: 75-77; Marinatos 2000: 48-70.
[24] Koch et al. 2017: 16: "a grotesque face, with broad nose and ears, inflated checks and a long tongue".
[25] *Epic of Gilgamesh*. V. 59-269.
[26] Dexter 2017: 81-92; Koch et al. 2017: 9-24; *Epic of Gilgamesh*. V. 59-269; Frothingham 1911: 349-377; Weappa 2018: 21-37; Dolmage 2009: 1-28; Marler 2002: 15-23.
[27] Mack 2002: 571-604.

Classical art.[28] Other scholars have centred their attention on Medusa's associations with various mythological figures and gods. Frothingham (1911), for instance, examines the relationship between Medusa, Apollo, and the Great Mother.[29] Dolmage (2009) explored the connection between Medusa and the goddess Metis,[30] while Felton (2012, 2021, 2023) analysed Medusa in the context of Greco-Roman monsters and their perceptions of them.[31] Dexter, on the other hand, has written and co-authored several more diverse papers on Medusa (2004, 2010, 2011, 2017), covering a range of topics that include her iconography, origins, and functions.[32] Nevertheless, the main focus of her work is Medusa's pre-Hellenic origins.

What has not yet been sufficiently explored, then, is a broader consideration of the Medusan figure within multiple contexts; one that examines not just one aspect or dimension of her representation within one specific period, but a comprehensive analysis that aims to investigate her origins as well as both her monstrous characterisation and her protective usages more holistically. While this might sound like an overly ambitious task, it must be noted that the majority of ancient texts contain only brief allusions to Medusa, mostly in her Monstrous form, and this research will focus predominantly on the versions found in Hesiod, Apollodorus, and Ovid.[33] Similarly, this research will not attempt to cover every surviving depiction of Medusa's Protectress form but will limit itself to an examination of the most common *apotropaic* depictions, such as those found on shields, protective garments (particularly Athena's *aegis*), and frontal face depictions on temples, graves, amulets, and vases. The investigation of Medusa's origin will focus on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Neolithic Bird and Snake goddesses, Bes, and the Great Mother Goddess. While this research

[28] Marinatos 2000: 48-70; Topper 2007: 73-105; Jooste 2018: 66-76; Karoglou 2018: 1-48.
[29] Frothingham 1911: 349-377.
[30] Dolmage 2009: 1-28.
[31] Felton 2012; Felton 2021; Felton 2023.
[32] Dexter 2010: 25-41; Dexter 2011: 181-202; Dexter 2017: 81-92; Dexter and Mair 2004: 97-121.
[33] Hes. *Theog*. 270-283; Hes. *Sc.* 220-237; Apollod. *Bibl.* II. 4. 1-5; Ov. *Met*. IV. 895 - V. 269.

does not profess to cover every source, it will offer a broader analysis of Medusa, ranging over a period from 2100 BCE to around the 5th century CE.

Understanding Medusa's changeability allows for a clearer understanding of the purpose of her myth for the ancient societies for which and by which she was created:

> [W]e cannot understand the images of the beautiful Medusa unless we know whether they are meant to glorify Perseus, to evoke sympathy for the monster, to provoke laughter, or to produce a different reaction altogether.[34]

In order to uncover the meanings behind the figure of Medusa, this research aims to explore several facets of her character. Chapter 1 examines the figure of Monstrous Medusa, focusing on Medusa's depiction within the Perseus-Medusa myth. This chapter will examine and compare different textual and iconographical depictions of Medusa as a monstrous figure, combined with a discussion of the pertinent themes arising from these depictions. To provide an overview of the various aspects of Monstrous Medusa, this research will involve, firstly, a comparative and critical analysis of the main textual and literary sources on the Medusan figure from Ancient Greece, Rome and Mesopotamia, centred predominantly around the works of Hesiod, Pindar, Palaephatus, Apollodorus, Diodorus Siculus, and Ovid.[35] To explore how the different aspects of Medusa's figure came to affect the formation and purpose of her mythological character in Greco-Roman society, this research will also engage with several pertinent feminist theorists.[36] Salzman-Mitchell (2005), Rabinowitz (2013), Bowers (1990), Berger et al. (1972), Mulvey (1992) and Wohl (1998) have all sought to explore the position of women in Greco-Roman society through an investigation of

[34] Topper 2007: 80.
[35] Hes. *Theog*. 270-283; Hes. *Sc.* 220-237; Pi. *P*. 12. 11-17; Palaeph. *Peri Apiston*. 31; Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 1-4; Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist*. III. 52-55; Ov. *Met.* IV. 836 - V. 269.
[36] Salzman-Mitchell 2005; Rabinowitz 2013; Bowers 1990; Berger et al. 1972; Mulvey 1992; and Wohl 1998.

such contemporary feminist concepts as the objectification of women by men, the 'male gaze, and the 'female Other'. This will allow for a greater appreciation of the various themes each of these myths addresses and how Medusa's figure was adapted to suit the authorial and societal demands of each version.

Chapter 2 focuses on the earlier roots of Medusa – before the Perseus-Medusa myth came to dominate the Greco-Roman perception of her character – to gain a more thorough understanding of her function as a protective figure. This chapter aims to analyse Medusa's iconographical depictions, with a consideration of how her contrasting Monstrous and Protective natures compare and conflict with one another. Through an investigation and comparison of the various Greco-Roman, Egyptian, European, Neolithic, Indo-European and Semitic iconographical, literary and mythological sources that influenced her protective representations and the broad array of contexts in which they were used – from tombstones to amulets, temple decorations, and military equipment – this chapter aims to shed light on the importance of the *Gorgoneion* as an iconographical symbol distinct from Perseus, the various influences behind its portrayal, and the deep-seated societal beliefs that this symbol represented.

Chapter 3 goes back even further, as an investigation into the origins of Medusa's 'Dual' nature by investigating the sources that precede the formation of the Hellenic Pantheon, and which ultimately shaped Medusa's figure and her seemingly conflicting Protective and Monstrous aspects. This will include a brief analysis of how society shifted from maternal to paternal, and how this change affected and informed societal views on life and death, civilisation and nature, and the relation between the divine and mortals. This chapter will then move on to investigate Medusa's evolution within the wider Greco-Roman mythological context, exploring Medusa's relation to

other figures, both divine and monstrous, who share the same origins, such as Athena, Asclepius, Artemis, the Furies, and Harpies, among others. This chapter aims to demonstrate that while Protectress and Monstrous Medusa may appear to be directly opposed, they are composite parts of a whole.

This research aims to enhance our understanding of why Medusa came to be such a recurring figure in Greco-Roman society. A versatile character with multiple representations, she serves as an illustration of the Greco-Romans' conflicting views on life and death, reason and passion, the nature of the divine, and the struggle between chaos and order, thereby revealing valuable insights into these cultures, particularly those of the ancient male authors and artists who created and propagated various interpretations of the Medusa-figure. She is a figure with multiple interpretations, and only by gaining a more nuanced appreciation of why she emerged and the different ways in which society appropriated her image can we begin to understand her power and why she has endured as a cultural symbol even to this day.

Chapter 1

Monstrous Medusa

Medusa is a multifaceted figure from Greco-Roman mythology, most unmistakably recognised today in her depiction as a cursed mortal woman-turned-monster who was slain by the hero Perseus. This depiction of Medusa will be referred to as the 'Monstrous Medusa'. This form of the Medusan figure is closely intertwined with the hero Perseus; there is no Monstrous Medusa without the heroic figure of Perseus to oppose her. In this form, her character embodies that of a monstrous being: she represents a threat, a figure of fear and horror to Greco-Romans, while Perseus is the saviour and champion of Greco-Roman society. Perseus was the son of Danaë, daughter of King Acrisius, who was impregnated by Zeus when he poured into her lap in a shower of gold.[1] As with most tales involving monsters throughout the world, Medusa is depicted as a known evil that can be overcome by a heroic figure. What defines this depiction of the Monstrous Medusa is the threat she poses; not just to individuals who encounter her, but also to society at large. This chapter will explore how Monstrous Medusa came to be seen as a threat and a monster, particularly focusing on how her very femininity rendered her powers and figure such a threat not only to individuals but also to the community. Understanding her as a female threat necessitates an examination of the context and societies within which and for which she was created.

Medusa, as a monster, was a prominent figure for both the Greeks and the Romans. Her persistence as a notable monstrous creature indicates that she served as a significant and powerful symbol for Greco-Roman society. Exploring Medusa through

[1] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 4.

the lens of contemporary theories on the 'male gaze' and the 'female Other', alongside a thorough consideration of Greco-Roman societal beliefs, will provide a more nuanced understanding of why her portrayal as a female hybrid monster was so terrifying to the Greco-Romans. Medusa became a recognisable and prominent figure, representing common and significant fears. She embodied the manifestation of specific cultural fears and anxieties, such as the uncontrollable wild nature of women, the power of the 'gaze' as a malevolent force, and the threat posed by powerful women. Although the figure of Monstrous Medusa exemplified cultural fears and anxieties that were countered by a hero, her representation was not static. While she maintained her role as an adversary for men, over time, the Monstrous Medusa underwent several crucial transformations. In various works by different ancient Greek and Roman authors, Medusa was depicted with varying emphasis on distinct aspects of her monstrosity. Medusa did not merely embody one singular fear within the Greco-Roman audience, but multiple fears combined. Consequently, the authors, depending on the context, the focus of their work, and their specific interests, produced variations of her character with differing emphasis on specific aspects of her monstrosity. There were also multiple variations of Medusa's history and mythological background, some with negligible differences and others with contradictory elements. Investigating and comparing her various portrayals will facilitate a clearer understanding of the societal fears she embodied and why her Monstrous figure was so prominent within the ancient world.

Monstrous Medusa: Early Literature

One of the earliest literary depictions of Monstrous Medusa[2] is found in Hesiod's *Theogony*, composed between 730-700 BCE:

[2] Although the earliest literary depictions of Medusa are in Homer's *Iliad* (V. 733-742, VIII. 340-349, XI. 32-40), here she is not shown in her Monstrous aspect. She is not associated with Perseus, who is

> And to Phorkys Keto bore the Graiai, with fair faces
> and grey from birth…
> and the Gorgons who, beyond the famous stream of the Ocean,
> live in the utmost place toward night, by the singing Hesperides:
> they are Sthenno, Euryale, and Medusa, whose fate was a sad one,
> for she was mortal, but the other two immortal and ageless
> both alike. Poseidon, he of the dark hair, lay with
> one of these, in a soft meadow and among spring flowers.
> But when Perseus had cut off the head of Medusa
> there sprang from her blood great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasos
> so named from the *pegai*, the springs of the Ocean, where she was born,
> while Chrysaor is named from the golden *aör*, the sword he handles.[3]

There is a strong emphasis on lineage and genealogy in Hesiod's *Theogony*.[4] Here, Hesiod glosses over the events surrounding Perseus' slaying of Medusa, focusing instead on her genealogy and the origins of people, monsters, and gods. In this early version of the myth, Medusa is the daughter of Keto. Keto was renowned as the mother of monsters, and this is clearly illustrated within this depiction, where she is said to have given birth to the Gorgons and the Graiai sisters. Keto herself was the daughter of Gaea ('Earth') and Pontos ('Sea'). This is an important aspect of Monstrous Medusa: she is descended from nature, an uncontrollable force, and from Gaea specifically. Even though Medusa is mortal, her ancestry is a defining part of her Monstrous aspect, since in Greco-Roman mythology, the various monsters that are born of Earth or Typhoeus typically "serve as metaphors for the struggle of man over nature."[5] When investigating Greek monsters, chthonic 'underworld' imagery and snake-attributes are commonly seen as representative of the primordial earthly powers that the ouranian 'heavenly' gods opposed.[6] Chthonic aspects had specific associations within the ancient world, and the various contexts within which they were used followed set patterns that served as a means of expressing the ingrained

mentioned separately at XIV. 319-20., and is instead depicted as Protectress Medusa, which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

[3] Hes. *Theog*. 270-284.

[4] Pender 2010: 219.

[5] Felton 2012: 109.

[6] *ibid*.

concepts which underpinned them.[7] One such pattern is the strong association serpents had with the earth, resulting in many chthonic monsters having serpentine features.[8] Chthonic imagery and the earth were linked in ancient Greco-Roman society, as the underworld was envisioned to be below the earth.[9] Not only did snake imagery link monsters to the underworld, but snakes themselves were also connected with the idea of the dangerous wild. In Greco-Roman literature, the slaying of serpents allowed for springs to be safely accessed, and snakes were therefore seen as symbols of the threatening nature of areas beyond human control and civilisation.[10] In many myths, the earth is depicted as base and bestial, an uncontrollable and dangerous counterpoint to the heavenly powers of the gods, and this association is often emphasised in the depictions of mythological monsters.

While the ouranian and the chthonic are set into conflict in these narratives, it should be noted that chthonic forces were not viewed as inherently negative within Greco-Roman society. Similarly, snakes were not only associated with monstrosity; they were often depicted as protectors. Serpents guarded the golden fleece and golden apples,[11] and snakes could be the protectors of cities, such as the guardian of the Athenian Acropolis.[12] They were depicted inside tombs and regarded as protectors of the health of several gods' devotees.[13] While some serpents are opposed by heroes to gain the objects they guard, the snakes themselves and their guardian nature are not malicious. Frequently, the role of snakes when they were opposed by a heavenly

[7] Floky 2018: 7.
[8] *ibid*. 18, 91.
[9] This is displayed in the *Iliad* (ca. 750 BCE), Hom. *Il*. XX. 56-64: "Poseidon from deep under them shuddered all the illimitable earth... Aidoneus, lord of the dead below, was in terror and sprang from his throne and screamed aloud, for fear that above him he who circles the land, Poseidon, might break the earth open and the houses of the dead lie open to men and immortals…"
[10] Floky 2018: 140.
[11] Ov. *Met*. VII. 314-316, Hes. *Theog*. 332-336.
[12] Hdt. *Hist*. VIII. 41.
[13] Rodríguez Pérez 2021: 2.

warrior was to serve as a transitional symbol.[14] Through battling and defeating a monstrous serpent, a heavenly hero completed a turning point in their life or journey.[15] Snakes were ambiguous creatures that could not be easily categorised,[16] making them capable of being used in multiple contexts. In later chapters, the protective roles of serpents and monsters, as well as the positive aspects of serpents, will be examined in greater detail. This chapter mainly investigates negative instances of chthonic and serpent symbolism, as this is what is most relevant to Monstrous Medusa.

In myths, this association between the monstrous, nature and Earth is often highlighted by the divine forces that oppose them. This is seen at a later point in the *Theogony*, when Zeus battles against the chthonic Typhoeus. Born of Gaea and Tartarus,[17] Typhoeus is portrayed as a terrifying monster, set on opposing Zeus for control:

> And now that day there would have been done a thing past mending,
> and he, Typhoeus, would have been master of gods and of mortals,
> had not the father of gods and men been sharp to perceive it
> and gave a hard, heavy clap of thunder…
> But now, when Zeus had headed up his own strength, seizing
> his weapons, thunder, lightning, and the glowering thunderbolt,
> he made a leap from Olympos, and struck, setting fire
> to all those wonderful heads set about on the dreaded monster.
> Then, when Zeus had put him down with his strokes,
> Typhoeus crashed, crippled,
> …but Zeus
> in tumult of anger cast Typhoeus into broad Tartaros.[18]

Typhoeus was an oppositional force from the prior universal rulers. An adversary that, because of his origins, embodied chthonic powers. His mother, Gaea, was the primordial earth goddess. His father, Tartarus, was the primordial deity of the pit

[14] Rodríguez Pérez 2021: 5
[15] *ibid.*
[16] *ibid.* 3.
[17] Hes. *Theog*. 826-844.
[18] *ibid.* 836-868.

Tartaros, the region the Titans were imprisoned within beneath the earth.[19] Within this battle for control, Zeus, a divine heavenly force, defeats a descendant of the earth, thereby allowing him to institute order and control.

This battle between the divine and the earthly is a pattern found even outside of Greco-Roman mythology. In the ancient Western Asiatic *Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2000 BCE), for instance, Enkidu and Gilgamesh are two legendary mortal figures from ancient Mesopotamian mythology. Gilgamesh, son of the cow goddess Ninsun, was a mortal king who, together with his companion Enkidu, opposed the monstrous giant Humbaba, guardian of the cedar forest.[20] This created a model for Greco-Roman mythology where a descendant of the gods opposes a monster to enforce order and control. As Felton has noted:

> The pattern set by Zeus and Typhoeus in the creation of the Greek mythological cosmos carried down not only into stories of other Greek gods but into later mythological generations of men in which heroes inevitably had to fight monsters in a re-enactment of the battle for order in the cosmos—the younger, male generation trying to overcome the elder female order; civilization and rationality trying to overcome savagery and emotion.[21]

This pattern is distinctly seen in Perseus' slaying of Medusa: Perseus, a hero of divine lineage – the son of Zeus and the mortal Danaë, princess of Argos – overcomes Medusa, a female monster of the Earth. In the *Theogony* there is a focus on Medusa's powers as a female monster. Medusa is singled out amongst her Gorgon sisters both as the only mortal and the one whom Poseidon slept with.[22] The focus is on Medusa's birth, her liaison with a god, her death, and the births accompanying it, highlighting

[19] For purposes of identification throughout, the primordial's name is spelt in the form Tartarus, and the Pit at the bottom of the underworld is spelt Tartaros.
[20] *Epic of Gilgamesh*. V. 59-269.
[21] Felton 2012: 113.
[22] NB In this version of the myth, it is not a rape in the temple of Athena as described in later versions of the myth, such as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), but an affair in a meadow.

one of the *Theogony's* main concerns, origins and genealogy. As Kamudzandu has argued, this emphasis on ancestors and genealogy performed a crucial function in the ancient world: signifying identity, and connecting people through culture, ideology and their linked origins.[23] Genealogy can also be used to "exhibit different patterns of *segmentation*. Where a genealogy justifies rules of behaviour".[24] Genealogy then becomes a means of explaining the interactions and conflicts between two different genealogical groups. For the ancient Greeks, genealogy and descent played an important role in society in terms of how inheritance was passed down and as a means of judging character.

The idea that offspring inherit their parent's nature is noticeably demonstrated in Euripides' *Bacchae* (405 BCE) where the chorus, Dionysus' maenads, see him as monstrous and ask:

> What was it that gave birth to him? He was not born
> From the blood of women, but from a lioness,
> Or he's descended from the Libyan Gorgons![25]

Monsters give birth to monsters. Here, the maenads vividly express the believed link between a mother's nature and her offspring. Whereas heroes, like, for example, Glaucus in the *Iliad*,[26] use their genealogy as a means of demonstrating their status, monstrous lines exhibit an inherent corruption. This genealogical corruption is best personified by Echidna, the mother of monsters. She is listed in Hesiod's *Theogony*, and is a monster who is part-snake, part-nymph, and who births many of the monstrous creatures found within Greco-Roman mythology.[27] The importance of

[23] Kamudzandu 2010: 11. The focus on the genealogy within the ancient world is demonstrated within the *Iliad*, where heroes are seen to boast of their lineage and ancestry often noting, as Glaucus does (Hom. *Il*. VI. 150-211), as many as eight generations of ancestors.
[24] Fowler 1998: 3.
[25] Eur. *Ba*. 1125-1127.
[26] Hom. *Il*. VI. 114-211.
[27] In Hesiod's *Theogony* (304-327) we are told that, with Typhoeus, Echidna gives birth to Orthos, the two-headed hunting dog, Kerberos, and the Lernadian Hydra (the Hydra goes on to bear the Chimaira,

genealogy is portrayed here as a societal fear that the female can corrupt a line. Medusa, a descendant of a monstrous line, thus has descendants who are also monsters. This inherent belief in the deviant, monstrous nature of women is illustrated in Aristotle's *Generation of Animals* (384-322 BCE):

> [M]ales are more like their father, females more like their mother; and some, though like none of their kin (*suggenês*), are nonetheless like some human being at least; while others are not like a human in visible form (*idea*) but are already a monster. And in fact what is not like its parents is already in a certain way a monster. For nature in these cases has in a certain way deviated from the genus. And a first starting-point is when a female comes to be and not a male.[28]

Women and men were thus viewed as intrinsically different. Women were an aberration through their deviation from the male, with 'male' implied to be 'correct, natural, and proper' and female 'incorrect, unnatural, and improper'. The focus on lineage in the *Theogony* and other tales also applies to those of divine heritage, such as Perseus. He is a hero, a demigod, and therefore closer to the gods and 'godliness' than the average mortal. Hesiod's *Theogony* has a strong focus on Medusa's mortality and feminine procreative ability – from her death comes life, a continuation of her monstrous line:

> Poseidon, he of the dark hair, lay with one of these, in a soft meadow and among spring flowers. But when Perseus had cut off the head of Medusa there sprang from her blood great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasos.[29]

Medusa fulfils the feminine role of producing offspring. But how she does so is an aberration, monstrous not just in its offspring but also in its manner. Her monstrous figure has fully perverted the means of genealogy, and it is through her corrupted line

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a terrible fire-breathing beast with three heads, a lion, a goat, and a snake). With Orthos, Echidna also gives birth to the Sphinx and the Nemeian lion.

[28] Aris. *GA*. 767a-b.

[29] Hes. *Theog*. 276-281.

and its continuation that Medusa is made to personify masculine fears surrounding society's reliance on women for procreation.

Medusa and Women in Ancient Society

An overarching link between the depictions of Medusa and the fear she caused rested on the fact that she was a woman. This allowed her to be a source of concern for several reasons that will be discussed further in this section. She is a woman which makes her capable of being seduced, and of seducing a male (in this case, she is sexually desired by the god Poseidon) and capable of childbirth, which men cannot control. Moreover, her childbirth scene is a perverted one, since it emphasises her monstrosity. It is her death which Hesiod depicts as leading to the birth of her children: Pegasus and Chrysaor.[30] Here, Medusa's 'Monstrous' powers are exposed at the same time she is shown as a feminine force.[31] Although women were generally perceived as submissive figures within Greco-Roman life, women were seen as a blatant source of male anxiety within tragedy and epic poetry. Greek and Roman literature, especially tragedy, is littered with accounts of women who have destroyed the peace of an ordered society. Medea, in both Seneca's and Euripides' plays of the same name, is a dangerous sorceress who wreaks destruction; Clytemnestra is a murderess queen who kills her husband to avenge her daughter's death in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*; and the maenads in Euripides' *Bacchae* are women who have been driven mad in the wilderness by Dionysus and who savagely tear their nephew to pieces.[32] This portrayal is part of a set pattern of the 'Othering' of women within Greco-Roman literature and society.

[30] Hes. *Theog*. 280-281.
[31] For a depiction of Pegasus' monstrous birth, see Fig 1.1 and Fig. 1.2 of the appendix.
[32] Sen. *Med*. (ca. 50 CE), Eur. *Med*. (431 BCE), Aes. *Aga*. (458 BCE), and Eur. *Ba.* (405 BCE).

In Greco-Roman society, women were typically expected to assume a submissive role. They were not fully autonomous citizens but rather lived their lives under the control of a male guardian, the *kurios* in Athenian Greek society and the *paterfamilias* in Roman society, ideally passing from their father's home into their husband's.[33] Women were expected to be compliant, quiet and passive, remaining indoors and outside the workings of active society. As a sign of their submission to masculine authority, women were not supposed to make direct eye contact with men. In Euripides' *Trojan Women* (415 BCE), Andromache explains how a virtuous woman such as herself ought to behave:

> I, who in Hector's house worked out all custom that brings discretion's name to women. Blame them or blame them not, there is one act that swings the scandalous speech their way beyond all else: to leave the house and walk abroad. I longed to do it, but put the longing aside, and stayed always within the enclosure of my own house and court. The witty speech some women cultivate I would not practice, but kept my honest inward thought, and made my mind my only and sufficient teacher. I gave my lord's presence the tribute of hushed lips, and eyes quietly downcast.[34]

However, it is not simply that women were regarded as subordinate to men, but also as distinct from men; a strange, uncontrollable Other. Segal notes that within Greek society there was:

> … a complex and ambivalent image of woman. As the one who bears and cares for children and tends house and hearth, she is at the centre of what is secure, nurturing, life-giving; but in her passionate and emotional nature and the violence of her sexual instincts which she is felt as little able to control, she is regarded as irrational, unstable, dangerous… an integral part of the civic structure… but also regarded as a threat to that structure.[35]

[33] Wohl 1998: xvii.
[34] Eur. *Tro*. 645-655.
[35] Segal 1978: 185.

As a manifestation of this male anxiety surrounding the female Other, transgressive women are a common literary motif, particularly in tragedy, where female protagonists "[o]ften… reject their role as a submissive object and dismiss the societal norms and male control".[36]

Medusa, when she is born as or once she has been transformed into a Gorgon, is a symbol of the dangerous female 'Other' par excellence, and transgressive tragic characters are often likened to her. In Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (458 BCE), for instance, before Orestes enacts his revenge against his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus for his father's murder, the chorus comments:

> Be not fear-struck when your turn comes in the action, but with a great cry "Father" when she cries "Child" to you go on through with the innocent murder. Yours to raise high within your body the heart of Perseus and for those under the ground you loved and those yet above, to exact what their bitter passion may desire; make bloody ruin of the Gorgon inside the house…[37]

Medusa is the ultimate uncontrollable, dangerous woman and being likened to her illustrates the danger of the women described. There is an underlying theme of the danger of women left unattended and uncontrolled, and Medusa, an unmarried woman living on the outskirts of society, fits this role. In the various versions of the Perseus-Medusa myth, she was shown to inhabit liminal, wild, isolated areas, such as beyond Okeanos at the edge of night,[38] the boundary of the inhabited world in western Libya,[39] and at the end of remote and distant byways past forests and rocky terrain.[40] Medusa was consistently depicted as living far outside of the male-dominated civilisations. There was also a belief that women were capable of controlling men through sexuality and beauty. Rabinowitz argues that part of the reason for the

[36] Wohl 1998: xxxv.
[37] Aes. *Lib*. 827-836.
[38] Hes. *Theog*. 274-275.
[39] Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist*. III. 53.
[40] Ov. *Met*. IV. 1060-1062.

repression of eye contact between men and women was due to the sexual power a woman's look could have over men.[41] This dangerous power of a woman's beauty and gaze is portrayed in multiple sources. The chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 BCE) warns of the dangers of these powers:

> Desire looks clear from the eyes of a lovely bride: power as strong as the founded world. Aphrodite, goddess, is playing, with whom no man can fight.[42]

This inherent danger that women were believed to pose is exemplified in myth which accounts for the creation of the first woman, Pandora, who was created to punish mankind and was given gifts and beauty to tempt Epimetheus into accepting her.[43]

This punishment was caused by Prometheus' decision to steal fire and gift it to mankind, due to this Zeus declared that:

> it [would] be a great sorrow to [Prometheus], and to men who come after. As the price of fire I will give them an evil, and all men shall fondle this, their evil, close to their hearts, and take delight in it.[44]

This evil took the form of the first woman, Pandora. Who was designed by the gods, and was gifted bewitching features moulded by Hephaestus, cruel desire and longing from Aphrodite, and a false, treacherous nature from Hermes, among other gifts from the pantheon.[45] She was thus named Pandora, 'all-gift', "because all the gods who have their homes on Olympos had given her each a gift, to be a sorrow to men".[46] It is thus an entrenched belief that women were created to be a burden and a temptation to men.[47] This is recognisably represented in other tales; it is Helen who, because of her

[41] Rabinowitz 2013: 201.
[42] Soph. *Ant*. 295-800.
[43] Hes. *WD*. 60-96. (ca. 700 BCE).
[44] Hes. *Theog*. 56-58.
[45] *ibid.* 63-80.
[46] *ibid.* 81-82.
[47] Cf. Euripides' *Medea* (431 BCE) and *Hippolytus* (428 BCE) where Jason and Hippolytus give hate speeches about women, despairing of the need for women, whom they see as the source of strife within

beauty, is blamed for the Trojan War in the *Iliad*.[48] Helen herself is seen to curse her beauty and the misery and infamy it has brought her in Euripides' play *Helen* (412 BCE) lamenting: "Save me, wretched as I am, from these misfortunes… There is no mortal alive who doesn't hate Helen."[49]

Through the prevalence of these themes within the literature, it is undeniable that women were perceived by men as possessing an inherent nature that could lead men to ruin and control them, and their abilities beyond what men could control. Felton explains:

> That women could also sometimes produce children with physical abnormalities only added to the perception of women as potentially terrifying and destructive. Creatures such as Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis, the Harpies, and the Furies, among many others, all spoke to men's fear of women's destructive potential.[50]

Medusa was desired by a god due to her beauty and was then able to give birth to the young man Chrysaor and a hybrid creature, Pegasus, a winged horse. The men feared uncontrolled women and, due to this, as Gould has noted, their relationships with women had both fear and anxiety attached to them, where women were seen as outside of the civilised, controlled, ordered world of men, but simultaneously as an integral part of its continuation.[51] Topper theorises that Medusa's death was a perversion of the erotic abduction stories prevalent in Greek myth and that Medusa has many similarities with women abducted in myth, such as Thetis, Persephone and Helen.[52] Men feared the powers and abilities women had that they did not, such as

households and life, being relied on for men to get children. Eur. *Med*. 569-575, Eur. *Hipp*. 616-649. Simonides of Amorgos. *Females of the Species.* 1-118, who wrote about the various undesirable forms a woman's character can take and how women are the worst plague Zeus has created for men.

[48] Hom. *Il.* III. 70-72.

[49] Eur. *Hel*. 924-926.

[50] Felton 2012: 105.

[51] Gould 1980: 57.

[52] Topper 2007: 82-83.

childbirth, and thus they enacted myths of harsh control and perversion of the female body in a bid to gain control over them.[53] Through myths of abduction and the destruction of female monsters, Greco-Roman men were able to face and overcome their fears surrounding women. The anxieties caused by the uncontrollable nature of women were put to rest through tales of heroes and men overcoming, possessing, and controlling women. Female monsters were exaggerated forms of underlying issues brought to life and then defeated. This gave them a sense of power and control over women, the unpredictable necessity within their lives.

Monstrous Femininity

The topic of monstrous femininity is an expansive subject, and all aspects of this topic cannot possibly be covered here. This discussion is limited to what is needed to give an overview of the context and specific aspects of it that are relevant to Medusa and her portrayal as a feminine monster. The societal anxiety surrounding women is one of the reasons why so many of the Greco-Roman monsters are female. The Gorgons, Scylla, Sirens, Echidna, Furies, Sphinxes, Lamiae, and Harpies – all of which are horrifying figures that can bring destruction, death, and suffering, and all of which are female. These figures are uncontrollable, monstrous hybrids; their very nature is in opposition to ordered society. And it is through these female monsters that the differences between men and women are not only highlighted but placed in direct and exaggerated opposition to one another. The female monster stands opposed to the male hero, and the monster's defeat brings order to society by purifying it from the female threat. As Douglas notes in her work *Purity and Danger*:

[53] This perversion of the feminine body for control has continued through to modern times and can be seen in studies on pornography, Griffin 1981: 261: "The nude body of woman recalls for us our mothers, our infancy, our vulnerability, the knowledge of our body, and the meaning of nature, recalls to us our mortality. Therefore, pornography, wishing to forget all this knowledge, defames that body, ridicules it, punishes it, tries to destroy the power of its presence in our minds."

> …ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.[54]

Monsters are created to serve as deviations from what is 'natural'. Rather than fitting into specific categories, they blur the boundaries between them. Monsters are considered 'monstrous' both for their transgression of order and morality, and by their very nature as hybrids. They represent the 'untidy experience' of life and are destroyed to exert male control. Perhaps one of the best examples of demonised disorder is seen in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where women are often transformed into monstrous creatures – such as Scylla, whose legs were transformed into dogs,[55] and Arachne, who is transformed into a spider.[56]

Keith notes crucial similarities between Poine, the Furies and Medusa, all of whom have serpentine hair and bring death to mortals.[57] The threatening descriptions of Poine and her serpentine hair have many parallels to the form of Medusa.[58] She was a dragoness death spirit (also called kēr), depicted in the myth of Coroebus of Argos' founding of Tripodusci in ca. 92 CE.[59] In revenge for his lover Psamathe's and their son Linus' deaths, Delphic Apollo punishes Argos and sets a monster on the city.[60] This monster has a maiden's torso, a serpentine bottom half, and a serpent head emerging from the top of her human head, and she impales the Argive babies on her claw-like taloned hands.[61] This is yet another serpentine, feminine monster that posed

[54] Douglas 2003: 4.
[55] Ov. *Met*. XIV. 55-67.
[56] *ibid.* VI. 129-145.
[57] Keith 2013: 303-318.
[58] *ibid.* 311.
[59] Ogden 2021: 74.
[60] *ibid.*
[61] *ibid.* 75.

a risk to civilisation; a woman who turned against societal values, killing the young she was expected to nurture. As a hybrid, the Sphinx showed the dangers of feminine sexuality and power:

> [the Sphinx] combines the clawed body of a man eater with the wings of a raptor and a face made for love, and clumsy man who prides himself on his intelligence is likely to end up eaten in her cave… A series of late archaic pictures show Sphinx inflamed with erotic desire, pursuing young men… him she catches she cradles in her claws close to her swollen belly – like a mother with her young? A lady with her lover? A hungry predator?[62]

The Sphinx is a lusting, tempting, feminine source of death. This is not uncommon in Greco-Roman mythology, where dangerous sea monsters are often female. Female dragons and serpentine monsters, like Scylla, are seen as more deadly than their male counterparts.[63] The dangerous lovers of the sea, Nereids and Sirens, are also female.[64] There is, therefore, a notable trend within Greco-Roman mythology; the examples of feminine serpentine monsters are too numerous and consistent in their portrayals for these representations to be accidental. They are archetypes, personifications of specific societal fears. These monsters embody the inherent dangers of feminine powers of seduction and the threat this poses to men. Like the other female destructive figures, Medusa's sexuality and femininity are inextricably linked to her dangerous ability. She subverts the passive norms expected of women and uses the power of the feminine gaze to enact violence.[65] This 'monstrous femininity', as Turner defines it, highlights Medusa's 'otherness', separating her from the average modest mortal woman and likening her instead to other female deathly figures such as the Sphinx, the Sirens, and kēr.[66] Medusa thus stands apart from mortal women while at the same

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[62] Vermeule 1981: 171.
[63] *ibid.* 196. Vermeule (1981: 187) explains that dragons with multiple heads are uncommon as they are meant to be killed by a single hero, this is dangerous enough without the creature having multiple mouths such as Scylla.
[64] Vermeule 1981: 193.
[65] Turner 2016: 157-158.
[66] *ibid.* 157.

time being used to represent the fears men had about them by embodying the seductive, dangerous woman, the ancient version of the *femme fatale*.

Monsters are not only hated mythological creatures. They are also a cultural category, a conceptual metaphor through which individuals can filter and organise their experiences.[67] The word 'monstrosity' originates from the Latin *monitus*, 'admonition', as monsters serve to signal or symbolise deeper cultural meanings.[68] Monsters are beings whose fundamental role is to serve as creatures against which people define themselves.[69] They are created only to signal something separate from themselves.[70] In addition, as a category, monsters are creatures which usually exhibit physical abnormalities and some form of hybridity.[71] They transgress literal or metaphorical boundaries, often acting as disruptive agents, unsettling figures, or dire threats to humans and human attempts to impose order on the wild.[72] Monsters are subject to the societies they haunt. They are reliant on the social rules, categories, and classifications they subvert and, as societal fears change, so do their monsters.[73] From the earliest times, people have created these creatures so that they might have something on which their fears might safely settle.[74] In their accounts of the Perseus-Medusa myth, authors used Medusa as a symbol of monstrosity. She is the antithesis of the male-dominated society; a wild feminine hybrid figure who poses a risk to those to whom she ought to submit.

[67] Asma 2009: 13.
[68] Cohen 1996: 9.
[69] Mitchell 2024: 23.
[70] Cohen 1996: 4.
[71] Felton 2024a: 3.
[72] *ibid*.
[73] Musharbash 2021: 2-5.
[74] Gilmore 2003: 1.

Monsters are created as an embodiment of a specific cultural time, feeling, and place, and their bodies are given life by the fears, anxieties, and desires of the social milieu in which and for which they are created.[75] As a result, monsters and their characteristics provide a unique insight into a wide variety of contemporaneous cultural concerns.[76] Since it is typically assumed that those who are felt to be imperfect, abnormal, wild or unpredictable pose a threat to the social order and its continued stability,[77] the idea of the monstrous became closely interlinked with that of the feminine, as they both define the norm through their difference.[78] While the exact nature of Medusa's representation shifted as society changed, at its core, her figure retained its feminine monstrous form, as this was an unchanging aspect of her threat to patriarchal society. She was demonised as a monster so that she could be destroyed; and yet, ironically, it is precisely her status as a monster that has enabled her to survive. Monsters violate categorical norms and are counterintuitive and frightening, making them memorable figures that encourage cultural transmission.[79]

Fears Personified

Felton has argued that for the Greeks, monsters embodied their fears: the possibility of chaos destroying order, the irrational triumphing over reason, nature subsuming civilisation, and the anxieties surrounding their inability to understand the female and its differences from the male.[80] She contends this is why myth frequently depicts monsters being overcome by gods and men, who symbolise order, reason, civilisation, and the patriarchy that inevitably triumphs over these opposing monsters.[81] In each

[75] Cohen 1996: 4.
[76] Felton 2024a: 1.
[77] Zajko 2024: 356.
[78] *ibid.*
[79] Larson 2024: 381.
[80] Felton 2012: 103.
[81] *ibid.*

mythical portrayal, Monstrous Medusa can thus be seen to epitomise specific cultural anxieties.

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Medusa is portrayed as a mortal woman who lives far outside of civilisation, "far beyond famed Okeanos".[82] She is an outsider, set apart from civilisation. Gilmore has pointed out that in all cultural traditions, monsters live in liminal places; that they are apart from regular society but merge and run parallel to society, often in underground, unseen places such as watery marshes, or in far-off wild places that people are afraid of.[83] In the case of Medusa and the other female monsters, it is this fear and lack of male control that resulted in this representation of female monstrosity; and it is through the portrayal of their destruction that men attempted to exert some form of control over them: "The myths then, to a certain extent, fulfil a male fantasy of conquering and controlling the female."[84] Medusa here displays the inherent threat women in Greek society were seen to pose to men through the lack of control men could place over them; they were a sexual and wild uncontrollable force in the eyes of Greek men. Perseus is a hero through his opposition to her and the dominance and control he gains over her through her death. Perseus symbolises male control, dominance, and ordered society in a stark contest to Medusa's wild, uncontrolled feminine threat. Thus, through the slaying of Medusa, these fears are abated, and the threat women pose is set aside now under the control of the male. This oppositional relationship between a male divinely descended hero and a female earthly monster is present throughout depictions of Monstrous Medusa; however, the fears and beliefs of society highlighted within the myths have certain key differences and change over time. While Hesiod's *Theogony* focuses on the origins and ancestral lines of Perseus and Medusa, other works and versions of the myth have different societal concerns and thus have differing focuses.

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[82] Hes. *Theog*. 274.
[83] Gilmore 2003: 12.
[84] Felton 2012: 105.

Perseus and the Shield of Herakles

The Hesiodic *Shield of Herakles* (ca. 640-550 BCE) does not have as strong a focus on Monstrous Medusa herself. Instead, it gives more information on Perseus, the various tools he used to slay Medusa, and the aftermath of her death. In his description, the author mentions both the "flying sandals"[85] of Hermes and "the war-cap of Hades"[86] Perseus was wearing when he killed Medusa; tools that granted him both his success as well as the "bag"[87] which allowed him to safely store the petrifying head. These tools allowed Perseus to avoid the monstrous gaze, to move without being seen, and to contain the gaze and prevent its effect from being used on him after Medusa's death.[88] The author focuses on Perseus' victory and the divine aid he received. Perseus is portrayed as a hero who has re-asserted his control by killing Medusa.[89] This work also goes into more detail on the aftermath of Medusa's death. Most importantly, however, this work also describes the anger of the other Gorgons, Medusa's sisters, and their pursuit of Perseus after Medusa's death. The description of the Gorgons at this point in the narrative overtly displays their horrifying nature:

> the rest of the Gorgons
> tumbled along behind him, unapproachable,
> indescribable…
> and on the belts of the Gorgons a pair
> of snakes were suspended,
> but they reared and bent their heads forward

[85] Hes. *Sc*. 220.
[86] *ibid*. 228.
[87] *ibid*. 224.
[88] See Fig. 2 of the appendix for a vase depiction of Perseus slaying the sleeping Medusa whilst wearing the tools gifted to him by the gods.
[89] Hesiod's account of Perseus slaying Medusa (Hes. *Sc*. 216-237) is laden with heroic and male-dominant symbolism. The account forms part of Hesiod's description of the decoration on Herakles' shield, an implement of war, alongside other images of battle, warriors, gods and monsters (Hes. *Sc*. 144-317). Furthermore, Perseus is his ancestor and emblematic of Herakles' heroic lineage. The shield itself is also a status symbol, an emblem of Herakles' divine ancestry and patronage (Hes. *Sc*. 318-322): "It was a wonder to look at, even for Zeus deep-thundering, through whose counsels Hephaistos had made the shield, great and massive, fitting it with his hands. And now the powerful son of Zeus swung it with full control and leaped down from the horse-chariot like a lightning-flash from the hand of his father, Zeus of the *aegis*…"

and flickered with their tongues.
The teeth for their rage were made jagged
and their staring fierce,
and over the dreaded heads of the Gorgons
was great Panic shivering.[90]

This description of the Gorgons highlights not only the fear they evoked and their monstrosity but also mentions an important identifying feature: snakes. Serpent symbolism had different associations depending on the context in which it was depicted. Snakes could represent healing, due to their venom's use in medicine as an antidote.[91] However, they could also symbolise danger. In the areas surrounding the Mediterranean, serpentine attributes on creatures were dominant among both land and sea monsters, likely because snakebites were viewed as highly poisonous and, if not fatal, could lead to terrible illness.[92] In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the lethality of snake venom is exemplified by the tragic loss of Eurydice, who died instantly after being bitten by a snake.[93] Medusa inherited both attributes of this symbolism, with the blood from the left side of her body known to kill, while that from the right side was known to heal.[94]

A large number of Greek mythical monsters, if they were not serpents themselves, often possessed some serpentine characteristics, such as multiple serpentine limbs or heads.[95] Medusa is renowned for having snakes for hair, and the Gorgons are known as hybrid women: part snake, part woman. This is important as serpents are often associated with danger and the monstrous in Greco-Roman mythology. Typhoeus,

[90] Hes. *Sc*. 229-237.
[91] Dexter 2017: 82.
[92] Felton 2021: 111.
[93] In Ovid's Metamorphoses, the fatality of snake venom is exemplified by the tragic loss of Eurydice, Ov. *Met*. X. 13-15: "for as the bride was strolling through the grass, attended by the naiads, she dropped dead, bitten on her ankle by a snake."
[94] Apollod. *Bibl.* III. 10. 3-4.
[95] Felton 2021: 111.

who battled against Zeus, has several serpent attributes: "He was part man and part beast… Down to his thighs he was human in form… from his arms there sprang a hundred dragons' heads. Below his thighs, he had massive coils of vipers".[96] The defeat of this serpent-human hybrid by the divine Zeus is mirrored throughout hero myths with male heroes slaying serpents or serpent-hybrids to protect their communities and regain control over that which hinders their rule. As part of his labours, for instance, Herakles slays the Lernaean Hydra.[97] He also passes the obstacle of a dragon guardian to get the Hesperides' golden apple.[98] Apollo likewise follows this pattern in the founding of his temple at Delphi, where he slays Python, a huge she-serpent.[99] In the *Argonautica* (third century BCE), Jason, too, must confront a guardian serpent, the Colchian dragon, to secure the golden fleece.[100]

Although the fundamental themes of female danger, monstrous hybrids, and the heroic triumph of a male hero remain largely present throughout variations of the Monstrous Medusa myth, there are other areas of focus within different versions. Pindar's *10th Pythian Ode* (498 BCE) portrays Perseus as the authority figure, while the death of Medusa is merely an aside:

> Perseus came to [the Hyperboreans] once, a leader of men, entered their houses, found them making hecatombs of asses to Apollo, who in their joyance and favourable speech rejoices, and smiles to see the rampant lust of the lewd beasts… far from labour and battle they live; they escape Nemesis, the overjust. Danae's son came that day, breathing strength in his heart, and Athene led him to mix with those blessed men. He killed the Gorgon, came bearing the head, intricate with the snake hair, the stone death to the islanders.[101]

[96] Apollod. *Bibl.* I. 6. 3. (First/Second century CE).
[97] *ibid.* II. 5. 2.
[98] *ibid.* II. 5. 11.
[99] Hes. *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*. III. (ca. seventh/sixth century BCE).
[100] Ap. Rhod. *Argon*. IV. 125-166.
[101] Pi. *P*. 10. 31-48.

Medusa's death is mentioned only nominally: a past feat which explains Perseus' possession of Medusa's head and its powers. Perseus uses Medusa's head to turn the islanders into stone. Perseus is undoubtedly the hero here: a powerful young king who uses the head as a weapon to regain order and civility against those who do not follow correct societal mores. Medusa is secondary here; she is but a tool, an object Perseus uses to assert his own power and dominance. In his *12th Ode*, Pindar once again mentions Medusa's death and goes into slightly more detail on Perseus' use of the head's power for his gain:

> [A]fter Perseus slew one of the three sisters and brought home death to the people in Seriphos by the sea. Surely he blinded the strange race of Phorkos and made a bitterness of the feast of Polydektes, and his mother's long slavery and her bed of necessity, by drawing forth the head of lovely Medusa, he, Danae's son, who, I affirm, was born of the raining gold.[102]

Perseus used the power of the head against those who opposed him and removed the threat of Polydektes, who was attempting to force Perseus' mother into marriage. There is also a focus on his birth and his position as a son of Zeus. Here, he is shown as a masculine, royal hero, using the Gorgon's head to assert his authority and control. While only briefly covering the Perseus myth, these references do highlight a crucial aspect within the myth, namely that so long as Medusa is alive, she is monstrous due to her being a female figure with power; however, once this power is in male hands, it is not monstrous, but the tool of authority and power Perseus uses for his own gain.

This is important because while some of the details may have varied across the different versions of the myth, the underlying message remained the same. One example where the myth differed is Palaephatus' (fourth century BCE) *Peri Apiston*, which places greater emphasis on the daughters of Phorkys. Another example is

[102] Pi. *P.* 12. 11-17.

Diodorus' (30-60 BCE) *Historical Library*, which recounts an Egyptian version of the Perseus-Medusa myth. In both of these versions, Perseus and Medusa remain antagonists, but Medusa is an entirely human character instead of a mortal who possesses monstrous powers of petrifaction.[103] Palaephatus was a rationalising mythographer, and as he does with other myths, he localises the myth, calling it a "ridiculous story",[104] and removes the mythical aspects from his interpretation of the tale. He describes the sisters as the daughters of Phorkys, a human king of the islands beyond the Pillars of Herakles. Phorkys possessed an undedicated golden statue, which Palaephatus claims is the Gorgon. When he died, he left his wealth and power in the hands of his three unwed daughters: Stheno, Euryale and Medusa. Palaephatus conflates the Graiai and the Gorgons, explaining away the Graiai's most prominent attribute – the sharing of one eye – as a less literal interpretation: 'the eye' is their father's advisor, whom the daughters take turns hosting. Perseus, an exile-turned-pirate, hears of this wealthy kingdom ruled by women, sails to it, intercepts the eye's ship and takes him hostage. As ransom, he asks the daughters for the Gorgon's location, which only Medusa refuses to reveal. As a result, Perseus returns the eye to the two sisters in exchange for the Gorgon, but kills Medusa. Perseus then cuts up the Gorgon so that it can fit on his ship, placing the head as the figurehead. Henceforth, his ship is named 'the Gorgon'.[105] The myth of petrifaction, Palaephatus claims, originated when Perseus tried to claim the money which the people of Seriphos had promised him upon his return. Instead, the Seriphians left human-sized rocks in their place, causing Perseus to remark: "Be careful that you do not suffer what the people of Seriphos did, who saw the Gorgon's head and were turned to stone".[106] Palaephatus, then, reframes the popular story, providing 'rational' explanations for all

[103] In other Egyptian versions of the myth, such as that mentioned by Herodotus in his *Histories* (II. 91) (425 BCE) Medusa does appear in her more commonly attested Monstrous Gorgon depiction.
Her Monstrous Gorgon form is not essential for the meaning and representation of her figure to remain the same. Highlighting that it is her position as a female threat that is most prevalent in her story.
[104] Palaeph. *Peri Apiston*. 31.
[105] *ibid*.
[106] *ibid*.

of its more 'mythical' aspects. Here, Medusa's threat is not unrealistic or fantastical. Her monstrosity in this myth is created through her personification of the real threat a woman with power could pose in the androcentric Greco-Roman society. In this myth, she displays the threat any woman could pose; she is an unmarried woman with wealth and authority who will not bend to Perseus' desires. Medusa is a threat to his masculine authority, and that is why he kills her.

Diodorus' version, although not an attempt to rationalise the standard Medusa myth, does share certain key similarities with Palaephatus' version. In the *Historical Library* (ca. 36-30 BCE), Diodorus mentions the Gorgons while describing a race ruled by women in western Libya:

> Now there have been in Libya a number of races of women who were warlike and greatly admired for their manly vigour; for instance, tradition tells us of the race of the Gorgons, against whom, as the account is given, Perseus made war.[107]

He describes the Gorgons as a race where women practise war and administer states, while men merely serve as a means of procreation. This race, he claims, was known by the Greeks as the Amazons.[108] Diodorus' Gorgons are thus a more 'human' Other. They were not creatures descended from the gods, monsters, or primordials. Nor were they deformed humans, but a civilisation that held different values which contradicted the Greek way of life.[109] To the Greeks, the Amazons would have represented an inversion of their ordered society; a race where women rule, fight and hunt. These Amazonian women, like Medusa, had an association with snake imagery:

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[107] Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist*. III. 52.

[108] *ibid*. 53.

[109] Cf. Herodotus (*His*. IV. 114), where the Amazons inform Greek men: "We would find it impossible to live with your women, because our practices are completely different from theirs. We haven't learnt women's work. We shoot arrows, wield javelins, ride horses—things which your women never have anything to do with. They just stay in their wagons and do women's work; they never go out hunting or anywhere else either. We would find it impossible to get along with them."

they used "the skins of large snakes" "[f]or protective devices".[110] The parallels with the Gorgons continue. Diodorus explains that the Amazons were ruled by a queen called Myrina, who waged war with men and sustained heavy losses.[111] Over time the Gorgons regained their strength. Then Medusa became the Amazonian queen until Perseus came to subdue them. At a later stage, Herakles completely eradicated what was left of the Amazons, as he could not let any Greeks suffer under the rule of women.[112] This tale is a triumph for androcentric society, where Medusa's death becomes the means to protect Greek morals and enforce their societal hierarchy. There are several similarities and differences between these two tales. Here, as in Palaephatus' work, she is a mortal female ruler. However, this portrayal has more similarities with her normal hybrid Monstrous portrayal, here she not only retains her Gorgon title, but she is also found associated with snakes. In these works, there is a definitive focus on the danger of women with means and authority living apart from masculine control. This is the core issue represented in these depictions of Medusa, where she is a human monster, not a literal monster. She is not fantastical and inhuman, but she poses a much more insidious threat; the threat that any woman might pose if not sufficiently restrained by masculine authority. Since Medusa has not gained these powers from some god or divine curse, it makes the Greco-Roman fears about women seem both more realistic and more realisable.

Medusa's Gaze

The majority of the works discussed so far have focused on specific aspects of Monstrous Medusa's figure, particularly on her threat as a woman, as a descendant of the earth, and – through her association with snakes – as a hybrid. They do not, however, focus very heavily on the power of her gaze. This is the source of her power

[110] Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist*. III. 54.
[111] *ibid*. 55.
[112] *ibid*.

in most of the Monstrous Medusa myths, and it is this theme that forms the focus of Apollodorus' *Library*. The role of 'sight' and 'seeing' is a major theme in this work, with Medusa's gaze being the ultimate example of this and a core aspect of the myth. Medusa's Gaze is fought over within the myth, with Perseus attempting to take the Gaze from Medusa for himself. The importance of this battle's outcome can be underscored by a better understanding of the significance and power that Greco-Romans attached to 'sight'. Squire has pointed out that in antiquity, 'sight' was viewed as active in nature, not the passive physical, physiological and psychological phenomenon it is viewed as in modern physiological understanding.[113] From a modern perspective, sight is something that happens without any force being exerted; it is reactive. In the ancient world, however, 'sight' had power and ability. Several philosophers and thinkers, like Claudius Ptolemy, Euclid (the mathematician), Aelius Galenus, and Plato, ascribed to the "extramissionist" theory of seeing. Plato explains this theory in his *Timaeus* (ca. 360 BCE):

> So whenever the ray that flows through the eyes issues forth into surrounding daylight, like meets with like and coalesces with it, until a single, undifferentiated stuff is formed, in alignment with the direction of the eyes, wherever the fire from inside strikes and pushes up against an external object. The similarity between the fire from within and the fire outside means that the stuff is completely homogeneous, and whenever it touches or is touched by anything else, it transmits the object's impulses right through itself and all the way up to the soul, and the result is the perception we call 'seeing'.[114]

According to this theory, eyesight is an active process in which the eye itself contains fire and emits fiery rays of light that touch perceived objects. This clash between the fiery rays and the object itself is what is then transported back to the eye and understood by the soul to create perception. This is a physical force, one that makes contact and touches that which it beholds, and as a physical force, it can be used,

[113] Squire 2016: 19.
[114] Pl. *Ti*. 45 c-d.

wielded, and weaponised. 'Sight', 'seeing', and the 'gaze' were thus an active force in the ancient mind. Aristotle himself believed that sight was integral to understanding life and of greater importance than the other senses.[115] Bieldfeldt has shown how this idea of the eye as a fiery emitter of light persisted from the Archaic Age of Greece right through to the Roman Imperial period – from the time of Homer and Greek poetry to Roman poetry and poetic language, where the word *lumen* 'light', which carries the idea of a fiery eye, is used interchangeably with *oculus* 'eye'.[116]

The 'gaze', in Greco-Roman society, was not, therefore, merely an abstract idea. Nor was it a passive act as it is viewed today; rather, it was an active force that could potentially be directed outwards as a weapon. This is evident in the ancient beliefs surrounding the 'evil eye', where harm could be inflicted through malevolent forces emanating from another's eyes.[117] The Roman poet Catullus, in his *Poem 5*, refers to this force, requesting an uncountable number of kisses from his lover to prevent anyone from cursing them with the evil eye through knowledge of how many kisses they shared.[118] The eyes were regarded as a means by which power could be transmitted and directed. This belief was prevalent throughout the ancient world; the 'evil eye' was known as the *fascinum* in Latin and the *baskania* in Greek.[119] Consequently, the eyes serve both as a source of power and a channel for conveying emotions and intentions. The eyes' gaze can be interpreted to express an individual's resolve, anger, malintent, and fear. The importance attached to 'sight' in the ancient world is underscored by its prevalence in tragedy, where the eyes are frequently highlighted as a powerful indicator of a person's intentions and emotions:

[115] Arist. *Metaph*. I. 1: "[W]e prefer seeing, one might say, as against everything else. And the cause is that, among the senses, this one most of all makes us discover things, and makes evident many differences."
[116] Bielfeldt 2016: 125.
[117] Squire 2016: 27.
[118] Catul. *5*. 7-12.
[119] Foster 2003: 18.

> I've seen her cast a savage look at them,
> as though she's contemplating doing something to them.
> I know for sure she won't relent her anger
> until she's struck some victim to the ground —
> but when she does, may it be enemies, not friends.[120]

This quote from Euripides' *Medea*, spoken by the Nurse about Medea, is chilling; the danger Medea embodies as a woman and a sorceress is evident in the fear of her anger following her husband Jason's betrayal. It foreshadows the unforgivable act she will later commit: the murder of her children for revenge, during which he abandons her humanity and becomes a monster.[121] A female monster that possesses a dangerous gaze like Medusa's. Medea shares several parallels with Medusa; she is similarly associated with snakes, being able to control them and driving a chariot pulled by dragons.[122] Through this portrayal, she is being characterised as a powerful woman who is a threat to society and morality.

The eyes are used here to convey her dangerous intentions and anger. This is again evident in Sophocles' *Antigone.* After Antigone is led away to die, the chorus sings of others who have suffered; one situation they recounted was "where savage Ares beheld the terrible blinding wounds dealt to Phineus' sons by their father's wife. Dark the eyes that looked to avenge their mother."[123] Eyes are a source of projecting emotion; it is not always negative, although it is powerful. This is demonstrated in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (fifth century BCE), when Iphigenia's sacrifice is described, and her terror and pleading are seen as a physical force from her eyes: "she struck the

[120] Eur. *Med*. 93-94.
[121] Medusa is not the only female serpentine monster Medea is likened to, after this horrific act, Jason calls her, (Eur. *Med*. 1334-1345): a "lioness… more cruel that Etruscan Scylla."
[122] Ov. *Met*. VII. 320-327, 212-226. It must be noted that the Greeks and Romans connected snakes with witches and sorceresses, as seen here in Medea's ability to control them. This association will also be briefly mentioned later in 'The Tomb, the Womb, and the Moon' section of Chapter 3, when Hekate, the goddess of witchcraft, is shown to be connected with serpents.
[123] Soph. *Ant*. 970-976.

sacrificers with the eyes' arrows of pity".[124] The eyes, consequently, were a powerful descriptor and seat of emotion. Furthermore, when eyes were likened to the Gorgon's, they frequently symbolised malevolence. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (ca. 479-424 BCE), Zeus' battle against Typhoeus is recounted by Prometheus, with his depiction of the monstrous being not only focused on the inherent danger he holds that is overtly visible within his eyes but is also directly likened to Medusa's glare:

> Once against all the gods [Typhoeus] stood, opposed, hissing out terror from his grim jaws; his eyes flashed gorgon-glaring lightning as he thought to smash the sovereign tyranny of Zeus.[125]

This motif of the eyes appears again in Euripides' *Heracles* (416 BCE), where he describes Heracles in his monstrosity, and, in his madness, murdering his sons while focusing on his eyes as a descriptor for this: "But Heracles' eyes were like a gorgon's – savage, rolling".[126] Medusa is employed in these cases as the utmost personification of the dangerous gaze.

The power of sight was thus prominent within Greco-Roman thought,[127] and there were strict beliefs about who should wield this power. It was an active, authoritative power, and as such was seen as a power and a force that should be in control of the active, authoritative members within Greco-Roman society, the men. The patriarchal beliefs on male superiority[128] carried over into individuals' relationship with the gaze, wherein women who were expected to show modesty and submission and were relegated to the private sphere of the home, were also expected to have their eyes

[124] Aes. *Aga*. 240-241.
[125] Aes. *Pro*. 355-358.
[126] Eur. *Her*. 990.
[127] Sight was an important theme in the ancient world. Squire (2016: 10) notes that even in the archaic age, sight was used to define sentient intelligent beings and that, in the works of Homer, seeing the sun's light was synonymous with being alive, whereas the realm of the dead was imagined as dark and unseen.
[128] For the dependent status of Women in Classical Greece see Cohen (1989). For their dependent status in ancient Rome see Mosier-Dubinsky (2013), and Gardener (1986).

downcast in public.[129] Eye contact and movement within social interaction can be used as a means of communication, expressing emotions, and a means of showing respect, or the lack of it. Cairns notes in his work several factors that influenced how eye contact was viewed. He notes that free men of equal rank and men opposing each other feel it is right to look at one another.[130] They are equals, one is not superior to the other, and they thus meet on the same level without one showing subservience through restricted eye contact. Women, by contrast, were expected to have downcast eyes out of respect for male superiors due to social norms,[131] unmarried women were forbidden from making eye contact with men they did not know, failure to do this was seen by physiogymist philosophers (who used the body, especially the face as a means of interpreting character) as a sign that a woman was a prostitute.[132] This is because in their view, it was only prostitutes who did not follow the traditional values of seclusion of women from non-familiar men, and thus were the women most open to being looked at by men, while citizen women were constrained by modesty and propriety.[133] There is thus a hierarchy to the look where those lower can be looked at by those above them, and deference through restrained eye contact is expected. Cairns explains that ancient authors and sources such as Adamantius[134] and Anonymus Latinus[135] "explicitly observe that the shameless not only stare without blinking but

[129] For the seclusion and status of Women in Classical Greece see Cohen (1989).
[130] Cairns 2005: 132-134.
[131] This submissive manner of conduct is exemplified by Andromache in *Trojan Women*, (Eur. *Tro*. 654): "I gave my lord's presence the tribute of hushed lips and eyes quietly downcast."
[132] Cairns 2005: 132-134. Cf. In Lysias' speech (Lys. *10*. *Against Theomnestus*. 19) where he raises issues of law and its language, he categorises prostitutes as: "All those women who go abroad overtly... Pay attention, all of you. 'Overtly' (*pephasmenōs*) is 'in public,' 'go abroad' (*pōleisthai*) is 'walk around'."
[133] Davidson 1998: 78: "[W]omen who wanted to preserve a reputation for decency rarely strayed out of doors except under pressing necessity and a thick cloak; public activities, such as politics and shopping, were the province of men. Women of the streets therefore lived on the wrong side of the threshold and advertised their availability by submitting to the public gaze."
[134] 2.48 = i.413 Foerster.
[135] 94 = ii.120 Foerster.

also look people straight in the face."[136] There is thus an authority seen through the gaze and its use; it is a symbol and weapon of power.

According to Mulvey's theory on the 'male gaze', looking is divided into two categories: the active/male and the passive/female. The 'male gaze' asserts its desires onto the depicted female, who is styled in an exhibitionist role for considerable visual and erotic impact.[137] Mulvey notes that women are often presented as the objects of sexualised gazes; women in film exist to evoke emotions in the hero, and they are not significant in themselves.[138] Female characters serve as the spectacle while the male character is the driving active force of the narrative that moves the action.[139] Men in these tales are the possessors of the look, and this is where they gain their power.[140] Here, gender has a direct relationship with power. Women can possess a male gaze and men a female one depending on the context.[141] In this manner, the nymph Salmacis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, can be perceived to gaze at the male youth Hermaphroditus with a 'male' voyeuristic gaze. The nymph watches Hermaphroditus bathing in her pond and immediately falls in love with him, endeavouring to possess him, regardless of his desires:

> … she saw the boy,
> and realized that she just had to have him…
> Salmacis is delighted by the sight
> and burns with passion for his nakedness…
> he dives into the pond…
> glowing within that liquid as though lilies
> or an ivory figurine has been sealed up

[136] Cairns 2005: 128.
[137] Mulvey 1988: 62.
[138] *ibid.* 63.
[139] *ibid.*
[140] Salzman-Mitchel 2005: 6.
[141] When speaking of a 'male gaze' or a 'female gaze', Salzman-Mitchel (2005: 7) emphasises that it is important to note that the terms do not imply that the observer is either male or female but instead imply the position of power, or lack of it, from which an individual acts. Whether or not their look has power is dependent upon the amount of active force and ability the one with the gaze possesses.

in clearest glass.[142]

Her gaze is seen to reduce him to a thing possessed, as a figurine for her to keep, not a person. Furthermore, Salmacis' invasion of his bodily autonomy does not end here. She dives into the pool and grabs onto Hermaphroditus. Acting in a predatory, invasive manner, she "surrounds her prey, just as the serpent wraps herself around the eagle when he grasps her in his talons"[143] and prays to the gods to grant her wish that they may never be separated, the gods immediately acquiesce, blending them into a singular being, a hermaphrodite, joining them together for all eternity and stripping his personhood from him.[144] Hermaphroditus' wishes are completely dismissed within this narrative, his bodily autonomy and voice is stripped from him in an act akin to rape, he is made into an object of sexual desire. This male gaze and its power to objectify are especially relevant in Greco-Roman literature and art, where the works are created by male authors and artists for male audiences. It is this context that makes any woman who possesses it so dangerous, and this is what makes Medusa so Monstrous. Her power is far greater than Salmacis' since she not only figuratively objectifies men, but literally objectifies them by turning them into stone. With Medusa, this power of the gaze, this active forceful masculine power, is possessed and enhanced. She is the 'male gaze' turned Monstrous, and she uses her gaze against the very men who normally possess it. Medusa's gaze transformed men into the objectified visual position normally associated with women in myth. She is a feminine force of male creation made for the male audience's consumption, yet she possesses this masculine power escalated to an extreme form.

It is this context that is needed to understand the prevalent themes of 'sight' and 'gaze' in Apollodorus' account of the Medusa myth. Medusa was a serpentine, unmarried

[142] Ov. *Met*. V. 433-488.
[143] *ibid*. 497-499.
[144] *ibid*. 511-514.

woman without male guardianship, who lived on the outskirts of society on a rocky island in the Mediterranean, far from the ordered towns and civilisation. In addition to these sources of male anxiety, Medusa also possessed the male gaze in a more literal and powerful form. Her figure thus represented several fears for the Greco-Romans: the fear of chaos, the fear of women being outside of male control, and the fear of emasculation. To counter these threats, Perseus is presented as a heroic figure opposing them. To analyse and understand the Monstrous Medusa, one must also comprehend Perseus as a figure; their stories are closely linked and serve as parallel elements opposing one another within the narrative. The Perseus myth is not only a means for a male force to regain order over a monster, but also epitomises the typical Indo-European 'hero' myth.[145] Which follows the model identified by Lord Raglan: a hero is set in deadly opposition to a monster, after a series of steps which lead to victory against this adversary, he is then able to return, thereafter gaining his rightful inheritance which he was previously deprived of, thus gaining patriarchal control.[146] This happens within the myth of Medusa; she is the deadly threat he must overcome, and the control being battled for is power over Medusa's gaze. Medusa is the opponent Perseus must face to be able to return and assert his control and dominance. Perseus seeks complete control over the gaze that will allow him to cement himself as a man and a heroic figure. Perseus' character is created and shaped against, and at the expense of, Medusa's.

This is common in myth, where women are seen as the barrier between men and their *arete* 'excellence', and the male role in Greek society is explained and defined through women's opposition to it.[147] This holds true as well in Roman myth. A distinct example of the male role being defined in opposition to a woman is seen in the tale of Hercules

[145] Mack 2002: 578.
[146] Raglan 1990: 138.
[147] Gould 1980: 56.

and Omphale. In Ovid's *Heroides* (ca. 25-16 BCE), Deianeira writes to Hercules: "Venus has harmed you more than Juno did: Juno's persecution spurred you on; Venus humiliates you, her foot on your neck."[148] She sees Hercules' interactions and affairs with women as the main aspect that overcomes his strength. Deianeira goes on to mention that when, as a servant to Omphale, Hercules and Omphale cross-dressed in one another's clothes, this is the one time he was conquered, and it was by a woman:

> How could you tell of all that while wearing a distinguished purple dress? Didn't your clothes make you hold your tongue? Omphale even adorned herself with your arms – famous trophies taken from her captive. Go on – take on airs, enumerate your brave exploits; she was the real man, you have no right to that title. Greatest of heroes, you're inferior to her, in so far as it was a greater feat to conquer you than those you conquered. All your achievements are credited to her; hand over what was yours; your girlfriend is the inheritor of your glory.[149]

Here, Deianeira accuses Hercules of being unmasculine and unheroic by acting the part of a woman. She insists that what makes Hercules a heroic figure is his distinction from womanly attributes and pursuits. Omphale becomes 'the real man' when she adorns herself with Hercules' armour and trophies. In this work, the male is defined precisely in its difference from the feminine and the female Other. Hercules' heroism is eradicated through Omphale's coercing him into her clothes. Just as female monsters such as the Erinyes, the Graiai, and the Sphinx have the power to inhibit men, a mortal woman poses the same threat. Women and men, heroes and monsters, these categories that defined through their antithesis to one another in myth, where the conflict between these opposing forces is used to investigate, explain, and reinforce societal norms and beliefs.

[148] Ov. *Her*. IX. 11-12.
[149] *ibid*. 101-110.

Apollodorus' Perseus-Medusa myth serves as an exploration of the gaze through the narrative of Perseus' heroic journey. In this journey, Perseus usurps the objectifying gaze from a monstrous entity and asserts control over it. Throughout Apollodorus' rendition of the myth, the gaze is alluded to and emphasised through the themes of sight and seeing. The first mention of sight appears in the oracle's prediction regarding Perseus' birth to his grandfather Acrisius.[150] The prophecies of seers and oracles are regarded as possessing a vision beyond that of an ordinary man. This focus on sight intensifies as the narrative progresses, with its repetition underscoring its significance. Acrisius attempts to escape his foretold fate by concealing his daughter from view underground.[151] However, prophecy is inescapable and, in this instance, is thwarted by Zeus, who impregnates Danaë in the form of a shower of gold that illuminates her and forces her into view. Danaë and Perseus subsequently both locked out of sight in a chest and cast out of view of their homeland over the sea.[152] Acrisius first attempts to repress the erotic power associated with gazing at a woman by imprisoning Danaë, thereby preventing her from gaining a suitor.[153] When this strategy fails, he hides both mother and child from sight.

The theme of Apollodorus' account of the myth so far has been sight, but specifically the lack of it. Perseus' situation is repeatedly one of a lack of sight or being out of sight. Mack argues that this is a sign of Perseus' lack of complete control over vision: he is seen by the oracle, his grandfather hides his mother from sight, and then Perseus is sent out of sight.[154] While Perseus does not have power over vision, others around him do, and they use it against him; and Medusa, his future opponent, exemplifies this.

[150] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 1.
[151] *ibid*.
[152] *ibid*.
[153] Squire (2016: 27) comments that Acrisius' attempt to repress Danaë's erotic powers follows Greco-Roman ideas about bewitching and envy both of which are conferred through a look. This therefore adds yet another aspect of sight and seeing to this tale.
[154] Mack 2002: 589.

From this point on references to 'the gaze' become more explicit as Perseus' quest against Medusa begins and it is modelled as a battle of vision: Perseus must defeat Medusa without falling victim to her gaze. Medusa can gaze upon others, she cannot safely be looked at, and she has complete dominance and control of the gaze. Perseus thus needs tools to defeat her. In his search, he must find the Graiai sisters, siblings of Medusa, old women with one eye and one tooth among them, where one is always awake and watching.[155] In Apollodorus' version of the myth, Perseus manages to steal this eye, their sight, and use it as leverage to get the information about the location of the nymphs from them before returning it.[156] The Roman Hyginus' variant of the myth in the *Astronomy* (ca. 27 BCE – 14 CE) has the Graiai as the guardians of Medusa; here, Perseus throws their shared eye into a lake, blinding them, so they are unable to see him and protect Medusa.[157] Both versions require the possession of the Graiai's sight by Perseus to proceed. Perseus, who previously had no control over sight, steals sight and uses it for his own gain.

In Apollodorus, Perseus gains gifts from the nymphs that prepare him to oppose Medusa:

> [W]inged sandals, and the *kibisis*, which is said to have been a kind of wallet. They also had the cap [of Hades] … as long as he wore it, he could see whomever he wished while remaining invisible to others. After he had received in addition an adamantine sickle from Hermes.[158]

The sandals allow him to move instantly by flight, to travel to the outskirts where the Gorgons dwell.[159] This allows him to move to where he can access, where he can 'see' the Gorgons. With the helm, he is safe from sight and thus able to avert the sight of

[155] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 2.
[156] *ibid*.
[157] Hyg. *Poet. ast*. II. 12.
[158] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 2.
[159] Vernant 1991: 146.

his enemy, Medusa, the obstacle to his success. He has the *kibisis* to enclose her decapitated head in darkness so that her gaze's power is suppressed until brought out at Perseus' will. Perseus then travels to the Gorgons and finds them sleeping. With Athena's guidance, he can cut off Medusa's head, and from her severed neck the winged horse, Pegasus, and Chrysaor are born.[160] Importantly, Perseus cuts off Medusa's head while "looking into a bronze shield in which he could see the reflection of the Gorgon".[161] Here, Perseus is finally able to indirectly view Medusa; he looks at her image while her sight is obscured by sleep. Medusa is no longer the one looking at and objectifying people; here it is Perseus looking at her with the 'male gaze' and reducing her to an object, both figuratively by viewing her and literally through her death and taking her head as a prize. Perseus has made Medusa an object of his gaze and thus reasserted his control over a monstrous woman. He then takes her gaze and her power for himself:

> … what was at stake in his encounter with Medusa was less the need to slay the monster… than the need to take possession of her power… the hero's charge… was not to rid the world of this power, but to 'rescue' it from the clutches of a noxious monster. The head of Medusa remains active in order both to represent this power (as a condensed form of the figure of Medusa herself) and to enable the legend (via the trope of decapitation) to describe the transferral of this power to Perseus.[162]

He is then able to safely flee hidden from the sight of the other Gorgons by the helm.[163] Sight is now his tool and firmly within his power.

Even in death, Medusa's head retains her powers. Perseus has claimed the gaze and is using it for his own masculine pursuits. He employs it against Phineas, the man plotting against him for Andromeda's hand in marriage, thereby securing a wife to

[160] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 2.
[161] *ibid*.
[162] Mack 2002: 588.
[163] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 3.

continue his legacy; he wields it to protect his mother from her suitor; and ultimately, he uses it to secure his kingship.[164] He has taken Medusa's gaze, her power to objectify, and has used it to assert his total masculine control. He has defeated the monster and restored order to society through his possession of Medusa's gaze. Medusa's gaze is now wielded by a man and directed against both men and women who oppose him. Perseus' control over the gaze establishes his position as a hero and a king; with him, it is redefined as a heroic trophy rather than a monstrous element. Thus, Medusa's gaze is the central feature of the Perseus myth, created to be tamed. Medusa's gaze and the Perseus-Medusa myth were designed to convey cultural ideas about sight and seeing, articulating the fears of patriarchal societies while enabling them to surmount such fears. Medusa was armed with her gaze so that Perseus could claim it and utilise it to establish order and assert his masculine authority. Medusa challenges the established patriarchal norms associated with the male gaze, while Perseus counters her. This dynamic creates a cultural hero whilst simultaneously transforming Medusa and her gaze into a powerful symbol within the Greco-Roman world. Therefore, Medusa is not the agent of the myth; Perseus is. Medusa serves merely as a tool for transmitting the message and the ideology of the male gaze and its rightful place. As Mulvey notes, it is commonplace in a patriarchal society for a woman's image to be fixed in place as the carrier of meaning, not as the creator of meaning.[165] Medusa epitomises the misuse of the gaze and personifies the monstrous figure that carries the myth's message. Perseus is the hero; he is the active force within the myth, seizing the power for himself and crafting the narrative and the meaning of the tale for Greco-Roman audiences. Monstrous Medusa was fashioned to convey the masculine societal message within Perseus' heroic journey; she was created to communicate a message through her destruction.

[164] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 3-4.
[165] Mulvey 1988: 343.

Divergence and Conformity in Roman Myth Inheritance

The Roman accounts of the Monstrous Medusa myth are taken from the Greeks. Felton notes that the Romans took the earlier Greek models of monsters with little adaptation, like their adaptation of the Greek pantheon.[166] However, there were some important differences in the reception and focus of the Roman versions.[167] Rome also had less divergent versions of it as the myth became standardised from Ovid's 8 CE version onwards. Roman Monstrous Medusa remains a figure of dangerous femininity and the battle over the gaze. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid focuses on the transformation and the mutation of mortals, gods, beings, animals, and objects. Medusa, the mortal-turned-hybrid monster, is a perfect example of this theme. As is common with female monsters such as Scylla, Lamia, the Sphinxes and more, Medusa transcends ordered categorisation. She is a completely hybrid character; a symbol of female pollution and the easy mutation of the boundaries around women in classical mythology, she loses her form to monstrosity, gaining bestial parts and merging forms.[168] She never falls under a single category, and this hybridity highlights her monstrosity.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Perseus is once again portrayed as the son of Zeus, born from a shower of gold.[169] Medusa, once a beautiful maiden, was desired by many and ultimately raped by Neptune in Minerva's temple. Outraged, Minerva transformed her to have snakes for hair and to turn all she looked upon to stone.[170] Medusa's curse is inflicted after "Jove's daughter turned away from the outrage /and chastely hid her

[166] Felton 2012: 127.
[167] Felton (2012: 127) observes that the Romans were even more obsessed with the idea of monstrous beings than the Greeks, embracing the bizarre and grotesque and allowing it to affect all aspects of Roman life.
[168] Keith 2013: 314-315.
[169] Ov. *Met*. IV. 836-837.
[170] *ibid*. 1082-1094.

eyes behind her aegis."[171] Minerva looks away from the polluting act; she averts her sight from Medusa as all will have to in future. The Perseus in this account also steals the eye of the Graiai,[172] and indirectly looks at Medusa's reflection in his shield, gazing at her before killing her, and Pegasus and Chrysaor emerge from her body.[173] Ovid goes into more detail about the powers her head possessed after her death: the transformations it inflicted on others and the incredible power of the gaze are depicted in detail. The blood dripping from her head when Perseus flies over Lydia "come to life as snakes / of various kinds; and that is why today / serpents infested that whole unpleasant land."[174] Medusa is thus responsible for creating a whole race of dangerous creatures. When Perseus rests Medusa's head in a nest of seaweed for safekeeping, the twigs solidify with contact and become the seeds that make coral, a new species.[175] While both her ability to give birth from her severed head and the creation of coral show Medusa's overwhelming unnatural power, the most forceful example of her abilities comes when Perseus wields her severed head against Atlas:

> The hero turned his back
> to Atlas and raised up in his left hand
> the unkempt horror of Medusa's head.
> Atlas became a mountain just as large
> as the man had been…
> Each part grew to extraordinary size
> (as you immortals had ordained), until
> the weight of heaven rested on his shoulders.[176]

Medusa's gaze, even in death, has the power to transform anything, from inanimate objects to people, and even Titans.

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[171] Ov. *Met*. IV. 1089-1090.
[172] *ibid*. 1055-1058.
[173] *ibid*. 1067-1072.
[174] *ibid*. 848-850.
[175] *ibid*. 952-1024.
[176] *ibid*. 897-907.

In every version, Medusa – while still alive – is presented as a threat to men, and there is only one extant version, the Roman poet Lucan's *Pharsalia* (61-65 CE), in which she wields her powers against women when turning several Ethiopian tribes to stone.[177] The sole Greek version of the Medusa-Perseus myth where her powers are directed against women is in Pindar's *12th Pythian Ode* (490 BCE), where Perseus employs her power against the entire island of Seriphos.[178] In no other version of the myth is Medusa's gaze aimed at women. Her threat can thus be pinpointed in that Medusa does not adhere to male authority, and her actions are outside of male control. While Lucan diverges from previous Greek versions of the myth by having Medusa herself utilise her power on an entire population, the Roman poet retains a core element of the earlier Greek tales, with the Gorgon embodying a monstrous female threat to male patriarchal society. He preserves her most monstrous characteristic. The use of her powers against other women would not be considered as monstrous by the androcentric Greco-Roman society as when they are directed against men. Her greatest crime is that she used her powers against those who should have power over her. This is depicted within Aeschylus' play, the *Eumenides* (458 BCE), where Orestes is on trial for killing his mother in revenge for her murder of his father. The gods Apollo and Athena are present at this trial, showcasing the divine perspective. This, therefore, exemplifies the societally just and moral argument in this case. Athena openly shows her support for Orestes' actions: "So, in a case where the wife has killed her husband, lord of the house, her death shall not mean most to me."[179] The goddess of wisdom views Clytemnestra's murder as just, as it was in retaliation for the murder of a man, Orestes' father, Agamemnon. Apollo regards the fact that Agamemnon was murdered by a woman as a grave crime, stating that: "It is not the same thing for a man of blood to die honoured with the king's staff given by the hand of god, and that

[177] Dexter 2010: 40. Cf. Luc. *Pharsalia*. IX. 50-52
[178] Pi. *P*. 12. 12.
[179] Aesch. *Eum*. 739-740.

by means of a woman".[180] The chorus, after hearing the gods' perspectives note that "Zeus, by your story, gives first place to the father's death."[181] This trial scene thereby reveals the societal belief that the murder of a man was a more heinous crime than that of a woman, and that for a man to be murdered by a woman and not killed in battle was viewed as even worse. The heinousness of this female opposition can then be extended to crimes other than murder. This explains the prevalence of the opposition of men by female threats in myths such as Medusa and other figures, such as Circe, when she uses her witchcraft against Odysseus' men in Homer's *Odyssey*.[182]

The descriptions of Medusa's use of her destructive power on women do not concern them specifically. Women are only included when civilisations or groups of people are petrified, never as individuals; they are collateral damage when her gaze is directed against patriarchal populations. In these cases, her threat to society as a whole is being emphasised. It was men who tried to oppose Medusa individually. The *Pharsalia* looks at the monstrosity of Medusa, describing her in vivid detail as a terrifying creature. Lucan seems to portray Medusa as unmistakably evil; he is unsympathetic and only describes her as a monster. Here, 'evil' is being used as a description that is "beyond saying that someone is bad, or even mean, malicious and vicious"[183] Lucan describes her as almost an antithesis of what is natural.

In this narrative, Medusa is wholly monstrous; she has no sympathetic attributes and is a threat to society. It is from her that the dangerous aspect of serpents first emerged,[184] alongside the inclusion of "whole tribes of Ethiops tilling lands nearby

[180] Aesch. *Eum*. 625-627.
[181] *ibid*. 640.
[182] Hom. *Od*. X. 230-249.
[183] Singer 2004: 191.
[184] Luc. *Pharsalia*. IX. 629-630.

hardened to marble".[185] This description reinforces that none were safe from her power. This is showcased by the fact that "[n]ot even Pallas could risk a glance".[186] The goddess who gave her this horrifying ability could not even safely look at her. Even the image of Medusa was so powerful that "the Gorgon-brooch centred on Pallas' / bosom… concluded / the Gods' monumental brawl".[187] Lucan reinforces that Medusa is a danger to all, in that even the snakes, part of herself, are not safe from her gaze: she is a universal danger, "even her own adders, rippling and rearing back, avoid the glance of the Gorgon."[188]

Lucan's portrayal focuses on her inherent danger and her power, comparing her to other monstrous beings and describing her own family's fear of her:

> The Eumenides' tresses merely stirred up madness;
> Cerberos tempered his hisses when Orpheus sang;
> Amphitryon's son Hercules looked at the Hydra while lopping it;
> but this monster—! her sire feared her, Phorcys the guardian
> deity of waters, as did her mother Ceto and sister Gorgons.
> She had the power to menace sky and sea
> with a weird paralysis, could encase all creation in clay.[189]

Medusa is thus fashioned and described as a horrifying and threatening female monster. She is a societal threat, dangerous even to other monsters. She is opposed by Perseus and subdued to bring safety to all and reinforce order through the destruction of the threat of the wild dangerous female Other. Her power is then used to mould society to Perseus' ordered masculine control and dominance.

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[185] Luc. *Pharsalia*. IX. 650.
[186] *ibid*. 683.
[187] *ibid*. 654-656.
[188] *ibid*. 652-653.
[189] *ibid*. 442-448.

The Gaze in Iconography

The popularity of the Medusan myth extended beyond the realm of literature. Medusa's image, especially that of her decapitated head, was a powerful symbol in Greco-Roman iconography. In myth, there is a recurrent theme of not only Perseus using Medusa's head after her death, but also of the image of her head being weaponised by Athena, who "[put] the Gorgon's head in the middle of her shield."[190] Just as Medusa's head retained its powers after her death, so too was her image believed to hold her gaze's power. Once Athena puts Medusa's head on her *aegis*, it becomes known as the *Gorgoneion*. This transformation from a monstrous weapon to a protective symbol is an important aspect of the myth.[191] This transference of the power of Medusa's image is symbolised within the myth when Perseus indirectly gazes at Medusa's reflection on the shield. Here, Medusa, who before could not even be gazed upon by a Titan without petrifaction, is seen by a mortal man through her reflection in the shield. The *Gorgoneion* was a recurrent image in iconography used in both an *apotropaic*, or protective manner,[192] and as a decorative feature. Depictions of Medusa are found from the seventh century BCE onward and have one constant feature: a frontal view of her face.[193] In this form, her head was normally depicted as a frontal-facing grotesque image with large eyes, tusks, and a rounded face gazing back at the viewer, retaining the ability to look even as an image. Grethlein notes that "the beholder is immune to their visual threat. The petrification is even reversed: it is not the viewers of the vase, but rather the Gorgons who are petrified as figures on clay".[194] Medusa is therefore objectified not only in death, but also in her transformation into an image. She who once turned victims into images or statues[195] now becomes an

[190] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 46. For a depiction of Athena's *aegis* look at Fig. 3 of the appendix.
[191] Foster 2003: 181.
[192] The *Gorgoneion* and its protective *apotropaic* uses shall be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.
[193] Foster 2003: 182. See, for example, Fig. 4 in the appendix.
[194] Grethlein 2016: 92. Cf. Turner (2016: 160) then argues that in these images Medusa "personifies and embodies (the effects of) her own power."
[195] Ov. *Met.* V. 198-199, 206, 226-229.

image herself. These depictions of 'powerless' Medusa, when she is not being used for her *apotropaic* qualities, are a representation of Monstrous Medusa; it is specifically her image rendered as the creature defeated by Perseus being evoked in these images.

Her objectification and the transfer of the gaze to men are especially seen in images of her death itself and scenes surrounding it on vases. In these depictions, certain common elements persist: Perseus (sometimes accompanied by Athena herself or other figures such as Medusa's sisters or Hermes) gazing at Medusa, moments before slaying her.[196] Although there is some variation in terms of how Perseus views her, whether in water or on his shield, nevertheless, he is always there, gazing at her – and thereby duplicating Medusa's representation as a symbol of the gaze.[197] In these images, Medusa is shown at the very moment she is turned into an object. Perseus has succeeded in putting her under the male gaze, and she is immortalised as an object: Perseus "looked upon her image… reflected in the shield".[198] At last, he "could see the Gorgon's image".[199] Medusa now becomes an object of Perseus' gaze. Having bypassed her monstrous gaze and hidden from her sight, Perseus looks upon the monster that none before him could look upon. In addition to capturing her in his gaze, he then goes on to later nullify the threat she poses by killing her and appropriating her gaze for himself.

The iconographical depictions of Monstrous Medusa invoke Perseus' battle for the gaze and his eventual supremacy over Medusa. There are also images on pottery where Perseus is not present, yet this victory is still evoked. Medusa's depiction, especially that of her decapitated head and its gaze, was a popular image on the *kylix* cups used by men in symposia. By portraying Perseus' triumph, these vessels served

[196] For examples of Athena with Perseus in depictions of Medusa's death scene, see Fig. 2 and Fig. 5 of the appendix.
[197] Grethlein 2016: 97.
[198] Ov. *Met.* IV. 1066-1067.
[199] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 41.

to evoke such key themes as the validity of male control, the ordering of society, and the appropriation of the gaze – all of which would understandably be popular in such an overtly masculine context. Medusa's image was also frequently displayed on a specific type of *kylix* cup, the so-called 'eye-cup', where the motif of her head was a common decoration on the tondo at the bottom of the cup, which was exposed to the drinker as he drank his wine.[200] The outer 'mask' of the cup stares out at the companion symposiasts, as the drinker is stared at by Medusa. The drinkers thus take the Gorgon's face and power on themselves at the same time as they are looked at by her and look at her themselves.[201] Grethein argues that while not all eye-cups feature the symbol of Medusa or the Gorgon, on all of those that do, 'the gaze' is a prevalent theme:

> … the projection of the *gorgoneia* into the eye represents what the symposiast himself sees upon drinking from the cup: it shows Medusa in the reflection of an eye – just as in the act of drinking, the symposiast sees her in the reflection of his own eye… the two visual motifs… eye-cup and *gorgoneion*, were understood to be intrinsically related… the external mask shown to the drinking companions can be seen as the petrification effected by the internal *gorgoneion* when faced by the user of the cup. The petrification lasts only as long as he is drinking and facing the Gorgon. As soon as the vase is put down, the *gorgoneion* is covered by wine once more, so that the symposiast reverts to wearing his own face.[202]

Eye-cups have their own inherent association with the theme of sight.[203] As Steiner notes, they function to convey a specific message: "Vases are vehicles with a set of conventional controls or directives for how the traditional and social material they convey is interpreted."[204] As is common on pottery, motifs and images with linked meanings add to the symbolism of the themes depicted on them. The added Gorgon

[200] For example, see Fig. 6 of the appendix for a depiction of a Gorgon on the tondo of an eye-cup.
[201] Grethlein 2016: 102.
[202] *ibid*. 104. For an example of the eye-cup and its mask effect see Fig. 7.1 of the appendix, this eye-cup is also an example of an eye-cup with a *Gorgoneion* in the tondo, Fig. 7.2.
[203] Steiner 2007: 41.
[204] *ibid*. 73.

element shifts the meaning of the cups slightly by invoking the tale of Perseus' triumph, but it does not weaken the themes associated with the eye-cup shape. Rather, it invokes them more strongly through the link to the tale with similar themes and added meanings and associations.

Steiner also argues that artists link scenes on vases through repetition that is recognised intellectually rather than visually, where there is an expectation that by habit viewers will compare all scenes on all areas of a vase to see if they are linked.[205] This means that the painter would expect the combination of the eye-cup mask element and the *Gorgoneion* tondo decoration to be linked. The context in which these cups were intended to be used is important. Medusa's image was common on cups made for symposiums, an occasion marked by all-male symposiasts.[206] Medusa's story is therefore being evoked by male painters, for use at a gathering of men. The viewers would be those whom Perseus represented, the masculine, educated, wealthy controllers of civilised society. Significantly, her representation here is that of her *Gorgoneion* form: the decapitated head, a trophy of Perseus' heroic exploit. It is also significant that these iconographical depictions show the gaze in the possession of the men who wielded it, the dominant members of society who used the gaze in their everyday lives now also hold Medusa, thus symbolising their possession of the male gaze. Medusa is now a literal object, depicted in clay, stone, metal, and art. This context and the specific audience are important to note as "our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing."[207] It is the context of the Perseus myth that explains what this image invokes. The decorations on symposiastic vessels were often chosen for their depiction of behaviour that should

[205] Steiner 2007: 31.
[206] Mack 2002: 576. Additional sources to consult about the Symposium are: Lill (2007), Slater (1991), Burkert (1991), and Murray (1995).
[207] Berger et al. 1972: 514.

either be emulated or avoided.[208] In this case, Perseus is evoked as a male hero to emulate and embody. When represented in this way, it is Monstrous Medusa who becomes the passive object, the very product that her gaze previously produced.[209] Medusa's gaze is taken by the male, and she is turned into an object, reduced to a defenceless woman in the image of her death.

Conclusion

The representation of Monstrous Medusa was not a static portrayal. The myth did not become standardised until Ovid's account in 8 CE. While she retained her role as an adversary to men, over time Monstrous Medusa underwent several transformations. Authors such as Hesiod, Pindar, Herodotus, Apollodorus, Diodorus, and Ovid all played a significant role in the evolution of the Medusan myth, each presenting their own version of the story. In some iterations of the myth, she is an Amazonian queen, in another, she is shown to be desired by Poseidon without the later emphasis of being his victim.[210] The broad scope of her characterisation, with its varied uses and meanings, reveals her as a powerful and multifaceted monster imbued with a wide range of societal beliefs and values. Monstrous Medusa was used to personify the dangers of the gaze and sight in Greco-Roman society, and the fear of the dangerous and uncontrollable female Other. Medusa was a monstrous mother descended from a perilous line who tempted a god and gave birth to further monstrous beings. She transgressed boundaries: both female and animal, a mother within death and an inhabitant of the distant regions. She was not submissive, and she did not look away from men; it was men who were compelled to avert their gaze from her. Transgressive female figures such as Medea and Clytemnestra are often compared to her to illustrate their monstrosity. Medusa is a symbol of the fears of the male-dominated society of

[208] Steiner 2007: 155.
[209] Bowers 1990: 219.
[210] Diod. Sic. *Bib*. *hist*. III. 54. 1-3; Hes. *Theog*. 270-283.

the time, and this is reflected in the versions of her myths that men propagated about her. For male heroes, she represents a deadly threat to be overpowered; for normal men, she embodies their fear, given form for them to be conquered. Medusa serves as the obstacle for the hero Perseus. She is what separates him from his ability to save his mother, obtain a wife, and gain his kingship. She was the voyeur par excellence who subsequently became the object, not only in death but also as a literal image in art. She is a woman created to be destroyed and objectified, a trophy of the male gaze in the hands of a hero. Her invention and her opposition by Perseus served as a means of alleviating male anxieties and fears. Whether she was a monster, a mortal woman, a mother, or a victim, she had a role to play. As Perseus was fashioned into a shining light of heroism and a means to conquer fears through his successes, so too was Monstrous Medusa invented to exemplify that which he fought, real-world problems embodied in their extreme and terrifying form.

Chapter 2

Protectress Medusa

Monstrous Medusa is the most prominent and recognisable form of the Gorgon. Yet this characterisation of Medusa is not her only form. In fact, this Monstrous aspect is often entirely absent when it comes to iconographical depictions of the Gorgon. Nor is Medusa only recognisable when paired with the hero who slays her. Again, the symbol of Medusa's frontal-facing head, the *Gorgoneion*, already existed long before the emergence of literary accounts on Perseus and Medusa. Even the early recorded literature of the *Gorgoneion*, such as in the *Iliad*,[1] has a *Gorgoneion* as a separate entity from Perseus. The Perseus-Medusa myth was probably a creation to explain an existing phenomenon: the protective *Gorgoneion*. This chapter will explore the iconography of the *Gorgoneion* to see the uses and associations of this protective aspect of the Gorgon. This chapter will look at both the earlier iconography that predates the Perseus-Medusa myth and how *Gorgoneion* imagery changed over time, even once the myth was in circulation. This investigation will focus on the iconography that is separate from Perseus, examining the Gorgon's depictions as a guardian. As society changed and adapted, so too did this form of the Gorgon, adapting and adjusting over time just as the literary sources altered Monstrous Medusa over time. The *Gorgoneion* form maintains its protective nature, but it is not a static image; it alters and changes over time and within different contexts. The *Gorgoneion apotropaic* symbol is the focus of this Chapter, investigating Medusa as a protectress, what it represented, and the associations, beliefs and power it had behind it.

[1] Hom. *Il*. V. 733-742, VIII. 338-349, and XI. 33-40.

The *Gorgoneion*

Images and iconography depicting Medusa were, as Mack points out, extraordinarily common in ancient Greek culture.[2] While some of these images look at Medusa in the context of the Perseus myth and depict some aspect of the legend's narrative, there is a separate image of Medusa, the *Gorgoneion*, which is not situated this way: an image of the Gorgon in isolation from any narrative context.[3] The symbol of the Gorgon-head is agreed to have been depicted before the development of the full-body Gorgon, the *Gorgoneion* depiction thus existed before the Gorgon.[4] This *Gorgoneion* symbol has different connotations from the Perseus legend; instead of fear and destruction, this representation of Medusa has an *apotropaic*, or 'protective', effect. In this form, Medusa's image represents not a Monstrous Medusa, but a Protectress Medusa. This 'protective' image was not confined to any one context or use. The functions of this *Gorgoneion* are diverse, from terrifying enemies, using the symbol's inherent abilities, and even appealing to a divinity for protection.[5] The symbol was not confined to one specific use and was a powerful symbol. The image was used by both the Greeks and the Romans in multiple contexts: "shields, ships, chimneys, temples and other buildings… coins… gem-stones… lamps and furniture… pottery and other vessels, on statue bases, relief *stelae* and votive plaques".[6] Its usage was not isolated or short-lived. The *Gorgoneion* was a specific type of image that was part of a larger category of images within the ancient world. These creatures had their own protective powers; they were *apotoaia* or talismans used to avert evil and were frequently used on military equipment, drinking vessels, sepulchral monuments, sacred architecture, and in the luxury arts.[7]

[2] Mack 2002: 576.
[3] *ibid.* 585.
[4] Croon 1955: 13.
[5] Spathi 2024: 95.
[6] Mack 2002: 576.
[7] Karoglou 2018: 4.

Images of the Gorgon first appeared around the eighth century BCE and have persisted ever since. This emergence marks one of the earliest benchmarks in Greek art, making this image one of the oldest in the medium.[8] The Gorgon was among the earlier monsters depicted in Greek canonical iconography, quickly gaining popularity across the Aegean.[9] Additionally, the depiction of the Gorgon did not vanish from the iconographical record at a later point.[10] Although the Gorgon was a common iconographical image, its portrayal was by no means static. The Gorgon's depiction evolved and transformed over time, with several distinct styles reflecting this change. This evolution was not consistent and occurred at varying dates across different regions; these styles do not indicate the dating of the depiction but serve as a means of categorisation. In the Archaic style, for instance, Medusa is portrayed as an ugly and terrifying monster used as an *apotropaic* symbol, where the grotesque imagery serves as a deterrent and source of fear for the benefit of the user.[11] This Archaic Gorgon appeared independently of the Perseus-Medusa myth.[12] The Archaic style has specific features: a frontal facing, overly circular head with wide, staring eyes, tusks, a bearded mouth, with a long tongue emerging from the grinning mouth, live snakes instead of hair, clawed bronze hands, wings, and often depicted with bent knees to suggest rapid movement.[13]

Generally, the Gorgon develops from a more bestial form to a more humanoid one.[14] The next style, referred to as the 'middle style', is less grotesque. The Gorgon is

[8] Wilk 2007: 31.
[9] Tejero 2021: 6.
[10] *ibid.*
[11] Jooste 2018: 67.
[12] Lazarou and Liritzis 2022: 48.
[13] Jooste 2018: 67. For examples of Archaic Gorgons, see Fig. 8 and Fig. 9 of the appendix. Tejero (2021: 25) explains that the Gorgon's full sprint depiction is done through a pose known as the *knielauf* schema, a frontally depicted body with the image from the waist down depicted in profile with both legs exaggeratedly bent at a 90-degree angle and one leg placed low at the ankle of the other leg. For an example of a running Gorgon, see Fig. 6 of the appendix.
[14] Tejero 2021: 25.

depicted as half-monstrous, half-human, possessing a short nose and a lolling tongue. Aside from fangs and wings, they have human forms, with normal hair rather than snakes.[15] The final style moves even further from the grotesque. This is termed the 'beauty' style, in which the Gorgons are presented as divinely beautiful women who are almost completely human, save for their wings.[16] Over time, the Gorgon adopts a softer appearance, transforming from a monster into a young woman. Occasionally, wings are attached to her decapitated head to signify her otherness, and in Roman times, she acquires a woeful, pitiable expression.[17] The image of the Gorgon with hair composed solely of snakes did not emerge until the Renaissance (14th-17th century CE); before this, depictions featured a blend of both snakes and hair.[18] Another very rare style exists from before the standardisation of the *Gorgoneion's* form. In this form, Medusa is portrayed as a centaur.[19] It has been argued that centaurs are among the earliest animal-human hybrids found in Greek vase paintings.[20] This may explain why some early Greek vases from the Cyclades depict a hippomorphic Gorgon, which then quickly transitioned to featuring the feline and serpentine features as more mythological monsters were adopted.[21] This form existed before a canon of the Gorgon image had been established. This also clarifies other early examples, such as one from Corinth, where the Gorgon head is depicted on an avian body.[22] This lack of consistency in the early iconography gradually diminished as more recognisable Gorgons with humanoid bodies became increasingly favoured.[23]

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[15] Jooste 2018: 68.

[16] *ibid*. To see an example of the beauty style Medusa see Fig. 10 in the appendix.

[17] Wilk 2007: 35. For an example of the mournful Medusa image, see Appendix Fig. 11.

[18] Wilk 2007: 47. For depictions of the Gorgon with a mixture of snakes and hair see Appendix Fig. 8, Fig. 11, Fig. 12, Fig. 13, and Fig. 14.

[19] Jooste 2018: 69. Cf. Howe (1954: 213) mentions an example of the hippomorphic Medusa which was found on a Boeotian pithos.

[20] Tejero 2021: 25.

[21] *ibid.*

[22] Wilk 2007: 37.

[23] *ibid.* These depictions of the *Gorgoneion* and its associations with birds and horses are examined in further detail in the next chapter, which also discussed why these animals may have been chosen for these early depictions before the image became more homogenised.

This *apotropaic* depiction of Medusa contradicts her Monstrous depiction in the Perseus myth. In most contexts, the *Gorgoneion* acted as an *apotropaia*, a protective image used to ward off evil and malevolent forces. The earliest surviving description of the *Gorgoneion* image is in the *Iliad* on Agamemnon's shield:

> There were ten circles of bronze upon [the shield], and set about it were twenty knobs of tin, pale-shining, and in the very centre another knob of dark cobalt. And circled in the midst of all was the blank-eyed face of the Gorgon with her stare of horror, and Fear was inscribed upon it, and Terror. The strap of the shield had silver upon it, and there also on it was coiled a cobalt snake, and there were three heads upon him twisted to look backward and grown from a single neck, all three.[24]

In Book 8, Homer also compares the enraged Hektor driving the Greeks back to their ships to the Gorgon,[25] and when arming herself Athena's shield is decorated with the Gorgon's head as a symbol of fear and horror.[26] The use of the Gorgon on the *aegis* of Athena, Agamemnon's shield, and defensive armour in general functioned as "a horror to avert horror."[27] Athena's *aegis* is depicted by artists either as a breastplate with a central prominent *Gorgoneion*, or a shield with a central *Gorgoneion*.[28] The shield is occasionally textured to resemble scales, feathers, or both, which might be linked to Athena's associations with owls and snakes.[29] Homer also mentions the Gorgon in the

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[24] Hom. *Il*. XI. 33-40.

[25] *ibid.* VIII. 338-349: "As when some hunting hound in the speed of his feet pursuing a wild boar or a lion snaps from behind at his quarters or flanks, but watches for the beast to turn upon him, so Hektor followed close on the heels of the flowing-haired Achaians, killing ever the last of the men; and they fled in terror. But after they had crossed back over the ditch and the sharp stakes in flight, and many had gone down under the hands of the Trojans, they reined in and stood fast again beside their ships, calling aloud upon each other, and to all of the gods uplifting their hands each man of them cried out his prayers in a great voice, while Hektor, wearing the stark eyes of a Gorgon, or murderous Ares, wheeled about at the edge his bright-maned horses."

[26] *ibid.* V. 733-742: "Now in turn Athene, daughter of Zeus of the aegis… now assuming the war tunic of Zeus who gathers the clouds, she armed in her gear for the dismal fighting. And across her shoulders she threw the be-tasselled, terrible aegis, all about which Terror hangs like a garland, and Hatred is there, and Battle Strength, and heart-freezing Onslaught and thereon is set the head of the grim gigantic Gorgon, a thing of fear and horror, portent of Zeus of the aegis."

[27] Howe 1954: 213.

[28] Wilk 2007: 45.

[29] *ibid.* Athena's association with owls and snakes is discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

Odyssey. When Odysseus journeys down to the Underworld in Book 11, he fears that Persephone might set "forth upon him, from the house of Hades, the head of the Gorgon, the terrible monster".[30] Here, the Gorgon is not specifically linked to the figure of Monstrous Medusa. Persephone sends out only the Gorgon's head, and the head is not described to have Medusa's prevalent features of wings and snakes for hair. At no point does Homer ever mention the name 'Medusa'.[31] The *Gorgoneion* here is not Medusa, but a preexisting symbol with its own specific protective and *apotropaic* usages and associations, that was only later transformed and merged with the Gorgon.

The origin of the *Gorgoneion* mask is contested. Howe has suggested that primitive Greeks created these terrifying masks as embodiments of their fear of predatory animals, and that enacting and embodying this fear by wearing the mask allowed it to be overcome.[32] It is the grotesque nature of the mask that facilitates this process.[33] Although many scholars agree with Howe's theory that the *Gorgoneion* originated as a mask, not everyone supports her view of its use. Papanova notes that as a mask, the *Gorgoneion* could also be seen as a protective item, as in ancient times, masks, or lip and eye plates, were believed capable of guarding the living against the dead.[34] Croon, on the other hand, believes that the *Gorgoneion* was originally a ritual mask, worn by followers as a representation of the deity, enabling the deity to come to earth and act in ritual celebrations.[35] This theory does not portray the mask as a representation of fear but as a means of identifying with a god during religious ceremonies. Croon observes that when used in chthonic rituals, this mask takes on an *apotropaic* nature

[30] Hom. *Od*. XI. 633-636.
[31] Habib 2017: 48.
[32] Howe 1954: 212.
[33] *ibid*.: "So it is, that even when a specific animal is adapted to a mask, there must be present distortion, roaring noise, exaggeration and malformation usually through multiplicity of colour and stark, horrifying composite forms, all incorporated in a grotesque enlargement of the fear that must be worked off."
[34] Papanova 1997: 124-125.
[35] Croon 1955: 13.

and embodies the appearance of a being that can petrify other creatures present, both living and dead.[36]

Masks are not an unknown device in the religious rituals of ancient Greece. In addition to being used in theatre,[37] they were also employed in various other cults, such as the cult of Eleusinian Demeter at Petroma.[38] As part of the ceremony, a chthonic form of Demeter is evoked by her priest wearing a mask, in which the power of the face serves as a symbol of identity and a means of distinguishing oneself from others.[39] Ceremonial masks act as significant symbols of myth and cultural spirituality in religious practice.[40] Masks permit individuals to adopt a different identity and, when worn in conjunction with costumes, performance, music, and dance, become indistinguishable from the energy being directed and what it is invoking, such as healing or liminal states.[41] There have also been sixth century BCE terracotta masks found in the temple of Artemis Orthia at Sparta, which appear to be part theatre mask and part archaic *Gorgoneion*. These masks are believed to be votive copies of the masks worn in performative rituals in honour of Artemis Orthia, thus demonstrating that the *Gorgoneion* was used in her worship.[42] Masks and the *Gorgoneion*, therefore, played a

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[36] Croon 1955: 13.

[37] For examples of votive mask offerings, see Fig 15 in appendix.

[38] Pausanias, *Description of Greece*. VIII. 15. 2-3: "When every other year they celebrate what they call the Greater Rites, they open these stones. They take out of them writings that refer to the rites, read them in the hearing of the initiated, and return them on the same night. Most Pheneatians, too, I know, take an oath by the Petroma in the most important affairs. On the top is a sphere, with a mask inside of Demeter Cidaria. This mask is put on by the priest at the Greater Rites, who for some reason or other beats with rods the Folk Underground."

[39] Merrill 2004: 16.

[40] *ibid.*

[41] *ibid.* 17.

[42] Croon 1955: 15. Wilk (2007: 36) gives further examples of *Gorgoneia* found in religious contexts. At Tiryns, heavy clay masks with wide fanged mouths, broad noses, bulging eyes and prominent ears, that could not be worn were found in the sacrificial pits of Hera's shrine from the eighth or ninth century BCE. These are the only other life-sized terra cotta masks other than those from Artemis Ortheia's sanctuary at Sparta which contained wearable masks, where fifteen of those discovered here have been classified as Gorgons.

crucial role; they held a ritualistic position that allowed worshippers to connect with the divine. Whether used to confront fears or as an aspect of religious ceremonies, the *Gorgoneion* mask originated as both a powerful and functional symbol.

The traditional image of the *Gorgoneion* took time to develop. We do not find examples until the early seventh century BCE, when multiple examples of the specific image of an unmistakable *Gorgoneion* appear. Although these are recognisable as *Gorgoneia*, they are not yet uniform in their depiction; some were depicted with beards, fangs, and horns, while others lacked these features.[43] Howe, therefore, has suggested that Homer, who mentions four *Gorgoneia* without descriptions, used this as a generalised term for an image that did not have a set representation at that time.[44] The inconsistency of earlier depictions decreased as the *Gorgoneion's* representation solidified into a set form. These inconsistencies in interpretations are an unmistakable sign that the early *Gorgoneia* were an instantiation of a previously existent concept before its form was established.

The *Gorgoneion* possessed powers before it became associated with Perseus. The power of this symbol was then encapsulated and personified in Medusa's petrifying gaze, granting it a corporeal form and allowing Perseus to gain this power through his triumph over her.[45] It is likely that the Gorgon Medusa only received her name after the Perseus myth had been created. Similarly, it is not improbable that the name 'Medusa' was chosen due to her union with Poseidon. She is first granted the epithet 'Μέδουσα', meaning 'guardian' or 'protectress', by Hesiod.[46] It could also stem from one of Poseidon's titles, 'Eury-medon', 'the wide-ruling one', from which 'Medusa'

[43] Howe 1954: 213.
[44] *ibid.*
[45] Lazarou and Liritzis 2022: 48.
[46] Howe 1954: 214; Hes. *Theog*. 276.

could be a feminine, abbreviated form,[47] perhaps given to her as a result of Poseidon's favour towards her.[48] Her name could thus either have been granted to her due to her association with Poseidon or may have been an epithet implying her protective 'guardian' abilities.

While the Perseus-Medusa myth was only created ca. 730-700 BCE, the figure of Perseus may be based on a mythical hero that predates Homer.[49] It is generally understood that Perseus belongs to Mycenae.[50] He is the most prominent Mycenaean hero of the previous generation of heroes.[51] His mother Danaë's name simply means "the Danaan maiden". Danaoi was a Mycenaean tribal name obsolete by the time of Homer.[52] Croon agrees with this probable (but not certain) Mycenaean origin for Perseus. He also notes that Perseus' name's etymology may have an Etruscan chthonic context.[53] The Greek goddess Persephone corresponds with Etruscan ϕersipnai and the Greek Perseus with Etruscan ϕerse, furthermore the Etruscan word 'ϕerse-', which is understood to mean 'the wearer of the mask', is connected to funereal contexts.[54] Additionally, Greek names which start with 'perse-' are conventionally ascribed to

[47] Howe 1954: 214.
[48] *ibid.*
[49] Nilsson (1972: 26) supports this view, and suggests that this might account for the fact that the older series of heroic names, those with abbreviated forms and '-eus' endings, are difficult to explain as etymologically Greek, while the later series of heroes, in other words their sons, have common compound names. Nilson gives multiple examples of this pattern: Odysseus—Telemachus; Tydeus—Diomedes; Neleus—Nestor; and Oeneus—Meleager.
[50] Graves (2011: v:) argues against this chthonic origin for Perseus: "A large part of Greek myth is politico-religious history. Bellerophon masters winged Pegasus and kills the Chimaera. Perseus, in a variant of the same legend, flies through the air and beheads Pegasus' mother, the Gorgon Medusa; much as Marduk, a Babylonian hero, kills the she-monster Tiamat, Goddess of the Sea. Perseus's name should properly be spelled *Pterseus*, 'the destroyer'; and he was not, as Professor Kerenyi has suggested, an archetypal Death-figure but, probably, represented the patriarchal Hellenes who invaded Greece and Asia Minor early in the second millennium B.C., and challenged the power of the Triple-goddess."
[51] Nilsson 1972: 40.
[52] *ibid.* 42. Nilsson (1972: 42) also reports that the tribe name 'Danaoi' is found in Egyptian inscriptions from the times of Echenaton and Ramses III, and that Danaë's father was named Acrisius, which later served to link Perseus' genealogy to Argos.
[53] Croon 1955: 16.
[54] *ibid.*

characters linked with the underworld, such as the Greek goddess Persephone, Perses, the Titan of destruction, the Graiai Perso, and Perse, which is another name for Hecate.[55] Perseus' name and origins alike connect him to masks and underworld imagery. This would explain Perseus' future selection as the hero connected to the Gorgon mask and the destroyer of the chthonic monster, where his associations with the underworld serve to double and intensify those of the *Gorgoneion*, building up the layers of imagery within the Perseus-Medusa myth.

Before the emergence of the Perseus-Medusa myth, the Gorgon mask had its own specific history and function, which might have served as a tool for overcoming fears or a ritual element. The Gorgon's power was later seized. First by Poseidon, and then by Perseus.[56] They both conquer the *Gorgoneion's* power through their domination of Medusa, demonstrating the masculine domination over wild nature and its power.[57] This wild animalistic aspect of the mask's symbolism is significant, since it allows it to be easily grouped with the Mistress of Animals, from whom it could have gained its *apotropaic* use.[58] The Mistress of Animals was a goddess from ancient Western Asia and Mediterranean, associated with wildlife and dominion over the natural world, she often appeared on amulets and other objects intended to ward off evil.[59] Her depiction in Greek art disappeared by the end of the Greek Orientalising period (mid-8th until the mid-7th centuries BCE).[60] Artemis, the goddess of the wild, who became a protector of people, also inherited aspects from this goddess.[61] The *Gorgoneion* now became a means of averting evil. The *apotropaic* nature of the Gorgon's figure associates it with several important nature goddesses, where Medusa performs a

[55] Croon 1955: 16.
[56] Howe 1954: 214.
[57] *ibid.*
[58] *ibid.* 215.
[59] Marinatos 2002: 11-13.
[60] *ibid.* 95.
[61] Howe 1954: 215.

similar function to that of Cybele, the Mother of the Gods, Rhea, maternal Artemis, and Demeter.[62] In sum, then, it was the image of Medusa, and her use as a protectress, that came first. Since the *Gorgoneion* existed before the Gorgon Medusa, the Greeks assumed that the *Gorgoneion* must belong to a figure which had been decapitated, and thus, in attempting to re-create her 'lost' body, they needed to create the instrument of her decapitation, Perseus. Perseus' name could also be derived from the aoristic form of the verb 'πέρθειν', which means both 'to waste, ravage or sack', or 'to destroy or slay'.[63] This verb is derived from the Sanskrit 'bardh-aka-h', which means 'to cut, shave, trim or prune'.[64] Creating a figure whose name means 'destruction through cutting' perfectly shows the central defining act of the myth, where Perseus cuts off the head of the Gorgon.[65] The Perseus myth thus evolved and came into being after the symbol of the *Gorgoneion*, a depiction that originated as a protective force and a means of warding off evil.

Defensive Medusa

Protectress Medusa, as we have seen, was commonly depicted for military defence, such as on Agamemnon's shield.[66] She was also a common figure decorating armour. There are archaeological finds with the Gorgon being depicted on breastplates, mosaics, and ship beams[67] in the Roman period, with a famous example being Medusa's depiction on Athena's breastplate of the Athena Parthenos statue.[68] The *Gorgoneion* has been found on ornamental shields, cuirasses, and greaves.[69] These all point to its use as a type of charm or symbol useful in a military context. The

[62] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 167.
[63] Howe 1954: 216.
[64] *ibid.*
[65] *ibid*. Rouard (2022: 27) supports that there are links between early Indo-European, Vedic Sanskrit, and other Indian languages.
[66] Hom. *Il*. XI. 33-40.
[67] See Appendix Fig. 12 a *Gorgoneion* finial, possibly from a ship.
[68] Lazarou 2019: 2.
[69] Karoglou 2018: 12.

Gorgoneion depicted in military contexts from the time of Homer's *Iliad* has a different, yet still protective ability. This is not the *Gorgoneion* as an invocation of a god or the underworld, or as a fear mask, but as an overwatching protective symbol and a deterrent. Here, it is a prophylactic mask, an amulet used to turn away evil through its forceful gaze.[70] The Gorgon as a defensive decoration is found not just in writing but also in iconography. An Archaic Greek fragmentary terracotta relief of Achilles (ca. 600 BCE) has almost the whole of his shield decorated with a grotesque *Gorgoneion,* and a beautiful version of the Gorgon can be found displayed on the shield of a Hellenistic Cypriot terracotta warrior figurine (early third century BCE).[71] In her different forms, from the Archaic and the middle to the beautiful, Medusa can be found depicted on armour.

The *Gorgoneion* is often found on military equipment, from belts to weapons.[72] The prevalence of this image in military contexts points to it having a specific function and purpose in this usage. Wilk proposes a theory of this usage having two purposes, one as a distraction and the other as a means of intimidation.[73] The theory of the *Gorgoneion* as a distraction notes studies done on the human gaze, where traces of eye movement on images and people showed that the gaze returns to the eyes and the mouth recurrently, the face is the most recurrent focus, even on non-human faces such as lions and gorillas.[74] Wilk thus posits that on shields, the *Gorgoneion* was a distraction to opponents, with its striking staring eyes and dramatic mouth commanding attention and may distract the enemy, thus gaining an advantage, similarly, he suggests this is why spirals, arcs and radial patterns were popular shield decorations.[75] He argues this is doubly effective when the face is also displayed on the breastplate as

[70] Mack 2002: 572.
[71] Karoglou 2018: 12.
[72] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 169.
[73] Wilk 2007: 156.
[74] *ibid.* 152.
[75] *ibid.* 156. To see some examples of shield decoration see Appendix Fig. 16, and Fig. 17.

another diversion, theorising that through trial, it was discovered those with *Gorgoneion* shields seemed to have more luck in combat and thus believed that it possessed protective abilities.[76] The popularity of the symbol on weaponry could in part be due to the later prevalence of the Perseus myth; however, the function of the Gorgon on shields was protective and similar to the *Gorgoneion*'s use in Homer.

An alternative theory regarding the *Gorgoneion's* usage is that it symbolises prestige. Müller notes that this image was often found in association with royalty and divinity.[77] Both Zeus and Athena were commonly depicted with the *Gorgoneion* on their shields.[78] The *Gorgoneion* is strongly associated with Athena,[79] as seen in her previously mentioned link to the Perseus-Medusa myth. There are also outlying images of Athena wearing the *Gorgoneion* as a helmet/mask on top of her head in iconography from various probable dates in the Roman period.[80] The *Gorgoneion* thus had a measure of prestige associated with it, having been an aspect of such high-ranking deities. Athena's *aegis* was said to have been given to her by Zeus, indicating her position as a favoured child, and thus it was not often associated with other deities.[81] Both Zeus and Athena wore the *Gorgoneion* as a protective pendant, and it gained associations with divine birth and protection through this; consequently, rulers of the Hellenistic Age, such as Alexander in the Alexander Mosaic, are depicted with it.[82] In the Roman era

[76] Wilk 2007: 159.
[77] Müller (2010: 202) gives examples of the *Gorgoneion* found on bronze Roman objects such as metal decorated cuirasses of emperors, gods, and military commanders, for example, the Mars Ultor statue, and on the late first to early second century CE statue of Caesar there was a traditional decoration on the collar which included a large Gorgon head and below on the cuirass several masks could be found including the central Gorgon.
[78] Lazarou 2019: 2. To see examples of Zeus and Athena wearing the *Gorgoneion aegis*, see Appendix Fig. 3, Fig. 18, and Fig. 19.
[79] For example, in Euripides *Ion* (187-190:), the chorus of Kreousa's attendants are shown to observe an image of Athena in temple iconography saying: "Over there you can see Athena shaking her shield, that Gorgon snake-nest, at the giant Enkelados."
[80] Herrmann 2019: 140.
[81] Hartswick 1993: 274.
[82] Asandoăe 2015: 215. For an image of the Alexander Mosaic, see Fig. 20 of the appendix.

(146 BCE – 330 CE), Medusa is depicted on many objects as a symbol to protect emperors and senior officials who wear her image.[83] This use can be observed in a hollow gold bust from Ploutinoupolis in Thrace, likely a portable image of the emperor carried by soldiers alongside other legionary standards.[84] The bust depicts Septemius Severus in a feather cuirass with a central *Gorgoneion*.[85]

The depiction of the Gorgon for defensive use was not just restricted to individual persons; it could be found on walls, fortifications, gates, and the edges of roofs.[86] For similar reasons, the *Gorgoneion* was also found on city walls, chariots, and other defensive *apotropaic* positions.[87] Scholars are divided over why this image was felt to be so terrifying. Wilk and Karoglou have both suggested that the grotesque appearance mimics and reflects death, since the excessively rounded face of the Gorgon might be meant to mirror or represent the bloated face of a decomposing corpse:

> Generally, it is not until one or two weeks have gone by that the corpse begins to expand from the pressure of the gases generated by decomposition. The results of this process are dramatic. The tongue begins to swell, pushing itself out of the mouth. The eyes swell as well, and they protrude grotesquely from the sockets. Sometimes a bloody fluid leaks from the mucous membranes around the eyes. The face bloats, broadening all the features. The lips may pull back from the teeth. The hair begins to detach itself from the scalp. In other words, the body begins to take on the characteristic features of the Gorgon.[88]

Faraone, on the other hand, argues that in the Archaic and early Classical periods, the *Gorgoneion* was terrifying because of its hybridity as a mix of predatory wild animals,

[83] Lazarou 2019: 13.
[84] Lapatin 2015: 332.
[85] *ibid.*
[86] Karoglou 2018: 12. For examples of the *Gorgoneion* on military equipment, see Fig. 9, Fig. 21, and Fig. 22 in the appendix.
[87] Faraone 2018: 40.
[88] Wilk 2007: 187. Cf. Karoglou 2018: 12.

one of which is a lion.[89] This notion of hybridity and the blurring of boundaries certainly seems to be a key component of Medusa's image. In her grotesque depictions, she appears both ugly and beautiful, divine and monstrous, sometimes with snakes for hair, a lion-like head, ears of a bovine, and the tusks of a boar, appearing both masculine and feminine with her sometimes bearded, penile-like tongue, and pubic-like hair.[90] The combination of a bearded, inhuman face with a broad nose, protruding tongue, tusks, and exaggerated features makes her appear human yet also foreign. Frontal images are primarily restricted to animals, such as owls, panthers, sometimes Sphinxes, Gorgons, and *Gorgoneia*, while human faces are depicted in profile and are much more angular than the round Gorgon's face.[91] The Gorgon's tongue is often depicted protruding in a beast-like manner. This is reminiscent of how lions are depicted on vases with their tongues out and teeth bared.[92]

The use of the *Gorgoneion* was not limited to any particular area and could be found in multiple places throughout the ancient world. The earliest depictions of Medusa's head in Egyptian art were found painted on Egyptian coffins from the Ptolemaic period (305-30 BCE), the Gorgon image was also found on buildings in Roman Alexandria (second – fourth centuries CE).[93] In Southern Italy, bronze greaves have been found with a *Gorgoneion* on the kneecap, and there are sixth and fourth century BCE depictions of the *Gorgoneion* on greaves.[94] The image can also be found in Etruria, in fourth century Chiusi and late fourth century BCE Gela.[95] The *Gorgoneion* is found in Greece from the time of Homer in the eighth century BCE, and its use continued

[89] Faraone 2018: 40.
[90] Foster 2003: 182.
[91] Tejero 2021: 15.
[92] *ibid.* 23.
[93] Müller 2010: 199-200.
[94] Karoglou 2018: 13.
[95] Faraone 2018: 40.

until the Roman Empire (27 BCE – 476 CE) and then spread through it. In the Roman Imperial period (31 BCE – 476 CE), a statue of Alexander the Great, the founder of Alexandria, the Aigiochos (Alexander wearing the *aegis*), shows him wearing a snake-patterned cloak and a large *Gorgoneion* shield.[96]

One usage of the *Gorgoneion* is its application on buildings, not merely on walls and fortifications in military settings but also on roof antefixes, doorways, and temples.[97] Medusa's protective image was a common iconographical feature on the prominent areas of early Greek temples. From the Orientalising period (mid-8th-mid-7th century BCE) onwards, temples from Corfu to Paros showcase Gorgon displays.[98] This image did not diminish in popularity over time. The Gorgon was a dominant motif in Greek sanctuaries from the seventh century BCE, and its popularity surged in the sixth century BCE, becoming a standard form of decoration on the upper parts of buildings ,from the antefix on the temple of Hera on Corcyra to the Oikos of the Naxians on Delos.[99] On the pediment of Artemis' Archaic temple in Corfu, for example, a full Medusa figure takes pride of place above the central entrance.[100] In this early sixth century BCE depiction, Medusa's grotesque form is prevalent. She is not portrayed as a monster at a hero's mercy – Perseus is nowhere to be seen – and her head remains attached even though she holds her children, who, according to the Perseus myth, were believed to have sprung from her severed neck.[101] This protective force on buildings is not merely a singlular occurrence but rather a prevalent motif.[102]

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[96] Müller 2010: 200.

[97] To see examples of architectural *Gorgoneia* see Appendix Fig. 8, Fig. 9, Fig. 13, and Fig. 23.

[98] Tejero 2021: 37.

[99] Petit 2013: 208.

[100] Turner 2016: 157.

[101] Howe 1954: 215.

[102] Jooste (2018: 67) gives an example of this as the metopes (the rectangular slabs that decorated the outside of Doric temples above the exterior colonnade), from the Thermon Temple of Apollo which also depicts a *Gorgoneion*. Marconi (2004: 214-221) additionally notes that the Thermon Temple of Apollo had a *Gorgoneion* on the main façade covering the ending of the apex pediment's ridge tile, the Temple

The specific purpose of these temple *Gorgoneia* are debated. It is possible that the Gorgon's glaring scowl served as a means to avert evil influences.[103] Wilk argues for a much more practical purpose, suggesting that the use of Gorgons and other masks was intended to deter birds from nesting in roofs and architectural gaps.[104] On the temple's pediment at Corfu, it has been contended to represent a narrative and heraldic scene.[105] However, the repeated use of an image in a sacred area is unlikely to be random or purely decorative. *Gorgoneion* clay roundels dated to the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the third century BCE have been discovered in deposits at sanctuaries, such as that of Artemis Limnatis at Ancient Messene, the Temple of Athena at Prasidaki in Elis, and a shrine attributed to Demeter and Kore.[106] Some of these deposits are found to have holes, indicating their original use as votive offerings meant to be hung suspended,[107] while others likely were placed by builders to protect their work and ensure good fortune.[108] The use of the *Gorgoneion* as exterior decoration, when considering these additional uses in sacred and protective contexts, makes the interpretation of it as solely decorative improbable.

On temples, the *Gorgoneion* is often displayed over prominent areas and entrances. This can be likened to the display of religious symbols, such as crosses above the doorways of places of worship and depictions of angels on Medieval churches intended to avert evil forces and influences from entering. Marconi points out that in the last quarter of the sixth century BCE, it also became common for the tops of

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of Artemis at Coryca (ca.590-580 BCE) has a running Gorgon at the centre of the west pediment. Temple H of the Athenian Acropolis had in its original phase been decorated above the two central acroteria pediments with running Gorgons, and the *Gorgoneion* was also seen in the Temple of Apollo in Syracuse, and Temple C in Silenus.

[103] Wilk 2007: 42.

[104] *ibid.* 171.

[105] Tejero 2021: 40.

[106] Spathi 2024: 85-89.

[107] This practice of suspended masks is also found in images of Dionysus, see Appendix Fig. 24.

[108] Spathi 2024: 93-94.

temples to "[become] all eyes: the unblinking eyes of Gorgons, Sphinxes, or lions, gazing continuously at the viewer, expecting a look in response." [109] Gorgons, Sphinxes, monsters, and ferocious animals began to supplant the previous images of divinities on temples, taking over the figural decoration.[110] Marconi theorises that these intimidating symbols were thus not just protective symbols on temples but served a secondary purpose: they were a means to inspire awe and terror in worshippers, as the previous symbols of divinity had done.[111] Here, it has a similar function to the previously mentioned belief in the use of the symbol on the battlefield to invoke fear, whether through similarity to a corpse or the terrifying predatory hybrid - in this case, employing frightening images to evoke the awe and fear expected in places of divinity and worship. This is a blatant indication of the prevalence of the Gorgon Medusa as a protective symbol, one so powerful it was employed not just to safeguard soldiers and homes but also temples. Petit has concentrated on the iconography of temple roofs and noted that the sanctuary is perceived as a liminal point between the earth and the divine.[112] He contends that temple iconography could reflect this through the monsters and beasts depicted, noting that some of these creatures are also used as guardians in funerary contexts and iconography.[113] To that end, it is argued that in the case of Sphinxes and Gorgons, who are associated with the chthonic realm, especially in combination with floral motifs representing plenty, the Gorgon acts as a guardian of the path to immortality.[114]

Medusa was also commonly featured on the central panels of floor mosaics, with a second century CE mosaic discovered on the outskirts of Rome that decorated the triclinium of a house. The Gorgon was also a typical decorative figure in Roman

[109] Marconi 2004: 214.
[110] *ibid*. 221.
[111] *ibid*. 222.
[112] Petit 2013: 211.
[113] *ibid*. 211-212.
[114] *ibid*. 229.

frescoes, on secondary wall panels, and ceilings.[115] Displayed on ordinary, non-religious buildings, the Gorgon's *apotropaic* symbol likely served a function similar to that which it held in military settings, to avert evil. This would act similarly to the idea of a horseshoe displayed over a doorway to guard against malicious forces. The power of the *Gorgoneion* was underpinned by belief in its protective capabilities, making it a common symbol of protection in the ancient Greco-Roman psyche. The influence associated with the *Gorgoneion* cannot merely be reduced to the tale of a slain monster; this aspect of the Gorgon stands as an important cultural device in its own right, separate from Perseus. It is the Gorgon, not Perseus, that repeatedly occurs in sacred contexts .

Healing and Guarding: Medusan Amulets

The use of the *Gorgoneion*, however, was not restricted only to warfare, sea travel and building defence, it was also a powerful amulet; a symbol used in healing and warding off disease. The term 'amulet' is a broad one, which encompasses the Eye of Horus, the Saint Benedict Medal, the rabbit's foot, the horseshoe, the ankh, effigies of the Egyptian god Bes, dried hummingbirds, dream-catchers, four-leaf clovers and Medusa's head.[116] Many of these symbols are still recognisable today. Zolla Luque et al. have argued that all body adornments originated as talismans or amulets, as signs of health and well-being that have over time lost their magical significance and become decorative, such as with necklaces, rings, and pearls.[117] An *apotrope* is an object that can protect both the body and material assets. Amulets are an *apotrope*. But whereas medals, rosaries, biblical texts, crucifixes and other sacred relics are all considered *apotropaic* as codified by the Roman Catholic Church, amulets are seen as

[115] Karoglou 2018: 19.
[116] Zolla Luque et al. 2019: 75.
[117] *ibid*.

mere superstition.[118] While this is unsurprising for a modern-day, anti-magic religion, from their definition it is apparent that the Greco-Roman amulets fit the same criteria and space within society in ancient times that crucifixes, medals, and other modern *apotropaic* symbols fill today.[119] Along with other 'lucky' symbols such as four-leaf clovers and rabbit's feet, they are used as a means of protection and warding off evil. The overarching feature that defines the category of *apotropes* is the effect believed by the user that the ritual, amulet, prayer, relic or gesture has. Talismans, sacramentals such as holy water, gargoyles of the Ming Xiaoling Mausoleum in Nanjing, and the Gothic French and Spanish Cathedrals, as well as the Assyrian stone lions, and the goddess Hariti in Pakistani temples, are all *apotropaic*.[120] In the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040-1780 BCE) protective deities such as Bes were depicted in the form of statuettes, amulets, and figurines and these were used as an *apotropaic* form of protection for the owner.[121]

The term amulet comes from the Latin *amuletum* and is often attributed to Pliny the Elder in the first century CE.[122] In his work *Natural History*, he uses the term in numerous passages[123] to refer to a variety of herbs and plants that could be worn as amulets to ward off diseases and other malicious dangers.[124] In Book XXIV, for instance, Pliny mentions the common belief that plants were known for their medicinal uses and their magical amuletic use:

> A different plant is erythrodanum… applied for snake-bites. The leaves also dye the hair. I find in some authorities that jaundice is cured if this shrub is merely looked at while worn as an amulet.[125]

[118] Zolla Luque et al. 2019: 76.
[119] To see examples of *Gorgoneia* as amuletic jewellery see Fig. 25, Fig. 26, Fig. 27, and Fig. 28 of the appendix.
[120] Zolla Luque et al. 2019: 76.
[121] El-Kilany 2017: 22.
[122] Zolla Luque et al. 2019: 75.
[123] Plin. *HN*. XXVIII. vii. 38., XXIX. xix. 66., XXIX. xxvi. 83., and XXX. xxiv. 82.
[124] *ibid*. XXIV. lvii, lxxxii, cvii, cix, cxviii.
[125] *ibid*. lvi.

Pliny also gives multiple detailed accounts in Books XXIX and XXV of animal parts being used or made into amulets, such as snake's teeth worn to relieve toothache,[126] and the polemonia root is used to ward against small venomous creatures such as spiders.[127] He also discusses the medicinal treatments for various ailments and means known for warding off danger. This includes looking at metals and gems and what powers they held that made them good for specific amulets.[128]

Amulets, as Zolla Luque et al. describes them, are "symbolic expressions of culture"[129] which can be analysed to understand the associations and powers these symbols held for of these symbols to the Greco-Romans. Just as crucifixes, the Hamsa, and the eye of Horus are amulets due to the belief systems and culture behind them, so too can the *Gorgoneion* be investigated in its use as an amulet to uncover some of the belief behind this symbol. Simón has argued that the belief in these amuletic and *apotropaic* symbols is a direct result of the belief at the time surrounding illness and bad luck. In the ancient world, illness and misfortune were seen as an external force, caused by bad or malevolent energy. Since the cause of such misfortunes is not visible it was believed that there were other powers at play causing them, either divine or human.[130] In his *Odyssey*, Homer shows this belief in evil beings causing sickness in the form of a metaphor for the shipwrecked Odysseus's joy of gaining sight of land.[131] The same holds true for punishment. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* Thebes is struck with a terrible

[126] Plin. *HN*. XXX. ix.
[127] *ibid*. XXV. ixxii.
[128] For example, Pliny (*HN*. XXXIII. xxv:) discusses the various protective attributes ascribed to gold: "Gold is efficacious as a remedy in a variety of ways, and is used as an amulet for wounded people and for infants to render less harmful poisonous charms that may be directed against them."
[129] Zolla Luque et al. 2019: 76.
[130] Simón 2021: 15.
[131] Hom. *Od*. V. 394-398: "And as welcome as the show of life again in a father is to his children, when he has lain sick, suffering strong pains, and wasting long away, and the hateful death spirit has brushed him, but then, and it is welcome, the gods set him free of his sickness, so welcome appeared land and forest now to Odysseus…"

plague, and Apollo's oracle is consulted.[132] The plague is caused by the murderer of Laius, the previous king, living in the city and the *miasma* ('pollution') he held from this crime affecting the city, spreading and causing the plague:

> Do not begrudge us messages from birds, or any other way of prophecy within your skill; save yourself and the city, save me; save all of us from this pollution that lies on us because of that dead man.[133]

If the cause could not be seen, it was thus attributed to ill-will, such as the evil eye, or other magical and divine causes.

Monstrous figures to protect against these forces were common in the ancient world, and were not merely a matter of superstition, as they are viewed by some today. Not all ancient peoples, however, believed in these amulets. Soranus of Ephesus comments on this in his *Gynecology*:

> Some people say that some things are effective by antipathy, such as the magnet and the Assian stone and hare's rennet and certain other amulets to which we on our own part pay no attention. Yet one should not forbid their use; for even if the amulet has no direct effect, still through hope it will possibly make the patient more cheerful.[134]

He does not assert that no one believed in these *apotropaic* amulets, nor that they could be beneficial. Soranus considers them useful, if only as a placebo. Given the lack of understanding of the causes of internal bodily functions, belief in an inhuman cause is not unusual. Conditions such as gout, bites, bleeding, stings, and particularly ailments related to the uterus and the stomach, which were found within the abdomen, were perceived as mysterious.[135] In ancient medical thought, the uterus was

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[132] The source of the plague and how to cure it is given, Soph. *OT*. 96-98: "King Phoebus in plain words commanded us to drive out a pollution from our land, pollution grown ingrained within the soil; drive it out, said the god, not cherish it, till it's past cure."
[133] Soph. *OT*. 310-313.
[134] Soranus. *Gynec*. III. 42.
[135] Simón 2021: 35.

a greatly misunderstood part of the body. Until the Byzantine times, it was believed that the womb wandered throughout the female body and was a defective, sentient body part akin to a passionate animal or even a demon with malicious intent that would bite and poison the body.[136] In the *Greek Magical Papyri*, there exists a spell for calming this defective body part and returning it to its rightful place.[137] Thus, it illustrates how unknown causes for conditions and physical issues were sometimes addressed through magical means.

In his *Republic*, Plato when commenting on the components of Asclepius' medicine states that:

> … until they give up drinking, over-eating, sex and idleness, no medicine, cauterisation or surgery, no charms, amulets or anything of that kind, will do them the slightest good.[138]

This shows that amulets were recognised as a method or cure to combat issues with health and the body. There is a range of evidence throughout the Greek-speaking world that the tradition of making amulets began at least in the Classical period and was then transformed, reshaped, and fashioned in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.[139] Animalistic demons are found on some of the earliest surviving magical amulets, such as a lead late fourth century BCE Cretan tablet that compels a she-wolf to flee back to her home, an *apotropaic* type found in multiple other Greek expletory and scapegoat ceremonies where demons and outcasts are sent back to their barren

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[136] Simón 2021: 35.

[137] *PGM*. VII. 260-71: "For ascent of the Uterus: "I conjure you, O Womb, [by the] one established over the Abyss, before heaven, earth, sea, light, or darkness came to be; [you?] who created the angels, being foremost, AMICHAMCHOU and CHOUCHAŌ CHĒRŌEI OUEMCHŌ ODOU PROSEIOGGĒS, and who sit over the cherubim, who bear / your (?) own throne, that you return again to your seat, and that you do not turn [to one side] into the right part of the ribs, or into the left part of the ribs, and that you do not gnaw into the heart like a dog, but remain indeed in your own intended and proper place, not chewing [as long as] I conjure by the one who, / in the beginning, made the heaven and earth and all that is therein. Hallelujah! Amen!" Write this on a tin tablet and "clothe" it in 7 colours."

[138] Pl. *R*. 4. 426. a-b.

[139] Vitellozzi 2023: 10.

sea or desert homes.[140] Vitellozzi suggests a model for the adaptation of amulets over time. This is a heuristic model with five levels of amuletic evolution. This model can be summarised to see the adaptation over time:

> … from plain stones thought to have inner magical virtues, gradually moved on to the use of "persuasive" images that could, by means of analogy, activate the energy of the stone. The next phase of this evolution was writing on the stone those words once only spoken to summon the gods represented on the amulets. Once again, the action of writing, which in the archaic period had a sacred aura, regained its original solemnity in an age of increased scribalization in society.[141]

Faraone theorises that amulets reflect an earlier oral tradition that was later inscribed on gems.[142] The amulets thus represent or embody, and aid in, this magical healing or *apotropaic* force.

One of the amulets developed in this way was the Hercules amulet, which was used against colics; another was the Gorgon's head amulet.[143] In the Classical period, images of boys and women wearing amulets most often depict them in the shape of circles and crescent moons. The circular type of amulet has a long history in the Mediterranean and ancient Western Asia, with examples including solar disks, *bullae*, repurposed coins, and wheels; however, the *Gorgoneion* was the most popular circular type in the early Greek world.[144] From the earliest times, Athena herself is shown to terrify both her own and her human devotees' enemies with a circular medallion-like *Gorgoneion* at the centre of her chest or shield.[145] Since the time of the description in Homer's *Iliad*,[146] Athena is commonly depicted with the *Gorgoneion* on her armour or

[140] Faraone 2011: 12.
[141] Vitellozzi 2023: 13. To see some examples of amulets view Appendix Fig. 29, Fig. 30.1 and 30.2, and Fig. 30.
[142] Faraone 2011: 20.
[143] Vitellozzi 2023: 13-14.
[144] Faraone 2018: 40.
[145] *ibid*.
[146] Hom. *Il*. V. 733-42.

clothing. This symbol, however, was not limited solely to the Greek world. In the Roman period (27 BCE – 476 CE), the *Gorgoneion* image persisted and could be found on small gold disks, engraved on red jasper, sculpted in jet and bone, and featured on larger medallions.[147] The powers of protection that Medusa's symbol carried were so important to the Romans that it created a widespread belief in and use of her protection for those who wore jewellery featuring her depiction; thus, she was found in cameos on rings, earrings, and medallions.[148]

For the symbol of the *Gorgoneion* to have persisted and maintained its popularity over such an extended period, it is highly unlikely that the symbol did not have a belief or cultural reasoning that accounts for its popularity. The functional aspect of the *Gorgoneion* can account for part of its longevity as a symbol. As an amulet, the *Gorgoneion* had a protective, magical nature that made it invaluable. The power amulets possessed explains why they were found entombed with the dead in graves, such as those of Greek soldiers and Egyptian royalty; they were not passed down but were kept as a means of warding off harm or danger.[149] The frontal Gorgon head symbol was possibly the most popular *apotropaic* device in ancient Greece. It was more popular than frontal views of Pazuzu and Humbaba in Mesopotamia, Silenic mask types, and other demons on Phoenician and Carthaginian amulets, Bes in Egypt, as well as satyrs and Sirens in Greece.[150]

The Greek world and the surrounding regions undeniably had contact and shared cultural influences. Homer himself mentions the presence and influence of Eastern

[147] Faraone 2018: 40-41.
[148] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 172-3.
[149] Zolla Luque et al. 2019: 75. To see examples of Roman Gorgon jewellery and gem amulets see Appendix Fig. 27, Fig. 29, Fig. 30.1 and 30.2, and Fig. 31.
[150] Faraone 2018: 68.

art.[151] There is a distinct 'Orientalising' period of art in the material record of ancient Greece from 700-620 BCE, which had obvious stylistic influences from Assyria, Egypt, and Phoenicia, among others.[152] Images frequently depicting demons and monsters, which were theriomorphic beings combining human features, animal parts, and unnatural appendages, were brought to the Greek world from Egypt and ancient Western Asia during the late eighth and seventh centuries BCE.[153] It is apparent that the Greeks had exposure to and appreciated foreign art and craftsmanship, therefore borrowing or copying aspects and styles from others.

This influence persisted over time. By the first century BCE, the Amuq plain, near the river Orontes, where it turns towards the Mediterranean, linked different parts of the ancient world and was one of the main centres where Greek society met with Assyrian influences. Kantor has argued that the kneeling motif of the Syrian Master of Animals was passed to Greece, and from here, the prototype stylings of Medusa and the Gorgons were created.[154] The similarity of the Egyptian Bes figure and the Medusan *Gorgoneion* points to the influence of Egyptian culture within Greece.[155] Bes was a dwarf deity and demonic fighter, a god of war and childbirth who appeared in the Middle Kingdom and was popularised in the New Kingdom as a protector of the household.[156] There are several significant parallels between Bes and the *Gorgoneion.* An amulet depicting Bes in composite material and green glaze shows him with bent knees, a grotesque face with broad ears and nose, a long tongue, and inflated cheeks,

[151] Chase 1902: 66. In the *Odyssey*, for example, Telemachus sees a basket of Egyptian workmanship in the home of Menelaus and Helen (Hom. *Od*. IV. 125-126), and in the *Iliad* we are told that Menelaus's corselet is a gift from Cinyras, the king of Cyprus (Hom. *Il*. XI. 19-29). See also *Il*. VI. 269-295 and *Il*. XXIII. 741-744 for examples of foreign workmanship.
[152] Tejero 2021: 7.
[153] Karoglou 2018: 4.
[154] Kantor 1962: 110.
[155] See Appendix Fig. 32, and Fig. 33 for examples of Bes amulets.
[156] El-Kilany 2017: 19.

he also has a round belly held by his hands.[157] This has sharp parallels with the *Gorgoneion* in Greco-Roman symbols, especially the Archaic grotesque version. The shared influence from Egyptian culture is noticeably seen within the repeated design similarities of the bent knees, face shape and tongue, and grotesque nature. Like the *Gorgoneion,* Bes' images were widespread and depicted on several items such as amulets, *stelae*, weapons, reliefs, papyrus, and equipment, among other items.[158] Bes is practically the only forward-facing Egyptian figure, and his image can be found represented as far back as 2000 BCE.[159] He was originally the protective deity of the royal house of Egypt, and then became a popular *apotropaic* deity for all classes of households, he was also thought to ward off negative emotions such as vanity and jealousy.[160]

There are also key similarities between the Medusan Perseus myth and the slaying of Humbaba, as well as the *apotropaic* Humbaba and Gorgon frontal-faced symbols. The slaying of Humbaba in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the influence of this story on the emergence of the Perseus Medusan myth can also be seen in the similarities of the uses of the slain Gorgon head with that of the slain Humbaba's head. Labelled Humbaba images from the seventh century BCE resemble images dating as far back as 2750 BCE, which predominantly depict the head alone, typically a frontal face without a neck, staring eyes with gritted teeth.[161] It is never depicted with a protruding tongue.[162] This image thus has many parallels with Bes and the Gorgon. The figures of Humbaba, Bes, and the Gorgon are the only figures regularly portrayed facing frontally in ancient art.[163] Greco-Romans were not isolated in the creation, use, and belief in such figures

[157] Koch et al. 2017: 16.
[158] El-Kilany 2017: 19.
[159] Wilk 2007: 62.
[160] El-Kilany 2017: 20.
[161] Wilk 2007: 64.
[162] *ibid*.
[163] *ibid*.

as the *Gorgoneion*. Bes symbols were common in the Egyptian New Kingdom and Southern Levant as amulets.[164] Bes had widespread popularity in Late Period Egypt (since ca. 700 BCE) and gained even greater popularity in the Mediterranean throughout Greco-Roman times, around the fourth century BCE until the fourth century CE, and can be found in Egyptian temples, homes, and cemeteries in all mediums.[165] Again, there are similarities with the *Gorgoneion*'s use and prevalence and Bes. Bes in Egypt meant the same to the people who called on his powers through his image as the *Gorgoneion* did to the Greco-Romans. They both fulfilled a social need for protection in the ancient world.

Also, as previously mentioned, Medusa and Dionysus were often depicted fully frontally in Greco-Roman art,[166] a-typically of how figures were normally depicted. Bes was portrayed frontally, very occasionally in half or full profile, as too was the goddess Hathor, was one of a select few Egyptian deities regularly depicted in a frontal view.[167] Bes was depicted with animalistic aspects such as a leonine face and a lion's tail; he also had a feathered crown and was shown wearing a panther or lion skin and round ears.[168] The feline skin Bes wore resembled the *Gorgoneion* as worn on Athena's breastplate featuring the face over his chest.[169] These similarities make it more plausible that Bes and the *Gorgoneion* filled the same protective function within Egyptian and Greco-Roman culture. While the Gorgon is a monster, she fills a very similar role to the god and thus cannot be said to be an unimportant or weak figure.

[164] Koch et al. 2017: 16.
[165] van Oppen de Ruiter 2020: 2.
[166] See Appendix image Fig. 34 for a frontal depiction of Dionysus.
[167] van Oppen de Ruiter 2020: 5.
[168] El-Kilany 2017: 19.
[169] van Oppen de Ruiter 2020: 6.

Several monstrous figurines from the ninth to the seventh century BCE, referred to as Akpallu, have been found in Mesopotamia. Simón has argued that the purpose of these human-animal hybrid figurines was to protect homes from malevolent influences, as they were found buried in thresholds, room centres, or the corners of Neo-Assyrian buildings.[170] These figures allow for the visualisation of how *apotropaic* symbols on buildings were used and mimic, to a degree, human beliefs today, such as the consecration of churches. For these Neo-Assyrian figurines, two long texts have been found detailing the ritual in precise detail, with instructions on how to bury such figures to block evil, including disease from a house.[171] The figures named in these rituals correspond to monsters within the Babylonian world creation poem, the *Enuma Elish*.[172] This allows for the use of the *Gorgoneion* in building foundations to be seen as not happenstance but a purposeful deposit. Not an incomprehensible action, but a facet still found in the construction of religious sites today, though in a different form.

Amulets also fulfilled a specific function in society. The Gorgon amulets were not just common in early Greek practices but persisted and spread to Rome. In the second to fourth century Rome, these Gorgon head amulets were in use, sometimes even in combination with traditional Egyptian elements in an image almost indistinguishable from the format of Pharaonic Hathor head amulets, except for stylistic elements.[173] This shows an almost interchangeability within these cultures between the symbol of Bes and the *Gorgoneion*.[174] They fulfil the same niche and function within different cultures. They are both fearsome figures invoked for protection. Protective Medusa is

[170] Simón 2021: 17.
[171] *ibid*.
[172] *ibid*.
[173] Müller 2010: 200.
[174] Compare the *Gorgoneion* scarab *apotropaic* amulet in Appendix Fig. 35.1, and 35.2 with the Bes scarab *apotropaic* amulet Fig. 36.1, and 36.2. In Fig. 35.1 the *Gorgoneion* is used to decorate the same place as Bes fills on the scarab in Fig. 36.1. See also; in Fig. 37 that the Egyptian male figure wears an *apotropaic* figure on his clothing (like Athena's *aegis*) that has been identified as either Bes or the *Gorgoneion*.

a source of comfort, serving to alleviate fears and anxieties. This form is unlike Monstrous Medusa, who is styled to be a representation and source of anxiety. The Gorgon's original function was as a powerful defensive symbol.

With the power and prevalence of the Medusan-type symbol, it is not surprising that the *Gorgoneion* appears in healing amulets. It is also often inscribed, depicted, or used in specific materials. The reasoning behind the use of these mediums is to strengthen or enhance the effect of the *Gorgoneion* symbol, which differs for each material. One of the optimal mediums for *Gorgoneia* is coral. One set of lapidary[175] directions claims that when the *Gorgoneion* is carved into red coral, it is the 'greatest phylactery', and there are surviving examples of the Protective Medusan symbol in both red coral and red jasper.[176] Amuletic gems with the *Gorgoneion* on them have been prevalent since the Archaic period, commonly found on gems for the protection of women against female reproductive diseases, or uterine amulets and *thymokatocha*, restraining charms for controlling anger.[177] The majority of these gems have been found made from coral. Vitellozzi has argued that this is due to the belief that coral was formed from Medusa's petrified blood.[178] Coral alone was also prized for its amuletic and medicinal value, even without the symbol of the Gorgon, it was still a powerful source of magic. Babies wore amulets made from coral branches as a means of protection, and when turned to powder with fire, it was mixed with water to help alleviate bladder issues.[179] Coral mixed with wine had similar effects, while coral in water was believed to be a sedative, to reduce an enlarged spleen it could be periodically taken in a drink, and the ash was used if one was expelling or spitting up blood.[180] It was also an ingredient in eye salves,

[175] Lapidary is the act of shaping minerals, stones, or gemstones (including inscribing designs or engravings into them) to turn them into decorative items.
[176] Faraone 2018: 41.
[177] Vitellozzi 2023: 14-15.
[178] *ibid*.
[179] Plin. *HN*. XXXII. xi.
[180] *ibid*.

aids with ulcers, and was used to smooth scars.[181] This association between coral, petrifaction, and Medusa was not uncommon and is confirmed in two literary sources: Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*,[182] and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[183] The coral and the symbol of Medusa, therefore, work in tandem, amplifying the properties of one another, making them an ideal pairing in magical amulets. Pliny explains that it is red coral that is sought after and prized.[184] Some called red coral '*gorgonios*', and consequently, they engraved the Gorgon into it and mounted it in either gold or silver, increasing its protective power through the added imagery.[185] Also, if consecrated, red coral could be used for those journeying as the greatest means to ward off fears, malevolent people, and the attacks of evil influences and wicked people.[186] This highlights the power of Medusa as a protector; that a substance associated with her, created from her, is seen to have great power and use as an *apotropaic* device, an amulet, and a medical remedy.

As Pliny explains, coral was a highly valued and therefore expensive commodity. While the lapidary ability of red coral was considered the optimal medium for a *Gorgoneion* amulet, this was not always used in practice. Sometimes, red jasper[187] was

[181] Plin. *HN*. XXXII. xi.
[182] *ibid*.: "It is said that at a touch it immediately petrifies, if it lives; and that therefore it is quickly seized and pulled away in nets or cut off by a sharp iron instrument. In this way, they explain its name 'coral.'"
[183] Ov. *Met*. IV. 1011-1024: "[Perseus] carefully constructs a little nest there on the beach, of some soft leaves with seaweed strewn upon them, and there he rests Medusa's snake-fringed head... Thirsty fresh twigs, still living, still absorbent, soak up the monster's force, and at its touch rigidify through every branch and leaf. Astounded sea nymphs try experiments on other twigs and get the same results; delighted, they toss them back into the sea as seeds to propagate this new species! Coral today shows the same properties; its branches harden when exposed to air, and what was—in the water—a spry twig becomes a rock when lifted out of it."
[184] Plin. *HN*. XXXII. xi: "The most valued coral is the reddest and most branchy, without being rough or stony, or again empty and hollow. Coral berries are no less valued by Indian men than are large Indian pearls by Roman women. Indian soothsayers and seers think that coral is a very powerful amulet for warding off dangers. Accordingly, they take pleasure in it both as a thing of beauty and as a thing of religious power."
[185] Faraone 2018: 90. To see an example of a gold *Gorgoneion* pendant, see Fig. 25 of the appendix.
[186] Faraone 2018: 90.
[187] Fig. 29 of the appendix shows a red jasper amuletic Head of Medusa with text.

used as a more available and cheaper substitute.[188] The Greeks also believed that jet could be used to repel venomous animals and cure issues with the womb when used as a fumigant.[189] Jet was abundant in Britain, and in the Northwestern part of the Roman Empire, *Gorgoneia* carved from British jet have been discovered.[190] Jet appears to have taken the place of coral in this region as the chosen medium for *Gorgoneia*, due to its nature and availability.

Circular style *Gorgoneia* were popular throughout antiquity. In Etruria, they were found on *bulla*[191] to add protective power, and from the fourth century BCE Gela, hundreds of *oscilla*[192] were discovered with the majority decorated by Sirens, *Gorgoneia*, and satyrs' heads.[193] These amulets at later dates became more decorative and were suspended from entranceways and were also used in Sicily in the fourth century as weights for looms and to protect the women weaving.[194] The Gorgon, satyrs, and Bes were also found as protective images moulded into small perfume bottles.[195] *Gorgoneion* amulets are even part of magic spells:

> … some of them bear magical formulas or personal names, while a famous Boston gem has an invocation and a prayer which probably refers to a context of personal rivalry, possibly arising from jealousy or from the need to avoid the anger of a quick-tempered master. The text

[188] Faraone 2018: 91.
[189] *ibid.*
[190] *ibid.*
[191] Nagy (2015: 194-195) describes *bulla* as hollow pendants that were often worn by children as protective amulets. Gold *bulla* were reserved for elite freeborn male children, while bronze *bulla* were worn by boys, girls and women. In some sources, bronze *bullae* are noted to be containers that hold remedies for diseases. In the mid-Republic the gold *bulla* changed into an attribute of elite children and in the Augustan period freedmen families used them in funeral iconography as a sign of social and family success.
[192] O*scilla* are small disks made of terracotta with holes to hang them from.
[193] Faraone 2018: 40.
[194] *ibid.* To see an example of a terracotta *Gorgoneion* loom weight look at Fig. 38 of the appendix, also Fig. 39.1, and 39.2 which is a different *apotropaic* loom weight design.
[195] Faraone 2018: 73.

> reads as follows: Gorgon. Achilles, Valios(?), son of Tauros, Iulis. If (they) talk to Al(e)xios, let them not be believed! Chnoubis.[196]

Here, someone is invoking the Gorgon not for protection, but to use it against someone else. Here, the Gorgon is seen to have an ability over the evil eye, either as a deterrent or an instrument of it. The *Gorgoneion* was thus not always used in a protective context, though this was common, but could also be invoked as a destroyer. When spells are invoked for destructive purposes, such as the above spell, the *Gorgoneion* is not the only aspect of Medusa recalled. The destructive aspect and powers of Monstrous Medusa are also summoned. Here, both Protective and Monstrous Medusa are recalled with the same face to use both aspects of her abilities. Amulets used and invoked specific aspects of Medusa's figure that supported the context she was used within.

It is also important to note that not everyone in Greco-Roman society wore amulets. While there is evidence of the use of the Gorgon on armour and military contexts, actual amulets are a separate matter. Greek men did not appear to wear amulets into battle, but only for dire illness and sea travel. Children, on the other hand, wore multiple amulets daily, and women wore them occasionally during sickness, childbirth and uterine issues.[197] As Pliny notes in his *Natural History*:

> even to-day the peasant women of Transpadane Gaul wear pieces of amber as necklaces, chiefly as adornment but also because of its medicinal properties. Amber, indeed, is supposed to be a prophylactic against tonsilitis and other inflections of the pharynx.[198]

He also states that "[amber] is of the benefit of babies when it is attached to them as an amulet."[199] This gives credence to the reasoning for the amber beads to be found

[196] Vitellozzi 2023: 15.
[197] Faraone 2018: 250.
[198] Plin. *HN*. XXXVII. xi.
[199] *ibid*. xii.

within the graves as a means of protection.[200] This also allows for this reasoning to be applied to other amulets. Due to the Greek depictions of heroic nudity for men, it would be suspected that if adult men did wear amulets within the Classical period, there would be evidence and images from the innumerable male nudes found within sculpture and vase paintings.[201] There is evidence of men wearing amulets if they were ill, and the prevalence of evidence of surviving medical amulets suggests that no matter the gender, injured and sick people wore curative amulets.[202] Amulets can therefore be seen as something worn to protect against vulnerability. They are often found well preserved, likely due to coming from the graves when they were entombed with the individual who wore them in life.[203] In Roman Gaul, the graves of children at weaning age (between 6 months and 3 years) have been found to have multiple charms, which have been taken as a sign of parental anxieties.[204] The Gorgon, with her head encompassed by snakes, was worn by respectable elder married women to cast away unwanted public gaze.[205] Through looking at the known cases and evidence of amulets, it is possible to determine the likely conventions on who wore them and when. Crescent moons were principally donned by women, male children wore gold *bulla*, and the *Gorgoneia* and coins/medallions seem to be restricted to women, in contrast to their usage as a universal *apotropaion*.[206]

The *Gorgoneion* and other amulets and *apotropaic* symbols thus could be used in different contexts and have very different connotations depending on who used them.

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[200] Faraone (2018: 48) maintains that while the discovery of amber beads and amulets in women's graves could be argued to be decorative, this is challenged by their presence in the graves of children of both genders and amber's known curative and protective properties. It is thus unlikely that these discoveries can be discredited as merely decorative. For an example of an amber *Gorgoneion* see Appendix Fig. 40.
[201] Faraone 2018: 53.
[202] *ibid*.
[203] Dieleman 2015: 29.
[204] Dasen 2015: 193.
[205] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 175.
[206] Faraone 2018: 47.

The *Gorgoneion* on armour is a masculine use of Medusa's symbol and power, while her use in protective amulets seems to be focused on the 'weaker' members of society, women, children and the sick. Children, the most vulnerable and unable to protect themselves, relied on such protective forces more. Women, who were seen as less capable than men in Greco-Roman society, also benefited when needed from this protection. Men, who were seen as the strongest and most capable within Greco-Roman society, wore them only when afflicted by unknown evils, such as life-threatening sickness, and untameable dangers such as sea travel.

Protectress of the Dead

Within antiquity, death and funerary rituals were an important part of society. In antiquity, death appears to have been put on show, where the dead were placed within plain sight, often on the sides of roads.[207] Greek and Roman memorials served to keep the dead within the gaze of the living. They were typically set on roadsides, normally busy ones, where it was guaranteed they would be looked upon.[208] As Turner notes:

> Death comes to us all but… viewers in antiquity seem to have been particularly attuned to the specular – and, more often, the spectacular – power of the visual in the face of death.[209]

Ancient burial practices and rituals were often spectacles intended to capture the attention and gaze of the living observers. While this included loud lamentations and strongly scented incense, the visual element took centre stage.[210] It is therefore not surprising that Medusa appears as a symbol within this context, where viewing and spectacle are so distinctively highlighted. Medusa and her undeniable association

[207] Turner 2016: 143.
[208] *ibid*. 150.
[209] *ibid*. 146.
[210] *ibid*. 145.

with the 'gaze' and 'viewing' fit neatly into a context where the dead gaze out at the living. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the Gorgon is mentioned as a terrifying creature of the underworld, the very thought of which results in Odysseus fleeing the underworld.[211] Here, where the living Odysseus and the souls of the dead interact, the chthonic Gorgon and its terrifying visage are invoked; its image again displayed at the intersection of the living and the dead. One of the top five contexts in which the *Gorgoneion* is depicted is grave settings.[212] Bucrania, lions, and Griffins, paired with Gorgons and Sphinxes, ward off evil and guard the dead.[213] Sphinx statues commonly flanked tomb entrances and were placed on top of funeral *stelae* as grave markers. Gorgons, along with Sirens and Sphinxes, served as guardians to protect against and punish those who disturbed the dead.[214] Monuments lined the *peribolos*[215] walls, where many families decorated their tomb façades with eye-catching *stelae* reliefs.[216] These were comprised of figural reliefs where scenes of the home, or *oikos*, were a prevalent theme that stood out among the inscribed non-figural memorials around them.[217] These figures were arranged in complicated arrangements and gazed upon one another self-consciously, making a spectacle of viewing.[218] When used in this context, Medusa could generate thought surrounding the act of viewing the dead and its limitations.[219] The relationship between sight and death is manipulated, as the dead, who are usually hidden from view in the underworld, are exposed to the living's gaze.[220] Through her ability to petrify, the Gorgon transforms individuals into their own funerary monuments, rendering her stone victims indistinguishable from their

[211] Hom. *Od*. XI. 633-636.
[212] Tejero 2021: 35.
[213] Koortbojian 2015: 294. See Fig. 41 for an example of a funerary *stele* with Sphinx guardians.
[214] Karoglou 2018: 28.
[215] In ancient Greco-Roman architecture, *peribolos* is the term for a court which was enclosed by a wall. In particular, this referred to a walled court which surrounded a sacred area.
[216] Turner 2016: 151.
[217] *ibid*.
[218] *ibid*.
[219] Squire (2016: 10) highlights that in Greek thought sight was a defining feature of sentient intelligent beings and that in Homer's works the realm of the dead was imagined as dark and unseen.
[220] Turner 2016: 160.

funeral reliefs.[221] The Gorgon in grave settings has a dual purpose, she is not merely a guardian chthonic creature but a link between the dead and the living. This view of a figure of the dead within stone accompanied by a Medusan image created an undeniable effect on the viewer, a powerful symbolic spectacle emphasising themes of the gaze and the dead.

This was not the sole reason Medusa could be found in funerary contexts. While Medusa's depiction became increasingly human and feminine from the beginning of the fifth century BCE, the power of her image did not diminish.[222] Medusan depictions, along with representations of other half-feminine monsters such as the Sphinxes, Scylla, and Sirens, were all associated with protective powers, leading to the frequent use of these hybrid creatures on grave monuments.[223] Even as *Gorgoneia* of the beautiful type became common at the end of the fourth century BCE, they retained their funerary function and could be found on cinerary urns, such as a Hellenistic terracotta hydria discovered in the Greek cemetery at Hadra in Alexandrian Egypt.[224] Here, Medusa is yet again employed as a protective device, serving to safeguard the dead. In Roman funerary art, particularly on sarcophagi and *stelae*, Medusa was the most prevalent depiction.[225] The Gorgon appeared either alone or accompanied by psychopomp images to guide souls to the afterlife.[226] This aspect further establishes her protective role over the dead, as well as her position as a liminal figure. Such accompanying depictions included birds such as doves, hippocampi, dolphins, and genii.[227] Gorgons were often carved to protect graves from malevolent forces and robbers. Due to Medusa's close association with death, stemming from her gaze's

[221] Turner 2016: 160.
[222] Karoglou 2018: 3.
[223] *ibid*.
[224] *ibid*. 16-17.
[225] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 168.
[226] *ibid*.
[227] *ibid*.

powers of petrification and her mortality, Karoglou argues that she embodies the inescapable fact that life comes hand-in-hand with death.[228] The associations Medusa acquired through the creation of the Perseus-myth subsequently turned the Gorgon symbol in funerary contexts into one laden with meaning. On graves, Medusa is thus sometimes depicted within the context of the Perseus myth, merging both aspects: her protective nature and the story of her powers and death. An Attic marble stele from a grave shows Perseus being chased by a Gorgon after the beheading of Medusa, while a Cyprian sarcophagus crafted from limestone (early fifth century BCE) depicts Chrysaor and a wingless Pegasus springing from Medusa's severed neck as Perseus walks away.[229]

Gorgoneia were not only found on grave monuments and markers, nor was their usage confined to a single geographical area. There exists a sixth century BCE golden casting relief of the *Gorgoneion*, found in Himera at Temple A, with stitch holes on the outer boundaries that point to its being a decoration on a dead man's garment.[230] It is a round mask with inflated cheeks, a protruding tongue, a large nose, raised eyebrows, and swollen eyes.[231] On a mid-fourth century BCE *phialae*[232] from a graveyard in Kul-Oba near Kerch, a *Gorgoneion* with snakes on her head can be seen.[233] In a tomb in Aeolian Kyme, a gold diadem is adorned with twenty-eight *Gorgoneia*, all depicted with protruding tongues.[234] On an early Hellenistic period enamel and gold funerary belt, likely made in an ancient Western Asiatic workshop, the central roundel showing a funereal libation scene features a Hellenistic *Gorgoneion* shield on a stool.[235] The

[228] Karoglou 2018: 8.
[229] *ibid*.
[230] Lazarou 2019: 5.
[231] *ibid*.
[232] A *phiale* is a shallow Greek bowl used for drinking or libation offerings.
[233] Lazarou 2019: 9.
[234] *ibid*. 10.
[235] *ibid*.

Gorgon has two snakes knotted under her chin, and a deity facing away from it, alluding to the myth of Perseus.[236] The use of the Gorgon in a funerary context was thus both well-established and widespread, inescapably intertwining the image with the dead and the chthonic realm, but without negative connotations. The Gorgon serves as a protector and guardian in the space between the living and the dead, watching over the deceased as they strive to reach the blessed afterlife.[237] In ancient Greco-Roman society, some held the belief that after death, the soul journeys to the underworld.[238] In Plato's *Phaedo*, the philosopher Socrates articulates this belief:

> 'When each person has met his end, his guardian spirit, to whom he was allotted when alive, undertakes to bring him to a certain place, where the assembled individuals must present themselves in court, and then travel to Hades with that guide who has been appointed to take them on their journey there.'[239]

However, this journey was not necessarily an easy one.[240] Hence, the need for a guide and protector. For this journey to be completed, the proper burial rites and ceremonies

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[236] Lazarou 2019: 10.

[237] The following discussion provides only a brief overview of the philosophy of the soul and the afterlife in ancient Greece and Rome to contextualise the Gorgon's use as a chthonic guardian. For a more in-depth discussion of the Greek and Roman beliefs on the soul and afterlife, see, for example, Felton 2024b: 149-167.

[238] This is mentioned as early as Homer's *Iliad*. As he is dying, the shade of Patroclus speaks to his killer, Hector, and goes down to Hades (Hom. *Il*. XVI. 855-857): "He spoke, and as he spoke the end of death closed in upon him, and the soul fluttering free of his limbs went down into Death's house mourning her destiny, leaving youth and manhood behind her."

[239] Pl. *Phd*. 107d-e.

[240] *ibid*. 107e-108a: "Once there, [the souls of the dead] are given what they should be given, and stay for however long is needed, and then another guide escorts them back here again, after many long cycles of time. So it turns out that the journey is not as Aeschylus' Telephus says. He says that a straightforward "path" leads to Hades, whereas it seems to me to be neither straightforward nor single. For then there would have been no need for guides, because surely nobody would have gone astray in any direction if the road were a single one. In fact, however, it looks as if the path has many divisions and forks – I say so on the evidence of the sacrifices and customs in our world."

needed to be completed.[241] Thereby making grave goods and funerary practices an important aspect of Greco-Roman society.[242]

A common object featuring the image of Medusa in funerary contexts was coins. This is another widely dispersed and utilised medium that has the Gorgon as a prevalent symbol.[243] Coins are also not an uncommon medium for *apotropaic* images to be inscribed upon. They were believed to bear significant magical qualities, and numerous references in the ancient world indicate that coins were used as amulets in antiquity.[244] In the ancient Greco-Roman world, coins commonly featured images of divinities. Coins could function as a type of amulet due to the images inscribed upon them and the protective properties attributed to the metals gold and copper, from which they are made, suggesting they were not solely worn for ornamentation.[245] It is not surprising that coins, as portable as they are, and often decorated with symbols on precious metals, could be viewed as a kind of amulet in the ancient world. Frequently perforated coins are discovered, potentially as a means of testing the quality of the metal (which was actually done by scraping small surface portions), and the perforations for wearing suspended on the wrist, neck, or ankle.[246] This Greek practise

[241] The shade of Patroclus is unable to finish his journey to the underworld until after he has reminded Achilles to perform the necessary burial rites (Hom. *Il*. XXIII. 70-74).

[242] It must be noted not all Greco-Romans believed in the afterlife. One such school of thought was the Epicureans. The founder, Epicurus (Ep. *Men*. 125:), explains his belief that life ends with death: "So it is silly for a person to say that he dreads death—not because it will be painful when it arrives but because it pains him now as a future certainty; for that which makes no trouble for us when it arrives is a meaningless pain when we await it. This, the most horrifying of evils, means nothing to us, then, because so long as we are existent death is not present and whenever it is present we are nonexistent. Thus it is of no concern either to the living or to those who have completed their lives. For the former it is nonexistent, and the latter are themselves nonexistent."

[243] Croon (1955: 11) mentions that while the *Gorgoneion* is found on coins at Athens as an attribute of Athena, it is also found on coins in multiple places where it is not depicted in connection with Athena, such as Seriphos, Segesta, Himera, Selinus, Melos, Lycaonian Iconium, Lesbos, Cilician Aegae, Apollonia ad Rhyndacum and Parium in Mysia, and with debated cases at Thermon, Bath and in Britain. Croon has identified twenty-seven Greek cities which have *Gorgoneion* coins.

[244] Porto 2020: 498.

[245] Perassi 2021: 39.

[246] Porto 2020: 498.

can be extended to Roman period coins as well.[247] Surviving Roman coins that were worn as jewellery have been found dating back to the end of the first century or the early second century CE.[248] Hence, coins could possess a greater value than just currency; they also had protective and magical functions. This is evident in the use of coins in association with the dead.

A known use of coins is Charon's obol. Greek and Latin sources from the late fifth century BCE to the late second century CE recount the custom of putting a coin in the mouth of the dead as a payment for the boatman Charon to ferry the soul across the river into the underworld.[249] Charon's obol was called an ὀβολός (obol) in Greek,[250] and in Latin the *viaticum* (provision for the journey) for the dead souls.[251] This coin was a means of accessing the underworld for the dead and allowed their passage into the next life. Coins were tangible symbols of abstract power to the living, almost magical with their abstract power in life and a way for the living to touch the unseen world of the dead.[252] Due to this Charon's obol is not the only use of coins found concerning the dead, different coin functions have been found in connection with burials.

[247] Porto 2020: 498.
[248] Perassi 2021: 39.
[249] Stevens 1991: 215. Some ancient sources that mention this are where the Greek playwright Aristophanes who jokingly mentions this fee at an inflated rate in his play *Frogs* (140-141:) "An ancient sailor takes you for a fee — two obols." The Roman Juvenal in his *Satire III* (264-267:) speaks of a deceased rich man stranded on the side of the underworld river without a fare: "…the latest arrival, is sitting there on the bank, scared of that filthy old ferryman. No crossing the muddy channel for *him*, poor devil, with no fare-coin in his mouth." Apuleius (*Met.* VI. 19:) also describes Psyche bribing Charon with a coin to journey back across the river Styx in the Underworld to the world of the living: "…and then giving the greedy ferryman the coin you have kept you will cross the river and retrace your earlier path until you regain the light of heaven above."
[250] Michal 2009: 112.
[251] Porto 2020: 500.
[252] Stevens 1991: 227-228.

Not all burials contained coins, and Charon's obol was not the only coin found in burial practises, it was only one embodiment of the wider practice and use of coins in a broader funerary context.[253] The earliest dated coins in Greek burial come from the fifth century BCE and the custom persists into the Roman period and the late fifth century CE and geographically is found all over the Greek world and in almost every province of the Roman empire.[254] This use of coins in Roman funerary customs is particularly important as this shows this practice is not solely that of offering Charon's Obol. Charon was foreign to the Roman religion and less likely to be associated with the practice of coins in burials there.[255] In Rome, coins are linked to the underworld in some rituals, such as when Romans annually tossed coins into Lacus Curtius (a location revered as an opening to the underworld) for the emperor's safety:

> People of every rank, fulfilling a vow made for his good health, would throw a coin into the lacus Curtius every year and on the Kalends of January, too, on the Capitoline they would give a new year's gift, even when he was away from Rome.[256]

This shows coins as a source of wealth, power, and an offering to promote fertility and health.[257] The coins acted as a mediatory force between people and the gods, in this case, the chthonic deities. They had a power and a use that went further than their power as currency. In ancient Greek burial rites, gold or bronze as its substitute were widely used as they were symbols of divine purity, warmth and light.[258] Coins are also buried with the dead with an *apotropaic* use.[259] These coins were used as amulets, a talisman with the associated ability of whichever metal it was created out of, which was then amplified by the images on them of deities or other powers (such as the

[253] Stevens 1991: 215.
[254] *ibid*. 223.
[255] *ibid*. 227.
[256] Suet. *Lives*. Aug. 57.
[257] Stevens 1991: 228.
[258] Papanova 1997: 125.
[259] Porto 2020: 500.

Gorgoneion).[260] Just as a *Gorgoneion* in red coral had an amplifying effect, a *Gorgoneion* inscribed in metals amplified its power. Coins have been found surrounded by the silver and lead funerary *lamellae*,[261] in funerary contexts.[262] However, this is also not where the prevalence of Medusa as a protector of the dead ends.

The *Gorgoneion* is one of the most common designs for the decoration of Roman sarcophagi, both on the chest and lid.[263] In the centre of a sarcophagus in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where its decoration mimics a temple's arched pediment, is a *Gorgoneion*; this construction is used to depict the coffin as the body's house or temple.[264] This Gorgon depiction resembles those found on Archaic temple pediments and is part of an integrated decorative design.[265] As ornamentation, it is also common on marble Roman sarcophagi surrounded with garlands, such as one from Tarsus in Cilicia.[266] The Gorgon on sarcophagi was protective, a guardian of the road to the afterlife, blocking the deceased from leaving their graves while watching over their body and soul.[267] The Gorgon's depiction on sarcophagi had chthonic associations, yet they also invoked a similar meaning to her liminal depiction on temples. Sarcophagi imitate the architectural features of temples; through this, the dead express their aspiration for a blessed eternal afterlife filled with happiness, and very likely a sort of apotheosis.[268] The resemblance of the *Gorgoneion* on the triangular

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[260] Porto 2020: 500.
[261] Blumell (2011: 166-167) details that *Lamella* (a thin sheet) of metal with inscriptions, can be found on funerary *stelae* (monuments) or interred with the dead, some inscriptions tell the deceased to 'cheer up' or 'take courage' after giving information such as the person's age and date of death. Often, they asserted a post-mortem existence or encouraged the deceased as they encountered dangers on the way to the underworld to the blessed afterlife.
[262] Porto 2020: 500.
[263] Pilipović 2024: 29.
[264] Karoglou 2018: 21.
[265] For a sarcophagus end panel decorated to look like a temple façade with a *Gorgoneion*, see Fig. 42 in the Appendix.
[266] Karoglou 2018: 21.
[267] Asandoăe 2015: 216.
[268] Petit 2013: 222.

section of the sarcophagus lid to the decorative triangular field of archaic temples also emphasises the Gorgon's *apotropaic* role.[269] In Rome, *Gorgoneia* and Sphinxes, Dionysiac motifs, and geometric and vegetative decorations were part of the normal collection of designs on Roman lead sarcophagi, which were mass-produced from the second to the fourth century CE in Phoenicia.[270]

The different symbols which accompany Medusa on sarcophagi alter the meaning of her depiction, such as Dionysian imagery or vegetation. This mask-like appearance of the *Gorgoneion* can be traced back to its origin and use in cult ceremonies, where its *apotropaic* function was used as a religious mask.[271] In these rituals, the masks were used during dances, likely as a chthonic character to invoke divine protection through the belief in the chthonic demons' ability to repel ghosts and malevolent people in one's life.[272] Medusa thus had early origins of a chthonic nature and continued to hold this type of influence even as the Perseus myth altered some aspects of her symbolism. Medusa's use as an *apotropaic* mask can be found in a bronze krater of a prince's grave from Trebenite near Ohrid from the sixth century BCE, where she is depicted in the archaic style with all the demonic and frightening creature characteristics.[273] She is, however, not merely a symbol of death and destruction or protection. In funerary architecture she was one who watches, intimidates, and protects against grave destroyers, she could be used in combination with such images as garlands, festoons, Cupids, cornucopias of fruit, abundance symbols, fertility and apotheosis and as such can be seen as a symbol of life, specifically the afterlife and the victory over death.[274]

[269] Pilipović 2024: 29.
[270] Karoglou 2018: 21.
[271] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 168.
[272] *ibid*.
[273] *ibid*.
[274] *ibid*.

Medusa's symbolic meaning varied depending on the religious belief system she was depicted within, such as when she is portrayed alongside Dionysiac heads, for instance.[275] These masklike heads are a specifically restricted typology with a symbolic meaning where the Medusa head's meaning is connected to the fact of death, and the Dionysiac heads with the ideal afterlife.[276] Milanovic and Andelkovic have argued that the Gorgon's role was to inspire people on their journey over the ocean to the blessed island.[277] This is related to the Orphic cult, in which Dionysus is viewed as a chthonic deity with control over the underworld and the afterlife:

> Orpheus, for instance, brought from Egypt most of his mystic ceremonies, the orgiastic rites that accompanied his wanderings, and his fabulous account of his experiences in Hades. For the rite of Osiris is the same as that of Dionysus and that of Isis very similar to that of Demeter, the names alone having been interchanged; and the punishments in Hades of the unrighteous, the Fields of the Righteous, and the fantastic conceptions, current among the many, which are figments of the imagination—all these were introduced by Orpheus in imitation of the Egyptian funeral customs.[278]

According to Orphic belief, Medusa resided close to the entrance to Hades.[279] Posing her in a liminal area neighbouring the living and the dead. Isolated reliefs of heads of Medusa, maenads, satyrs, and theatre masks can be found on the garland sarcophagi from Roman Imperial times.[280] Heads depicted without necks are very uncommon in Greek art, apart from depictions of creatures such as maenads, satyrs, some celestial deities such as the personifications of the sun, the moon, and the Anatolian moon god Men, and Medusa depictions.[281] Humans or Olympian gods were never depicted without necks, as such this style was used only for individuals who have crossed boundaries of normal human behaviour, such as Dionysian revellers, and demonic

[275] For example, see Fig. 43 for a sarcophagus with Gorgons, theatre masks, Victories and vegetation.
[276] Coulson and Leventi 1998: 226.
[277] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 168.
[278] Diod. Sic. *His. Lib*. I. 96. 4-5.
[279] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 168.
[280] Coulson and Leventi 1998: 225.
[281] *ibid*. 227.

beings.[282] This further links the Gorgon to Dionysus. Neckless, decapitated depictions of Medusa and Dionysus as masklike figures are thus a distinct and purposeful type of relief art used purposely for the association the images bring with the chthonic realm and the afterlife.

In Stoicism, on the other hand, Medusa is depicted as 'fear' personified, a fear that blinds, which is conquered by Perseus and Athena, who personify courage and wisdom.[283] The Stoics saw the myth of Perseus as an allegory:

> But let me explain what the Greeks, inclined as they are to embroider, would signify by this finely spun fabrication. They intended three Gorgons, that is, the three kinds of terror: the first terror is indeed that which weakens the mind; the second, that which fills the mind with terror; the third, that which not only enforces its purpose upon the mind but also its gloom upon the face. From this notion the three Gorgons took their names: first, Sthenno, for *stenno* is the Greek for weakening, whence we call *astenian* sickness; second, Euryale, that is, broad extent, whence Homer said: "Troy with its broad streets"; then Medusa, for *meidusam*, because one cannot look upon her. Thus Perseus with the help of Minerva, that is, manliness aided by wisdom, destroyed these terrors. He flew away with face averted because manliness never considers terror. He is also said to carry a mirror, because all terror is reflected not only in the heart but also in the outward appearance.[284]

In the Perseus myth, the victorious hero uses Medusa's head against those wild people who caused strife for his mother.[285] He also utilised it against the Satyrs of Dionysus, making the Gorgon's gaze a means of destroying lustful, animal impulses in humans, specifically men, thus restricting their masculinity and proving ineffectual on women.[286] While the Stoics moved away from the mythological interpretation of the image, ending a belief system, they still regarded the message and meaning of the

[282] Coulson and Leventi 1998: 227.
[283] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 168.
[284] Fulg. *Myth*. I. 21.
[285] Milovanović and Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 168.
[286] *ibid*.

myth as important. It was not dismissed in its entirety; it took on a new significance for them.

The final common depiction of Medusa in the context of the dead and funerary symbolism that will be discussed is her representation alongside vegetation and symbols of abundance.[287] This use of the *Gorgoneion* with vegetation is found almost universally in tombs, sometimes on their architecture, but more commonly on urns and sarcophagi.[288] The earliest example of this style can be seen in the Vatican's Etruscan Museum: nine surviving terracotta antefixes in the archaic style, which are from a temple dating to the end of the fifth century BCE. Medusa is winged with knotted snakes under her chin, bordered by three side-by-side pairs of acanthus leaves curving upwards.[289] In Greco-Roman art and architecture, decorative leaf borders were common.[290] One of the foremost examples was the acanthus, which was believed to symbolise long life and, from the second century BCE, life emerging from the grave.[291]

The door pediment of the Volumnii tomb near Perugia features a central relief with an unusual *Gorgoneion*: a beautiful Medusa presented at the centre, adorned with two snakes knotted under her chin, and the foreground is decorated with foliage radiating from her head, filling the background to the disk's border.[292] Flanking both sides is a *harpe*,[293] a curved sword, similar to that which Perseus is typically depicted as using

[287] For examples see Appendix Fig. 14 which has Medusa and Erotes on a Greek burial vase, and Fig. 44 a Roman sarcophagus which has Erotes, Medusa, oak garlands, and wild animals.
[288] Frothingham 1915: 13.
[289] *ibid.*
[290] El Weshahy and Ellabban 2022: 1.
[291] *ibid.* 2.
[292] Frothingham 1915: 13-14.
[293] See Fig. 45 a Mesopotamian *harpe* sickle-sword.

for decapitation,[294] and this *harpe* is generally accepted as an emblem of the sun,[295] reflecting the destructive aspect typical of its rays.[296] As early as 2500 BCE, it was employed by Babylonian gods as a weapon, and Merodach, the sun god and counterpart to Perseus, is depicted wielding it while battling the primaeval dragon Tiamat.[297] Most examples of this class are not earlier than the third century BCE, extending into the second or third centuries CE, and they are found in a substantial amount of later Etruscan art in sepulchral urns and tomb chambers.[298] The usual interpretation of Medusa as a symbol of suffering, death, or as a protective force is contradicted by other images associated with this vegetation type. Eros, the god of life, the Victories, the dove (fertility), griffins and eagles (apotheosis), as well as the cornucopia and first-fruits of the earth, all accompany the Gorgon positioning her as a symbol of life, victory over death, and the afterlife. In this context, she is not a negative protector but a positive one.[299]

The eagle as a symbol of apotheosis evokes Zeus and the abduction of Ganymede;[300] it signifies ascension to the divine realm and thus is a fitting image to appear on sarcophagi. In Rome, images of Ganymede with Eagle-Zeus have been discovered on

[294] For a Greek depiction of Perseus wielding a *harpe* see Fig. 46 of the appendix; for a Roman depiction, see Fig. 47.
[295] Wilk (2007: 28) explains that the significance of the *harpe* as Perseus' weapon is debated. The *harpe* might be associated with a sickle moon and a lunar cult; or, as an agricultural implement, it might point to Perseus' peasant origins; or it might even reveal Mesopotamian influences, as the *harpe* is the characteristic weapon of Marduk. In Greek mythology, other figures who use this weapon are Zeus in his battle against Typhoeus, Hercules against the Hydra, and Hermes to kill Argus.
[296] Frothingham 1915: 14.
[297] *ibid*.
[298] *ibid*. 13.
[299] *ibid*. 22.
[300] Ov. *Met*. X. 213-229: "The king of heaven once burned with desire for Trojan Ganymede; Jupiter found an identity pleasing him more than even his own did: no bird but the eagle, bearer of Jove's thunderbolt, could deserve this distinction. Without delay, as his counterfeit wings beat the air, he captured the boy, who, in spite of Juno's objections, mixes his nectar and serves him above now in heaven."

sarcophagi.[301] This imagery is typically accompanied by depictions of cupids, playing cupids, eagles, and geese;[302] scenes that embody plenty, fertility, and ascension. The doves on the sarcophagi also have further associations with abundance and life. Innana and Aphrodite, who share an ancestor goddess with linked with sex, love, war and fertility, both share the dove as their bird.[303] Goose symbolism on tombs could imply multiple meanings, as they were regarded as guardians and associated with love and knowledge.[304] Other examples of this type emphasise vegetation and fertility alongside the Gorgon through the depiction of produce.[305] This recalls the cornucopia, a symbol of plenty and abundance, said to be the horn of Acheloüs broken off by Hercules.[306] This Medusa type is present in the Museums of Chiusi, Perugia, and Volterra, illustrating its spread; however, it did not extend beyond the sphere of Hellenic influence.[307] Medusa in this form was thus dissociated from her previously mentioned symbolism as a death figure. Compositions featuring Vegetation *Gorgoneia* were prevalent in the first two centuries CE, with the figures in them including the Gorgons, Griffins, doves, Sphinxes, eagles, swans, other birds, centaurs, Victories, satyrs, and Erotes.[308] This reflects a distinct continuation of the vegetation *Gorgoneion* within the Hellenic sphere. In this context, she signifies life and immortality, representing life after death and the return of life in spring. This version of Medusa

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[301] Tsouli 2020: 147.

[302] *ibid*.

[303] Nance 2019: 148.

[304] Plin. *HN*. X. xxvi: "The goose also keeps a careful watch, as is evidenced by its defence of the Capitol during the time when our fortunes were being betrayed by the silence of the dogs; for which reason food for the geese is one of the first contracts arranged by the censors. Moreover there is the story of the goose at Aegium that fell in love with the supremely beautiful boy Amphilochus of Olenus, and also the goose that loved Glauce… These birds may possibly be thought also to possess the power of understanding wisdom: thus there is a story that a goose attached itself continually as a companion to the philosopher Lacydes, never leaving his side by night or day, either in public or at the baths."

[305] Frothingham 1915: 15.

[306] Ov. *Met*. IX. 123-129: "Nor was this all: grasping my rigid horn in his right hand and cruelly breaking it, [Hercules] tore it from my mutilated forehead. The naiads immortalized this incident, filling my horn with fruit and fragrant flowers; known as the cornucopia, it now enriches the sweet goddess of Abundance."

[307] Frothingham 1915: 16.

[308] *ibid*. 21.

was echoed in Roman art as well.[309] In funerary architecture, the Gorgon assumes the role of a guardian observer and a protector of graves.[310] When the *Gorgoneion* is combined with symbols such as cupids, garlands, birds, festoons, cornucopias of fruits, symbols of apotheosis, abundance, and fertility, she represents life, particularly the afterlife and victory over death.[311] The *Gorgoneion* is not a monstrous protector but a guardian on the path to the blessed afterlife.

Conclusion

Protectress Medusa is associated with numerous powerful divinities, symbols, and beliefs, spanning from Artemis, Mistress of Animals, to Hekate and Dionysus, as well as images of plenty, death, life, and apotheosis. She is a contradictory figure but a powerful one, with roots deeply entrenched within Greco-Roman cultural beliefs. Through transformations in imagery and altered portrayals for different usages — against enemies, for protection, health, and the dead — the *Gorgoneion* was carried throughout Greco-Roman society. The significance of the *Gorgoneion* as an important symbolic iconographical device in the Greco-Roman world is undeniable. Not only did the figure of the Gorgon possess multiple connotations and uses, many associated with protection, but it also served as a long-lasting symbol that persisted for over thirteen centuries, from the eighth century BCE to the fifth century CE. Its prevalence extended into the Byzantine era.[312] This enduring symbol formed the basis for the Monstrous Medusa and the Perseus-Medusa myth, which are still well-known today. However, even though Monstrous Medusa remains the most recognised version of her character, the creation of this myth did not entirely erase the *Gorgoneion* and its capabilities. The widespread application of *Gorgoneia* – from temples to military

[309] Frothingham 1915: 18.
[310] Anđelković-Grašar 2017: 168.
[311] *ibid*.
[312] Müller 2010: 195.

equipment, amulets to grave contexts – illustrates the significance this symbol held and confirms its importance within Greco-Roman society as a means to combat the threat of the evil eye. The portrayal and usage of the *Gorgoneion* adapted and evolved as Greek and Roman society developed. When the Perseus-Medusa myth was created to account for the *Gorgoneion* and its pervasive use within society, the male authors aimed to subjugate Medusa's power by reframing her as an allegory of male triumph over the female. Yet, these attempts were not successful; they neither limited nor weakened the *Gorgoneion's* power, but instead enhanced it. As a result, the *Gorgoneion* came to embody not only its previous *apotropaic* symbolism but also the Greco-Roman beliefs surrounding the gaze and vision within society. It mutated and adapted as society did, yet the Protective *Gorgoneion* endured.

Chapter 3

Dual Medusa

Medusa and the *Gorgoneion* appear to embody two opposing principles, with Medusa representing the Monstrous, and the *Gorgoneion* the Protectress. Although this may, at face value, seem to give the impression of dualism, of two conflicting, disparate forces, these two facets of the Medusa figure are, in fact, extensions of one another. Medusa is an aspect of the *Gorgoneion's* later form. The Gorgon is a figure of duality that is not strictly defined as good or bad, male or female, monster or protector; it is a balanced encompassing figure. The apparent opposition inherent in this figure is not as contradictory as it seems when looking further into the *Gorgoneion's* creation. This chapter will explore other similar figures from the time of the *Gorgoneion's* use, and will also go further back in time to examine the figure's origin and the fractured associations and powers that the Gorgon inherited from the cultural and religious landscape that existed before the Greeks. Prior to the implementation of patriarchal societies in ancient Europe and parts of Asia, cultural beliefs centred around the worship of ancient Mother goddesses.[1] Once these patriarchal societies developed, the powers of these ancient Mother goddesses were either coopted as male gods took over the utmost hierarchy or their abilities were diminished in power as they were set under the new male-dominated pantheon.[2] The powers and forces that these pre-patriarchal egalitarian societies believed in revolved around the idea of the continual and balanced cycle of life.[3] After the emergence of patriarchal culture, this was replaced by the dualistic, opposing categories of life and death. An opposition between life and death replaced the connection and cycle between them.[4] When linked

[1] Dexter 2011: 182.
[2] Dexter 2017: 81.
[3] Marler 2002:15.
[4] Lévi-Strauss 1981: 77: "Mythic thought operates essentially through a process of trans-formation. A myth no sooner comes into being than it is modified through a change of narrator, either within the

to such origins, the Gorgon's seemingly oppositional powers can be understood, not as contradictory, but as interlinked aspects of the same cycle. She is a figure of duality, not a contradictory combination of polar aspects.

By exploring the maternal theological roots of Greco-Roman religion and exposing the various sources that influenced the gods and monsters of the Greco-Roman pantheons, this chapter aims to illustrate that this source is where Medusa's duality originated. This investigation will include a consideration of the symbolism and perceptions of the earlier goddesses, focusing on the facets that Medusa inherited. It will also delve into bird and snake imagery and their long history and significance. The ancient Western Asiatic influences on the Perseus-Medusa myth will also be examined to demonstrate the inheritances of Greco-Roman mythology from neighbouring cultures. Exploring the links between Medusa and various figures of the Greco-Roman pantheon, such as Artemis, Athena, Asclepius and other Greco-Roman gods and monsters that inherited aspects from prior cultures.[5] Finally, the bird and snake symbolism will be revisited in the context of its adaptation within Greco-Roman cultures, allowing for a greater understanding of the Gorgon's figure and the associations and beliefs that became tied to it, including an explanation of the reasoning behind the Gorgon's associations within myth and their origins.

Bird and Serpent Symbolism

A dominant aspect of Medusa's image, both as a *Gorgoneion* and a mythical figure, is her association with serpents. Snakes, dragons, and serpentine characteristics possess

tribal group, or as it passes from one community to another; some elements drop out and are replaced by others, sequences change places, and the modified structure moves through a series of states, the variations of which nevertheless still belong to the same set."

[5] To see images of Mesopotamian deities with serpentine, winged, and feline attributes, see Fig. 48 of the appendix.

a long history and significance. A wealth of prehistoric iconography gives evidence for snake worship, such as the seated anthropomorphic female with arms ending in snaky three-fingered hands from Achilleion, a Neolithic Greek site.[6] Depicted serpent figures from this time can also be found in Thessaly, Crete, Ugarit, and Minoan Crete.[7] These Neolithic settlements in Greece are believed to date back to ca. 6700 BCE in Thessaly.[8] The symbolic importance of the snake is unmistakable, and its power as a symbol has endured. A snake's ability to shed its skin resulted in them being symbolic of rebirth and the preservation of beauty, making it a sign of immortality and unending youth.[9] Snakes also symbolised medicinal cure and were therefore found as the symbol of Asclepius, who is depicted with a snake wound around his staff.[10]

The symbolism of the serpent evolved from the Neolithic into the Hellenic era, and then into the Roman periods.[11] In every culture, images of female deities with serpents are not difficult to locate, often with the serpents eating from the goddess' hand, or wrapped around the goddess' tree, or the goddess is in the shape of a serpent.[12] Neolithic cultures developed in Greece from the seventh to the fourth millennium BCE, and material, ceramic, and sculptural evidence from this time reflects the rituals established within the horticultural economies.[13] Neolithic beliefs can broadly be characterised as inherently linked to the seasons, planting, working the land, and harvesting.[14] The chief aspect of this is the cycle of life, death, decomposition, and life emerging from decay.[15] Here, the source of all life that is sacred is thought of as

[6] Dexter 2011: 185.
[7] *ibid.*
[8] Elhelw 2016: 3.
[9] Håland 2011: 133.
[10] *ibid.*
[11] Weappa 2018: 25.
[12] *ibid.*
[13] Marler 2002: 15.
[14] *ibid.*
[15] *ibid.*

inherently female; giving birth to life itself and absorbing itself in death, the goddess of death also governs life.[16] Life and death in this culture and belief system are thus part of a duality; not separate but completely interlinked with one another. Death is not the end of life but rather a continuation of its cycle; not an end but a beginning. This perspective on life stands in stark contrast to the practice of categorisation and opposition that is observed in later Greek and Roman societies.

Like the snake, the bird was a common symbol during the Neolithic era that then underwent changes and adaptations in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In Greek Macedonia, Crete, and Thessaly, archaeologists have found figurines from ca. 6100 BCE of Bird goddesses; long-necked, beaked female figures.[17] These evolved in the Aegean Bronze Age within the Minoan culture into two representations: one human in form – bare-chested, wearing a long skirt, with raised arms holding a snake in each hand, standing between two lions – and the other winged, with birds and snakes on their head.[18] In the ancient world, these Bird-Snake goddesses had a widespread prominence in various places and can be found in distant geographical regions during the Neolithic Age (ca. 10200-3000 BCE) and the Bronze Age (ca. 3300-2100 BCE).[19] Both birds and snakes convey associations with birth, death, and rebirth, and many of these figures that have been discovered exhibit hybrid attributes of both birds and snakes.[20] While not all these bird/snake figures are female, the majority are, with female depictions far outnumbering the male and asexual examples.[21] Consequently, the feminine figure was thus the more dominant symbol within the matrilineal social structure of ancient Europe, and the tradition of her worship was widespread.[22] The

[16] Marler 2002: 15.
[17] Elhelw 2016: 5.
[18] *ibid.*
[19] *ibid.* 2.
[20] Dexter 2011: 183. To see a winged female deity from the Levant see Fig. 49 of the appendix.
[21] Elhelw 2016: 4.
[22] *ibid.*

goddess was a vital, widespread symbol of unity and the cyclical nature of life, with bird and/or snake symbols constituting a key aspect of her image. The earth was the foundation of survival, the provider of food, and the paramount source of life. The associated powers of birds and snakes made them a potent symbolic image of this power and the goddess.

Owls, who hunt silently in darkness, are closely associated with death.[23] Burial urns shaped like owls are found from the 3rd millennium BCE in the Aegean, Western Anatolia, ancient Western Asia, and Central Europe, and were also associated in these places with regeneration.[24] During the Neolithic Age, Copper Age, and Early Bronze Age on the Cycladic islands, Western Anatolia, Crete, Sicily, Sardinia, Spain, and Portugal, female sculptures in various styles and mediums featuring stylised bird masks were interred with the dead.[25] Bird goddess depictions also began to appear in predynastic Egypt in ca. 4000 BCE in funerary contexts.[26] This association and belief in the power that birds symbolised were widespread. Predatory carnivorous birds such as raptors, vultures, and crows were representations of death and war.[27] Other birds, such as swans, cranes, and geese, were depicted on cave walls and painted and engraved on bones from the Upper Palaeolithic period.[28] The seasonal migration of these birds signals the beginning of spring and the transition into winter.[29] In cultures heavily reliant on the natural world for sustenance and survival, the seasonal movement of birds and the changes in the weather were inherently important and thus, unsurprisingly, held great power. The dove was a symbol of peace, purity, and

[23] Marler 2002: 20.
[24] *ibid.*
[25] *ibid.*
[26] Elhelw 2016: 8.
[27] Dexter 2011: 185.
[28] Marler 2002: 20.
[29] *ibid.*

the soul, as it has continued to be in contemporary Western culture.[30] This is a sharp contrast to the meaning behind the predatory birds, but no less impactful. Birds of all shapes and classifications, whether predatory or prey, carry potent symbolic meanings for these goddesses, with some additional meanings and differences based on the type of bird. Medusa carries this symbolism in her depictions with wings, both in her Greek representations and in later Roman art, where she is portrayed with wings in her hair.[31]

Snakes also carry connotations of death, birth, and protection. Their meanings vary depending on the context of their usage. Birds and snakes are both used as symbols of birth due to their oviparous natures.[32] They also illustrate regeneration; birds through moulting and snakes through shedding.[33] They are both creatures of nature with abilities beyond those of humans, such as laying eggs, moulting/shedding their skin, and birds' capability of flight and snakes' burrowing abilities. Snakes were revered in the ancient world, where they were often worshipped and represented with other domestic animals, as they were kept for hunting vermin and protecting their owner's health.[34] They helped protect stores and houses from pests, not unlike how cats do on farms. Like predatory birds, venomous snakes also had a dual representation; they symbolised death due to their lethal potential, but also healing and regeneration, as their venom could be used as an antitoxin.[35] The significance of birds and snakes as symbols thus encompassed multiple aspects. They were often used in combination to amplify the goddess' powers over life and death through their associations. While not all the qualities and connotations of bird and snake imagery

[30] Dexter 2011: 185.
[31] For examples of the Gorgon with wings in Greek art, see Appendix Fig. 1.1, Fig. 2, and Fig. 6. For examples of the Gorgon with wings in Roman art, see Fig. 10, Fig. 11, and Fig. 14.
[32] Dexter 2010: 33.
[33] *ibid.*
[34] Håland 2011: 124.
[35] Dexter 2017: 82.

align, this does not mean that their being used together created a discordant meaning with the goddess. The interplay of the bird and snake imagery, both overlapping and not, combined to cover the whole range of the goddess' attributes.

Because of their flight, birds are associated with the heavens and the divine; some also live in or by water.[36] Snakes, on the other hand, live on the earth and in burrows below the ground, with some of them too, living in water.[37] Since the bird/snake pairing covers all realms, they can be used to create a complete representation of all parts of the earth, underworld, and heavens; the earth, the sky, and the sea.[38] Through them, the goddess' divine heavenly powers, her control and aspects over birth and life, and death and rebirth are all encompassed using these two creatures with her image. The use of goddesses with features of both birds and snakes thus takes advantage of the nature of hybridity. Before the Greco-Roman ideas of the monstrous nature of hybrid creatures, the combination of two aspects such as these was seen more favourably. Hybrids are seen as transitional creatures, they are a uniting force between two different spheres, elements or characteristics.[39] In Old Europe, there are multiple humanoid pregnant bird and snake goddess figurines and sculptures that have been found near food storage and preparation areas as well as in household shrines, most likely symbolising the personification of life to maintain plentiful and safe food.[40] These hybrids were guardians, formidable protective and life-giving sources comparable to the Gorgon and her abilities and depictions.

[36] Dexter 2010: 33.
[37] *ibid.*
[38] *ibid.*
[39] Elhelw 2016: 2.
[40] *ibid.* 3-4.

The snake also played an important role in religious practices in Minoan Crete and Ancient Thessaly.[41] The Thessalians, for instance, worshipped the goddess Eileithyia, a deity of the earth inseminated each year by a serpent, which was later transformed into a god with healing abilities[42] – so a serpent of fertility and healing rather than a monstrous destroyer.[43] The Minoan Great Mother goddess Diktynna had similar associations to Eileithyia, since she too was associated with the earth, rejuvenation, and snakes.[44] Because of a snake's ability to shed its skin, they were regarded as benevolent chthonic symbols of life renewal, making them viewed as a benevolent demon.[45] Although Diktynna had powers over death, she was not regarded as a malicious force. This connection between the goddess and her symbols is a means of enhancing power; a process termed 'intensification', where doubles in imagery represent potency or abundance.[46] By combining a goddess with chthonic and rejuvenation powers and a serpent which symbolises these same associations, the power of the goddess is not only invoked, but doubled and intensified. The Greek goddess Persephone, whom the Romans later called Proserpine, closely paralleled these earlier goddesses. In Orphic myth Persephone gave birth to Zagreus after Zeus raped her in the form of a serpent.[47] She was revered as a goddess representing the dual categories of "life and death".[48] Persephone was linked with Demeter as a harbinger of spring and fertility and was codependent with the god of the

[41] Antoniou et al. 2011: 218.
[42] *ibid.*
[43] Pausanias (*Description of Greece*. VI. 20. 4-5:) recounts a story about this goddess and her association with snakes: "… a woman came to the Elean generals, holding a baby to her breast, who said that she was the mother of the child but that she gave him, because of dreams, to fight for the Eleans… When the Arcadians came on, the child turned at once into a snake. Thrown into disorder at the sight, the Arcadians turned and fled, and were attacked by the Eleans, who won a very famous victory, and so call the god Sosipolis. On the spot where after the battle the snake seemed to them to go into the ground they made the sanctuary. With him the Eleans resolved to worship Eileithyia also, because this goddess to help them brought her son forth unto men."
[44] Antoniou et al. 2011: 218.
[45] *ibid.*
[46] Weappa 2018: 26.
[47] Nonn. *Dion*. V. 563-564.
[48] *Orphic Hymn*. XXIX to Persephone. 15.

underworld.[49] She embodied aspects of both the earth's fertility and the chthonic sphere.

The hybrid Bird-Snake goddesses thus embody life as a continuum, representing the abundance of the earth and fertility and the seasonal barrenness of nature and vegetation; both a granter and an extinguisher of life.[50] The earth provides for those who rely on it, but that does not mean there is no danger; both life and death come from the earth. Some of the first images of a snake entwined around a tree are found in connection Ditkynna's worship in the sixteenth century BCE, where her Sacred Tree of Life is portrayed in the Hesperides' Garden, guarded by a dragon.[51] The serpent guards the tree as a symbol of eternity and rejuvenation and this symbolism is the reason why Ancient Greeks planted trees over graves.[52] The goddess represents the earth. She is neither evil nor malevolent, but a commanding force that can harm or help, capable of bringing destruction and protection.

There are several crucial parallels between the Bird-Snake Goddess and the representation of Medusa found in ancient Greece and Rome. Like the hybrid goddess, Medusa and the *Gorgoneion* also hold power over both life and death; she is both a monster and a protector. A seemingly juxtaposed character that is in actuality not contradictory when examining the inspirations and cultures that inspired her creation. Apollodorus' description of the Gorgons closely resembles the Bird-Snake Goddess:

[49] Retallack 2019: 952.
[50] Dexter 2011: 185.
[51] Antoniou et al. 2011: 218. See Fig. 50 of the appendix for a depiction of the Tree of Life in the Hesperides Garden with a snake wrapped around it.
[52] Antoniou et al. 2011: 218.

> The Gorgons had heads with scaly serpents coiled around them, and large tusks like those of swine, and hands of bronze, and wings of gold which gave them the power of flight.[53]

The Gorgon is an adaptation of the previous cyclic, chief feminine deity, transformed into a monster. This is because the perspective on life and death changed from being part of a cycle to being viewed as opposites. Although Medusa still maintains a connection to both life and death, a destroyer in her own right, she is also a symbol of fertility, who brings forth life through her death: "As her head was severed, Pegasos, the winged horse, and Chrysaor, the father of Geryon, sprang from the Gorgon's body."[54] Like the pregnant figures of Bird-Snake goddesses, she can both harm and help, bringing life and death. She is a remnant of these goddesses morphed into a monstrosity, the inheritor of their now demonised aspects.

There are multiple cultural influences, crossovers, and adoptions that resulted in Greek culture and its belief system, and which consequently played an important role in the shaping of its monsters, several of which can be linked to aspects of the *Gorgoneion* and Medusa. Medusa was not just formed from the prior Earth Mother goddesses but from a diverse range of influences. Civilisations, cultures, and people in the ancient world did not exist in a vacuum; there was a significant amount of cultural crossover between the different groups who had contact with one another. In old Europe, the prehistoric imagery of ancient Egypt and ancient Western Asia have distinctive similarities, where techniques and visual metaphors[55] were transferred between the continents through trade, emigration, and colonisation.[56] There is not one single source that resulted in the formation of the ancient Greek people but a plethora

[53] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 4. 2.
[54] *ibid.*
[55] Feinstein (1982: 50-51) explains that a visual metaphor is an image that is used to communicate information without words where the viewer is expected to understand the image as representing something else through association.
[56] Elhelw 2016: 13.

of factors that they both gained and shared with nearby people. As Elhelw has argued, it is because of this transference of tradition and philosophies in this combination of cultures that some symbols gained lasting significance and prominence in different civilisations and places.[57] The Bird-Snake goddess is not the sole source for the figure Medusa becomes and her previous *Gorgoneion* form's creation. Dexter, for instance, has shown that Medusa can also be regarded as a combination of the Neolithic European Great Mother Goddess, and the ancient Western Asiatic male demon spirit Humbaba where her *apotropaic* face is a death mask, a frozen portrayal of her corpse, therefore maintaining the inseparable elements of both life and death from the Great goddess.[58]

Features from the hybrid bird goddess, or the Mother Goddess, appear in other nearby cultures. In ancient Western Asiatic and Mesopotamian imagery, almost identical idols are found in Crete and Cyprus. In the Queen of Night Relief, for example, there is a depiction of a nude female body with wings and bird legs below the knees, which may depict Inanna (the older form of the Mesopotamian fertility and Mother goddess Ishtar[59]) or Ereshkigal.[60] Ishtar could be either malevolent, giving barrenness or bringing death, or benevolent, granting fruitfulness or birth.[61] She was a goddess, not a monster; an impressive force to be revered rather than scorned. Inanna has many comparative characteristics to the Goddess of life and death and Mesopotamian and Sumerian mythology had an influence on the Greek people and the formation of the *Gorgoneion* and Medusa. Inanna, the goddess of life and love, and her sister Ereshkigal, the goddess of death who ruled the underworld, appear in the Sumerian *Descent of Inanna* where the goddess of life visits the underworld and is cursed with death by

[57] Elhelw 2016: 13.
[58] Dexter 2010: 38.
[59] For images of Ishtar see Appendix Fig. 51 and Fig. 52.
[60] Elhelw 2016: 11.
[61] Dexter 2010: 36.

her sister.[62] In this myth, the link between life, death, and fertility is notably displayed when the goddess of life and fertility goes to the land of the dead:

> My mistress has abandoned heaven, abandoned earth, and is descending to the netherworld. Inanna has abandoned heaven, abandoned earth, and is descending to the netherworld.[63]

Not only does the fertility goddess visit the underworld but the death goddess in the same myth gives birth and brings life.[64] Fertility and life die, and then new life and birth come from death within this tale. In this myth life and death are shown as intertwined aspects. These two goddesses of fertility and death have overlapping aspects, and life and death are shown as a continuum, in the same manner that Medusa's death is linked with bringing forth life.

It is not only Medusa who has mythological similarities to these goddesses. Weappa claims that this myth of Inanna and its parallels with the myths of Persephone and Demeter in Greek mythology, and the myths of Ishtar and Isis in Mesopotamian and ancient Egyptian mythology, clearly show that these myths were influenced by *Inanna's Descent*.[65] This displays a distinct cultural and mythological overlap between the Greeks, the Mesopotamians, and the Egyptians.[66] While Inanna has many

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[62] Dexter 2011: 184.
[63] *Inanna's Descent*. IX. 4-5.
[64] *ibid.* 257-258.
[65] Weappa 2018: 27.
[66] It is important to note that the influence of Inanna and the Bird-Snake goddesses is not only found in Greece but also in other cultures, such as ancient Egypt. Birds and snakes were crucial to ancient Egyptian iconography, with the snake becoming the symbol of lower Egypt, where the *uraeus*, the serpent biting its tail, represented the everlasting cycle of birth, death and rebirth. For examples of this iconography, see Fig. 54 of the Appendix, which shows Isis with an *uraeus* headdress leading Queen Nefertari of Egypt, and Fig. 55 shows a relief of a king with an *uraeus* headdress. For another depiction of *uraei*, see Fig. 37. Regarding bird symbolism, Dexter (2011: 188) explains that the vulture denoted Upper Egypt. Fig. 56 displays an Egyptian relief containing a cobra and a vulture. The Egyptian goddess Isis was also depicted with outspread wings to protect dead souls. A depiction of winged Isis with the mummy of Osiris on the back of a lion can be seen in Fig. 53. Khalifa-Guetta (2021: 226) explains that Isis, in her fertility aspect, was also associated with serpents. Dexter (2011: 188) further notes that in Egypt, the hieroglyphic which denotes the class for the classifications of goddesses and priestesses

similarities with Persephone, especially in the account of her descent to the Underworld, it is the Sumerian Underworld goddess Ereshkigal that is important in investigating the Gorgon. Ereshkigal and Medusa are both chthonic live-giving females. Medusa also has similarities with both the Indic goddess Kali, and the Indic Lajja Gauri figures.[67] However, these figures reside in temples bringing good fortune, and unlike Medusa, they were not viewed as monstrous.[68]

It was not only her powers and characterisation that the Gorgon borrowed from nearby cultures. Medusa's iconography is partially taken from ancient Western Asia where her amalgamated character evinces several similarities to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in ancient Mesopotamia.[69] In this myth, Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, meets his double Enkidu whom he eventually befriends and goes on heroic quests with.[70] Enkidu later dies in Gilgamesh's arms, prompting Gilgamesh's search for eternal life.[71] In this tale the snake once again emerges as a symbol of regeneration when Gilgamesh has the power of eternal life in his hands and then loses it:

> Gilgamesh found a pool whose water was cool, down he went into it, to bathe in the water. Of the plant's fragrance a snake caught scent, came up [in silence], and bore the plant off. As it turned away it sloughed its skin.[72]

This myth is contemporary to the *Cycle of Inanna*. The snake in this myth symbolises rebirth and sexuality due to its ability to regenerate and its phallic likeness.[73] As with the Bird-Snake goddesses, the snake is displayed here as a symbol of regeneration.

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was a serpent. These prior myths of the previous goddesses were therefore so prevalent that they affected multiple later cultures.

[67] Dexter 2010: 38. For an image of the fertility goddess Lajja Gauri, see Fig. 57 of the appendix.

[68] Dexter 2010: 38.

[69] *ibid.* 34.

[70] Bravo 2016: 351.

[71] *ibid.*

[72] *Epic of Gilgamesh*. XI. 305-310.

[73] Wolkstein 1983: 142.

This is also shown in Greco-Roman mythology, where Ovid likens Hercules to a snake after his apotheosis:

> And as a serpent who has shed his skin sheds old age too, rejoicing in new life, and glitters with new scales; so Hercules, when he had cast off his mortality, became more vigorous in his better part…[74]

However, there is an even closer link to the Perseus-Medusa myth that was mentioned previously in 'Healing and Guarding: Medusan Amulets'. Just as Perseus, with the help of the gods, beheads Medusa, so too does Gilgamesh, with the help of Enkidu, slay Humbaba[75]: "[Gilgamesh heard the words] of his friend, he drew forth [the dirk at] his side. Gilgamesh [smote him] in the neck".[76] The story of the Gorgon emerged alongside the popular Assyrian story of Humbaba's beheading in texts and art.[77] There are multiple parallels between the two stories, and it is possible that the Greeks adopted the symbol of the Gorgon's head and elements of the Perseus-Medusa myth both directly from Mesopotamia, as well as second-hand from Cypris.[78]

Thus the Gilgamesh-Humbaba saga acts as a precursor and a framework from which aspects for the later Perseus-Medusa myth developed, in the same way that *Inanna's Descent* mirrors Persephone's abduction in Greek myth. The Gorgon's iconography already existed and had power, and then her tale in the Perseus-Medusa myth was created to explain her power in the context of Greek mythology and religion, based on the slaying of another similar, monstrous demon figure. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is also widely accepted that this Medusan iconography was influenced by the iconography surrounding Bes, the fertility midget-god from Egypt.[79] The Perseus-Medusa myth was created from multiple influences to create a reason for the

[74] Ov. *Met*. IX. 392-396.
[75] To see an image of Humbaba go to Fig. 58 of the appendix.
[76] *Epic of Gilgamesh*. V. 263-264.
[77] Dexter 2010: 35.
[78] *ibid.*
[79] Khalifa-Guetta 2021: 217.

Gorgoneion figure. Her previous associations and descent from the fertility and Bird-Snake goddesses were erased in her envelopment in the new Greek mythology. The Gorgon became a remnant of the previously revealed aspects of female control that were now diminished and demonised in the new patriarchal order.

Lion Symbolism

Another animal symbol frequently associated with the Gorgon is the lion.[80] Medusa is often depicted alongside lions. This parallels ancient Western Asiatic goddesses, where deities such as Inanna-Ishtar, Cybele, and others are habitually connected with lions.[81] By the early centuries CE, lions were already recognised as the fiercest wild predators on the Indian subcontinent, fostering a long tradition of lion-warrior imagery.[82] Inanna-Ishtar has been closely associated with war, love, kingship, and lions since the 4th millennium BCE.[83] As seen in Chapter 2, the Gorgon's origins can be traced to multiple sources, one of which includes lion masks. Several lion masks have been discovered at Tyrans from the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, and others were found in Sparta from the seventh and fifth centuries BCE.[84] This imagery connects Medusa with Magna Mater, the Great Mother goddess worshipped by Minoan and other matriarchal Peloponnesian cultures.[85] This strengthens the Gorgon's relation to the overarching female goddess of the pre-horticultural societies. This is also congruent to female display figures from the earliest Upper Palaeolithic period, such

[80] Lions are a common and pervasive symbol in ancient cultures. For Greek depictions of lions see, Fig. 5 and Fig. 59; for Mesopotamian depictions see Fig. 51 and Fig. 60; and for Egyptian see Fig. 53.
[81] Dexter 2010: 38. For Cybele with a lion, see Fig. 61. For Ishtar with a lion, see Fig. 51. For a depiction of winged Isis with the mummy of Osiris on the back of a lion, see Fig. 53.
[82] Policardi 2024: 175.
[83] *ibid.* 178.
[84] Khalifa-Guetta 2021: 217.
[85] *ibid.*

as those found in the Chauvet cave, where they are depicted with lions from the Upper Palaeolithic Aurignacian period through the Neolithic and Bronze ages.[86]

On Artemis' Corfu temple, Medusa is illustrated flanked by female lions, thus associating her with Artemis as Potnia Theron, the Mistress of Animals.[87] This tether of origin between Artemis and the Gorgon becomes even more pronounced when maidens, during their initiations under Artemis at the Ortheia sanctuary at Sparta, were found to have worn Gorgon masks.[88] Furthermore, on the Aeginian temple, Medusa is central, and the lions shown with her equate her to Artemis and the Great Mother.[89] Artemis' lineage can be traced to Cybele in Asia Minor and even earlier to imagery from the seventh millennium BCE.[90] She is linked to the Neolithic goddess, as seen in her representation as winged Potnia Theron and in Arcadia, where she was associated with serpents.[91] Artemis is recognised as one of the oldest deities, whith worship and rituals possibly extending back to Palaeolithic times.[92] This winged form of Artemis was common in the seventh century BCE,[93] where she was shown as the Mistress of Animals, not only with wings but also holding animals, usually lions.[94]

Fragmentary ivory-carved Spartan plaques and shields also favour this early representation of Artemis.[95] In Sparta, there are depictions of Artemis Orthia (Standing Artemis) from ca. 600 BCE, which later disappear as the goddess is merged

[86] Dexter 2018: 476.
[87] For a depiction of Potnia Theron see Fig. 62 of the appendix.
[88] Marler 2002: 20.
[89] Frothingham 1911: 357.
[90] Marler 2002: 20.
[91] Dexter 2011: 193.
[92] Marler 2002: 20.
[93] To see a depiction of winged Artemis in her Potnia Theron aspect see Fig. 64 of the appendix.
[94] Boardman 1974: 219.
[95] Thompson 1909: 286-288.

into the later Hellenic Artemis.[96] Artemis Orthia can be found holding a bird, a lion, or both, and is also depicted as a standing figure with wings.[97] In Pausanias' second century CE description of the chest of Cypselus, he expresses unfamiliarity with this winged portrayal of Artemis: "On what account Artemis has wings on her shoulders I do not know; in her right hand she grips a leopard, in her left a lion".[98] As her image became static in its portrayal and merged into her new Greek form, her old associations with previous divinities faded from memory.[99] In some iconography, Artemis is even depicted wearing a lionskin, though this generally symbolises Herakles.[100]

The depictions of Potnia Theron decreased and eventually faded out entirely during the Classical period, by which time the previous lioness form of the wild Artemis had been tamed into a more 'civilised' version.[101] Artemis is a Greek goddess who emerged from a pre-existing goddess, modified to fit into the Greek Pantheon. Artemis is often depicted as a wild young maiden with little interest beyond hunting.[102] In Crete, she is known as the Lady of the Wild Beasts.[103] While her most famous shrine was at Ephesus,[104] she was worshipped throughout the mountainous and wild areas in Laconia, Arcadia, and Greece.[105] Homer refers to her as "Artemis of the wild, the lady

[96] Thompson 1909: 295.
[97] *ibid.*
[98] Paus. *Description of Greece.* V. 19. 5.
[99] See Fig. 65 of the appendix for a Greek depiction of Artemis without her winged aspect.
[100] Stern 2017: 168.
[101] Ridge 2013: 41.
[102] For an image of Artemis hunting with a bow see Fig. 63 of the appendix.
[103] Casadio and Johnson 2021: vii.
[104] This is not only her most famous shrine, Casadio and Johnson (2021: viii-xii) explain that Artemis' sanctuary at Ephesus was her main sanctuary before the start of the Archaic Age in the eighth century BCE. It was created from the Greek reinterpretation of the previous Mother goddess who was worshipped there. This goddess' counterparts in the nearby areas of Anatolia, Mesopotamia-Syria and Persia were Phrygian Cybele and the Iranian Anahita.
[105] Casadio and Johnson 2021: vii.

of wild beasts".[106] Like Medusa, Artemis was also a figure associated with birth. In ancient Greece she was appealed to for childbirth, gynaecological issues, and the protection of young children.[107] In this aspect, she is known as Artemis *Lochia* (of the childbearing bed), a protector of both infant children and women in childbirth.[108] This aspect of her worship is often syncretised with Eileithyia, the Cretan deity of childbirth who was worshipped in a cave.[109] This association with Artemis links to Medusa's fertility aspect, specifically the sons she gives birth to. Like Medusa, then, Artemis is also possessed dual affinities and powers over both life and death. In Greece, Artemis was thus a goddess of many aspects: the hunt, wild animals, the wild, virginity, protector of young girls, childbirth, and the bringer and curer of disease in women.[110]

In the Classical period, Artemis' associations with the Bird-Snake goddesses, Magna Mater and Cybele, are overwritten. Nonetheless, this initial connection between Artemis and these deities is significant, as is her connection with the Gorgon. While Artemis inherited the more 'acceptable' characteristics of the previous divinities, as evidenced by her godhood, Medusa inherited the uncontrollable aspects of the Mother goddesses that men later came to fear. These previously revered abilities of the Mistress of Animals became associated with and symbolic of Medusa's monstrosity. She poses a threat to the new male *polis*, a wild female with abilities greater than men, capable of both killing and reproducing unnaturally. Medusa, whether she was a sexual partner or a victim of Poseidon, embodied the feared sexual power of women in Greco-Roman society. At the same time, Medusa was reduced to a mortal figure, a

[106] Hom. *Il*. XXI. 470. In Hesiod's *Hymn to Artemis 27*, her delight in hunting is emphasised, (Hes. *Hymn to Artemis.* 27): "… the goddess with a bold heart turns every way, destroying the race of wild beasts: and when she is satisfied and has cheered her heart, this huntress who delights in arrows slackens her supple bows and goes to the great house of her dear brother Phoebus Apollo, to the rich land of Delphi."
[107] Larson 2007: 105.
[108] Vikela 2009: 74.
[109] Larson 2007: 107.
[110] Casadio and Johnson 2021: viii.

destructible monster instead of an all-powerful deity. The Gorgon could kill and bring forth life, but she could also be killed, and her powers appropriated by the male-dominated society for their benefit. The threat Medusa held was diminished by her inevitable death at the hands of Perseus. Following the establishment of the Perseus-Medusa myth, the *Gorgoneion's* power, whilst still utilised as a potent *apotropaia*, became a symbol of male triumph over female power. Medusa displays the dark elements of Potnia Theron that Artemis' new portrayal has shed. Artemis encapsulated and embodied aspects of the Mistress of Animals that were palatable to the patriarchal Greek society. She is wild and formidable, yet not a threat to the male Olympians. Her position in the pantheon allows for both the wild and the provisions of nature to be respected, while allowing for the childbearing ability of women to have a godly aspect, but in a non-threatening manner. Artemis does not bear children herself; she is a maiden goddess and thus not a temptation to men. Because she avoids men, Artemis is antithetical to Medusa's threatening sexuality and powers. The two, monster and divinity, share a connection, a common origin for their overlapping aspects, which diverged as civilisation, culture, and religion evolved.

Over centuries, a mixing of cultural ideas occurred between the differing ideological systems of the Old European horticulturalists, between the matrilineal egalitarian societies that worshipped earth deities and the new pastoral androcratic worshipers of sky gods.[111] In parts of ancient Asia and Europe, there is iconographical evidence ranging from ca. 6000 BCE – ca. 2000 BCE of a societal structure centred around a goddess as the chief deity; these horticulturalists were peaceful.[112] Later ca. 2000 BCE, in Iran, India, and Europe, this is shown to change with male deities now represented in greater quantity.[113] Settlements started to become heavily fortified, with large

[111] Marler 2002: 15.
[112] Dexter 2011: 182.
[113] *ibid*.

evidence of weaponry due to the onslaughts of the semi-nomadic Proto-Indo-Europeans who were patriarchal, militaristic, and patrilinear.[114] Archaeological and linguistic evidence shows that these Indo-European-speaking tribes came to the Balkan peninsula during the Bronze Age and intermingled with the indigenous non-Indo-European inhabitants, establishing the population that would develop into the Greeks.[115] Herodotus himself talks about those people indigenous to Greece, whom he called Pelasgians, as speaking a pre-Indo-European language that was pre-Greek.[116]

By around the eighth century BCE, the time of Homer, the pantheon of the Olympian deities had been established, warfare was entrenched in society, and the idea of the *polis* was conceived of as a community of male citizens separate from women. Male prerogative and ideas were now prominent in the literary sources of the seventh to fourth century BCE.[117] The previous means of cultural thought had been replaced. Dexter argues that in patriarchal societies, it is common for life and death to be viewed as linear, not the cycle seen in the goddess worship. Because death now became something to be feared in these patriarchal societies, those figures who were closely associated with death, and who had originally been regarded as protective, now became terrifying.[118] There are still remnants of the previous belief system that survived to influence the formation of the new pantheon, aspects that were retained but adapted to fit the new worldview. It is this intertwining of ideas and ideologies that results in the later creation of Medusa and her dual nature. The previous cyclic view of life and death changes. Society divides and orders everything into the opposing binaries of night and day, life and death, and male and female.[119] The world is divided into boxes, categories, and oppositions as a means of making sense of the

[114] Dexter 2011: 182.
[115] Marler 2002: 15.
[116] Hdt. *Hist*. I. 57.
[117] Marler 2002: 16.
[118] Dexter 2010: 34.
[119] Irigaray 2012: 41.

world, and previously intertwined ideas connected by a symbol, such as serpents, are now viewed as opposites. In the new male-controlled society, female deity-led worship stood against logic.[120] This explains the prevalence of rape and pursuit narratives that occurred within Greco-Roman society: "[s]tories of rape-domination by means of sex, euphemistically referred to as 'amorous' adventures dramatised and celebrated the power of the male over the female".[121]

Some Presocratic philosophers, however, maintained the belief in a single superior female deity.[122] The philosophers Empedocles and Parmenides, for example, proposed a less categorical approach to the world. Parmenides philosophised about a man's journey in a chariot to gain knowledge from a goddess. The goddess informs him that all Being is composed of a whole, not distinct oppositional categories: "'that Being is ungenerated and imperishable, entire, unique, unmoved and perfect".[123] This goddess is also shown to be the ruling goddess and force in all:

> 'Between these is the divinity who governs all things. For everywhere she initiates hateful birth and union, sending female to unite with male and male conversely with female.'[124]

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[120] The Greeks saw women as irrational and men as rational. Aris. *Pol*. I. V: "Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind." and Aris. *Pol*. I. XIII: "Here the very constitution of the soul has shown us the way; in it one part naturally rules, and the other is subject, and the virtue of the ruler we in maintain to be different from that of the subject; the one being the virtue of the rational, and the other of the irrational part."

[121] Marler 2002: 22.

[122] Schofield (2009: vii) notes that, although Parmenides' original work has been lost, through the works of Simplicius, Sextus, and other authors who wrote copies of parts of his works there is accurate evidence for what he wrote. As what remains of Parmenides' work is fragmentary, there is some debate over whether we ought to read him as a monist or not. For alternative readings of his work, see, Mourelatos (1979), Barnes (1979), and Curd (1998).

[123] Prm. *Frag*. 8. 2-4.

[124] *ibid*. 12. 3-6. Coxon (2009: 372) states that the 'hateful birth and union' mentioned here is "unmistakably Pythagorean". He explains this Pythagorean as follows (2009: 276): "the perpetual light of the divine world and the relative darkness of the human world… supplemented the allusion to the remoteness of the gateway and its opening on a region of light with a reference to Tartarus; this would be present if the phrase were taken to imply a view that the human world which P. is leaving is the true Tartarus, where souls are punished with incarceration…". 'P' stands for Parmenides.

The ancient author Simplicius comments that: "Parmenides posits as a single common efficient cause the goddess who is seated in the middle of all things and is the cause of all coming-to-be".[125] Simplicius also tells us the following about Empedocles:

> … like Empedocles of Agrigentum, who… was an admirer and associate of Parmenides and even more of the Pythagoreans. He makes the bodily elements four: fire and air and water and earth, which are eternal in muchness and littleness.[126]

To these thinkers, the entirety of Being is based on the feminine, be it nature or goddess.[127] These philosophers show a perspective that is different from the "frozen polarities" to which the later philosophers like Plato adhered: "Life is what grows; it is not considered as a completed totality to which death is opposed."[128] The binary is not the only possible perspective and before it existed a continuum, a cycle. Life and death and male and female were not separate and oppositional. This prior way of thinking distinctly encapsulates Medusa and the *Gorgoneion*: a killer with healing blood and an androgynous figure. Her root influences, the Earth Mother goddesses, possessed these aspects before they were categorised and cast in a monstrous light.

This is the origin of the female monsters and goddesses of the Greco-Roman pantheon, and the specific inheritances they gained are dependent on their designation as divine or monstrous:

> The natural origin, the maternal origin, has more connection to the fluid… than to the apparent, to the visible. It has thus been confused with the darkness – good or bad depending on whether this origin was experienced in a positive or negative way… And this was accompanied by nostalgia, hatred, contempt, at the very least by fear, tinged with

[125] Simpl. *in Phys*. 34. 14-16.
[126] *ibid*. 25. 19-23.
[127] Irigaray 2012: 3.
[128] *ibid*. 23.

> reverence or rejection – sentiments equally tied, subsequently, to god(s).[129]

Nature and the goddess are thus replaced by the masculine god.[130] With the fall of this nature goddess comes the decline of her symbols, in this case, the snake. The serpent is a symbol of cycles, such as in the double serpent Ouroboros (originating in Egyptian funerary art), and Jörmungandr, the monstrous serpent biting its own tail in Norse mythology.[131] They embody a continuum of life and death, just as the serpentine Medusa does. All over the world, the serpent symbol and the Mother goddesses appear to both rise and then fall together.[132] The goddess, initially amplified by her symbols, also loses her power alongside them. Yet the power remains present in the figures who inherited aspects of their abilities, such as the Gorgon, Artemis, as well as several other gods and monsters. The Great Goddesses may have lost their power, but their remnants can be found in Greco-Roman gods and monsters.

Duality in Greco-Roman Gods

The Great Mother goddesses, once assimilated into the male-centred pantheons, either lost some of their powers or became representatives of the new culture.[133] The prior aspects of the goddesses are split or repurposed to fit into the new pantheon. Remnants of the Mother goddesses can still be seen, however. Hera, for example, is often associated with serpents in her iconography and votive offerings, and Demeter, the fertility grain goddess, has an underworldly aspect associated with snakes.[134] The goddesses who inherited these aspects could be both nurturing and destructive, such as Aphrodite, Athena, and Demeter.[135] Aphrodite is sometimes depicted riding a goose

[129] Irigaray 2012: 104-105.
[130] Weappa 2018: 25.
[131] *ibid*.
[132] *ibid*.
[133] Dexter 2017: 82.
[134] Dexter 2011: 192.
[135] Dexter 2017: 85.

or a swan in vase paintings. In Diodalses' 'crouching Aphrodite' sculpture, she is shown with a snake curled around her arm.[136] In a Roman copy of this sculpture, there are also fragments of a goose below her, showing her as a goddess who inherited both the serpentine and avian aspects of the previous Mother goddesses.[137] Aphrodite is also renowned in that she can bless you or curse you in love. In the tale of Hippolytus, he is severely punished for not worshipping the goddess and is destroyed by her because of this and Aphrodite herself in Euripides' play notes: "those who worship my power in all humility I exalt in honour. But those whose pride is stiff-necked against me I lay by the heels."[138]

Some male gods exhibit this duality. Dionysus, whose scenes are often displayed on tombs alongside Medusa and whose figure is sometimes portrayed frontally, has snakes intertwined into his worship. In his Christian treatise, the *Exhortation of the Greeks*, Clement of Alexandria mentions this aspect of the cult in his critique.[139] In Euripides' *Bacchae,* when the Chorus are explaining Dionysus' birth, it is said that when Dionysus was born, Zeus crowned him with a garland of snakes, which is why his maenads braid snakes into their hair.[140] Snakes are thus an important aspect of this god, and he is known for his dual nature. He is shown as capable of blessing his followers with abundance.[141] This generosity contrasts with the god's temper and wrath when Dionysus ruins Pentheus and the house of Cadmus for disrespecting his

[136] Dexter 2011: 190.
[137] *ibid.*
[138] Eur. *Hipp*. 4-7.
[139] Clement of Alexandria. *Exhortation to the Greeks*. II. 12: "The raving Dionysus is worshipped by Bacchants with orgies, in which they celebrate their sacred frenzy by a feast of raw flesh. Wreathed with snakes, they perform the distribution of portions of their victims, shouting the name of Eva, that Eva through whom error entered into the world; and a consecrated snake is the emblem of the Bacchic orgies."
[140] Eur. *Ba*. 126-131.
[141] In Euripides' *Bacchae* (814-819:) this is shown in the summoning of milk and honey for the Bacchants and the call to praise him rather than condemn him, "And those who longed / For milk began to dig by hand, and spurts / Of it surged up. Honey began to pour / From the ivied rods they carry. So, if you / Had been there, too, and seen what I have seen, / You'd pray to Dionysos rather than / Condemn him."

divinity.[142] Therefore, Dionysus upholds the connection between beneficence and maleficence that was present in the previous Mother goddesses, but this power has been bestowed upon a male deity, transforming it into an acceptable form for the male-centred society. He embodies abundance, fertility, and sexuality, yet in an acceptable male form. He has wild female followers, but they are under the control of a male power. He grants abundance and a blessed afterlife to his devotees. He has both fertility and chthonic associations, but these are in line with Greek cultural ideas. His blessings and abilities maintain the culturally split aspects of life and death.

In addition to the chthonic associations discussed in Chapter 2, Dionysus also has further chthonic links. Dionysus also has some links to Demeter. Iacchus, a figure associated with the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, is a name given to Dionysus by initiates at Eleusis in songs accompanied by the flute.[143] In the Orphic cult, Dionysus-Iacchus is also linked with Demeter, who is known as the "illustrious companion of Bromios".[144] The serpent was an important symbol of the Eleusinian mysteries as the ritual symbol of Dionysus Bassaros in the covered baskets (*cista mystica*).[145] Here, women descend underground surrounded by *phalloi*, snakes, pinecones, and piglets symbols representing female genitals, sexuality and fertility, with the snakes being the guardians of the sacred areas and symbols of male genitalia, fertility and chthonic regions.[146] Demeter herself also retained facets of the previous Mother goddesses. In his *Catalogue of Women*, Hesiod links the goddess of grain and agriculture with snakes:

> The snake of Cychreus: Hesiod says that it was brought up by Cychreus, and was driven out by Eurylochus as defiling the island, but that Demeter received it into Eleusis, and that it became her attendant.[147]

[142] Eur. *Ba*. 1407-1408.
[143] Dumoulié 2016: 786.
[144] *Orphic Hymn*. XL To Eleusinian Demeter. 10-11.
[145] Håland 2011: 127.
[146] *ibid*.
[147] Hes. *The Catalogues of Women and the Eoiae*. 77.

Snakes were important in ancient mystery cults, especially those which involved initiation, cures, purification, or healing.[148] Demeter had a mystery cult at Eleusis based on the events of Persephone's abduction myth in the *Hymn to Demeter*. Although Demeter is a goddess of the earth, she is by no means a solely benevolent goddess. Her daughter Persephone mimics aspects of the *Descent of Inanna* when her story of being stolen by Hades into the underworld is seen in the *Hymn to Demeter*:

> I begin to sing of rich-haired Demeter, awful goddess—of her and her trim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus rapt away, given to him by all-seeing Zeus the loud-thunderer.[149]

Persephone becomes a goddess of life and spring who is taken to the land of the dead. It is also during this time that winter and its harshness are explained as Demeter shows her anger in her daughter's abduction: "she caused a most dreadful and cruel year for mankind over the all-nourishing earth: the ground would not make the seed sprout, for rich-crowned Demeter kept it hid."[150] This is a state that is maintained for the time her daughter stays with her husband under the earth.

Two goddesses of life are thus shown to share associations with the chthonic realm and the previous Earth Mother goddesses. Demeter is also linked to the *Gorgoneion* through Baubo, the woman who tries to give her food and then makes her laugh when she is despairing about her lost daughter:

> She declines to take it, being unwilling to drink on account of her mourning. Baubo is deeply hurt, thinking she has been slighted, and thereupon uncovers her secret parts and exhibits them to the goddess. Demeter is pleased at the sight, and now at last receives the draught, delighted with the spectacle![151]

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[148] Håland 2011: 134.
[149] Hes. *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. II. 1-5.
[150] *ibid*. 306-308.
[151] Clement of Alexandria. *Exhortation to the Greeks*. II. 17.

This tale is narrated by Clement of Alexandria, who also quotes the Orphic fragment he found this information from:

> I will quote you the very lines of Orpheus, in order that you may have the originator of the mysteries as witness of their shamelessness:
> This said, she drew aside her robes, and showed A sight of shame; child Iacchus was there, And laughing, plunged his hand below her breasts. Then smiled the goddess, in her heart she smiled, And drank the draught from out the glancing cup.[152]

Baubo and Medusa are both *apotropaic* devices, as will be discussed later in this chapter. These beings, Medusa, Dionysus, and Demeter are all associated with the underworld and abundance to an extent. They have divided up the surviving aspects of the previous Mother Goddesses. The Neolithic Bird and Snake-Goddesses maintained their influence on Greco-Roman culture even after their worship ceased. Clement of Alexandria, despairing of the rituals and beliefs of the worshippers of the Greek and Roman pantheon, warns Christians that they should "not believe that stones and stocks and birds and snakes are sacred things, while men are not."[153]

Monsters' Inheritance

Several monsters also inherited aspects of the Great Mother goddesses. Female figures – particularly those associated with death such as Medusa, the Furies, Sirens and Harpies – inherited aspects of the Mother goddesses but were turned into witches and monsters.[154] There are several monstrous Greco-Roman female figures which possess a combination of bird and snake features. Many are even feminine-bird or feminine-snake hybrid creatures, where they are seen to embody the now negatively perceived attributes of these symbols.[155] Medusa is a prominent example of these hybrid Bird-

[152] Clement of Alexandria. *Exhortation to the Greeks*. II. 20.
[153] *ibid*. X. 82.
[154] Dexter 2017: 82-83.
[155] Dexter 2011: 194.

Snake Greco-Roman monsters. When Perseus beheads Medusa, she gives birth to Pegasus and Chrysaor,[156] thus turning her into a serpentine figure who brings death through her gaze, but who also brings life through her death. Not only does this show her as closely linked to the previous society's ideas of a birth-life-death-rebirth continuum, but it also presents her as the serpentine mother of an avian-hybrid child. She is seen here encompassing both aspects of the Bird-Snake goddesses. The *Gorgoneion* is also sometimes depicted as winged.[157] This furthers her connection to the previous Mother goddesses' portrayals and attributes. Medusa was one of many monstrous Indo-European figures linked to the bird and snake iconography, such as Baltic raganas (witches) who take the shape of crows and have snakes in their hair.[158] There are also the Furies, Dirae, Sirens, and Harpies, all of whom have avian and snake features.[159] The Furies, in particular, share several crucial similarities with Medusa, both in terms of the aspects they inherited from the Great Mother goddesses and in terms of how the 'dangerous' aspects they inherited led to their being perceived as 'monstrous' in comparison to the Olympic gods.

The Furies, also called the Erinyes, were three sisters, virgin serpentine goddesses, who enacted punishment on the guilty, especially those guilty of familicide.[160] In his narrative of Aeneas' journey down to the underworld, the Roman author Vergil describes one of the sisters:

> …Tisiphone, armed with her lashes,
> Leaps up to whip them herself, thrusts her left hand, teeming with angry
> Snakes, at their faces, then calls in her armies of merciless sisters.[161]

[156] Hes. *Theog*. 270-283.
[157] Jooste 2018: 67
[158] Dexter 2010: 34.
[159] Dexter 2018: 473.
[160] Dexter 2011: 194.
[161] Verg. *Aen*. VI. 570-572.

They are portrayed as horrifying hybrid creatures of the underworld:

> Forces exist, people say, twin pestilent powers called the Dirae,
> Born with Megaera, their triplet in hell, to the never discerning
> Night in the one same moment of birth. Night endowed them with matching
> Ringlets of snakes and equipped them with wings like the winds they would glide through.[162]

However, they are not evil or unjust but dispensers of justice. A nightmare creature of death and destruction but also a keeper of order and morality. In Aeschylus' *Eumenides* the Chorus of Furies describes their position as defenders of morality:

> We hold we are straight and just. If a man can spread his hands and show they are clean, no wrath of ours shall lurk for him. Unscathed he walks through his lifetime. But one like this man before us, with stained hidden hands, and the guilt upon him, shall find us beside him, as witnesses of the truth, and we show clear m the end to avenge the blood of the murdered.[163]

The depiction of the Furies is very similar to the that of the Gorgon; Vergil even describes the Fury Alecto as "bathed foully in venom of Gorgons."[164] They are seen as both demons of death and as Eumenides ('Kindly Ones').[165] The respect for the previous Mother goddesses can be seen in these new savage goddesses of justice. They uphold the new morals of the *polis* as frightening and bloodthirsty creatures.

Athena and Medusa as Doubles

Athena is one of the goddesses who inherited aspects from the Neolithic and Earth Mother goddesses. She is also closely linked to Medusa. But this link is a paradoxical one, since while Athena inherits that which is enviable and revered, Medusa and the

[162] Verg. *Aen.* XII. 845-847.
[163] Aesc. *Eum*. 312-320.
[164] Verg. *Aen*. VII. 341.
[165] Håland 2011: 130.

Gorgoneion only inherit that which is feared and uncontrollable. This results in them being two sides of the same coin with opposing aspects. As Bravo has argued, doubles and counterparts are common in myth, and they fulfil a specific function:

> …the double is simultaneously identical to and different from – indeed, even opposite to – the original. It is always a source of fascination to the person who possesses it, because of the paradox that it represents (being simultaneously internal and external, here and there, opposite and complementary). In addition, it arouses extreme emotional reactions in the form of attraction or repulsion.[166]

Medusa and Athena are one such set of doubles, complementary characters intertwined with each other yet in opposition. Bravo has also noted that those who encounter their magical doubles inevitably suffer as a result.[167] An example of this can be found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where Enkidu is created as Gilgamesh's double in response to the prayers of Gilgamesh's people, who are suffering under him.[168] Enkidu matches the hero Gilgamesh in "how like in build he is to Gilgamesh".[169] Gilgamesh was a tyrant before he met Enkidu;[170] he was unopposed in power, fighting ability, and form.[171] Enkidu was created as his equal to challenge Gilgamesh's tyranny by the gods so that he could "be a match for the storm of his heart, let them vie with each other, so Uruk may be rested!"[172] The goddess Aruru fashioned Enkidu from clay, a man of the wild, with no people or country, who initially lived among the herds of

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[166] Bravo 2016: 346.
[167] *ibid*. 351.
[168] *Epic of Gilgamesh*. I. 97-103: "'Let him be a match for the storm of his heart, let them vie with each other, so Uruk may be rested!' The goddess Aruru heard these words, what Anu had thought of she fashioned within her. The goddess Aruru, she washed her hands, took a pinch of clay, threw it down in the wild. In the wild she created Enkidu, the hero…"
[169] *Epic of Gilgamesh*. II. 40.
[170] *ibid*. I. 69.
[171] *ibid*. I. 82-90: "… he has no equal when his weapons are brandished. 'His companions are kept on their feet by his contests, [the young men of Uruk] he harries without warrant. Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father, I 85 by day and by [night his tyranny grows] harsher. 'Yet he is the shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold, Gilgamesh, [the guide of the] teeming [people.] Though he is their shepherd and their [protector,] powerful, pre-eminent, expert [and mighty].'"
[172] *Epic of Gilgamesh*. I. 97-98.

gazelles in the wilderness.[173] Gilgamesh, the king of a people and civilisation, was doubled and made opposite by this wild man of equal strength. After Enkidu opposed and fought against Gilgamesh's tyrannical actions, they became steadfast companions.[174] As predicted, this meeting of doubles ends in tragedy. Enkidu is killed, bringing great pain to Gilgamesh as he bitterly mourns him.[175] Not only does he freive for his fallen companion, but he also develops a profound fear of death, which leads to Gilgamesh wandering the wilderness.[176] It is this loss of his double and ensuing mourning that drives Gilgamesh to search for the source of eternal life, which is stolen from him by the snake. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are intertwined, matched figures who initially differ in ideals until they become companions, the tamed wild man and the tamed tyrant. They are doubles, strikingly similar yet possessing many differences. Medusa and Athena, too, are set as contrasting yet complementary doubles.

This sheds light on aspects of the Medusan myths, particularly regarding the significance of the rivalry between Athena and Medusa and the mirror motif.[177] In some cases, Medusa and Athena oppose one another as Athena punished Medusa for being raped in her temple,[178] or that she had claimed to be her rival in beauty.[179] In various versions of myths, Medusa and Athena are set against one another. This opposition is increased by the repeated use of mirrors within Medusa myths. In Ovid, Medusa is only destroyed when Perseus "looked upon her image… reflected in the shield".[180] This detail is also found in earlier versions, such as that of Apollodorus, where Perseus is once again shown "looking into a bronze shield in which he could

[173] *Epic of Gilgamesh*. I. 101-112.
[174] *ibid*. II. 111-190.
[175] *ibid*. VIII. 44-45.
[176] *ibid*. IX. 5.
[177] Dumoulié 2016: 781.
[178] Ov. *Met.* IV. 1087-1090.
[179] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 3: "But there are some who say that Medusa lost her head because of Athene—for they say that the Gorgon had claimed to rival the goddess in beauty."
[180] Ov. *Met.* IV. 1066-1067.

see the reflection of the Gorgon".[181] In these sources, Perseus needs to look at the reflection of the Gorgon to defeat her. This is a task he is often shown as having completed with Athena's help.[182] Athena herself is sometimes credited with killing the Gorgon, as in Euripides' *Ion*: "Earth produced the awful Gorgon to help her children fight against the gods. And Zeus' daughter, Pallas Athena, killed the monster."[183] Athena and Medusa are two avian-serpentine female figures with powers that oppose one another.[184] While Medusa is the wild mother of Pegasus and Chrysaor, Athena is the civilised maiden guardian of the male *polis.* They are both alike and yet complete opposites. In this battle of doubles, it is the Gorgon, the inheritor of the feared aspects, who loses and thus surrenders her power to the male-dominated society, just as the Mother goddesses she inherited her aspects from did.

Athena, the 'better' of the doubles, the acceptable inheritor of the Mother goddesses, takes up Medusa's image, "[putting] the Gorgon's head in the middle of her shield."[185] The Gorgon is Athena's negative double with whom she shares many features.[186] In the *Aeneid*, Vergil describes Athena in a manner reminiscent of the Gorgon: "Hardly was her image placed in the camp when its eyes began bulging, Flared wide, leaping with flames."[187] The same resemblance is also found in Pindar's *Pythian Odes*. When Athena creates the flute, an instrument whose sound mimicked the Gorgons' wailing, she immediately abandons it because when it is played, the instrument distorts the musician's face into the Gorgon's likeness.[188] The flute makes Athena take on the sound and appearance of the Gorgons, thereby effectively blurring any sense of

[181] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 2.
[182] Pi. *P*. 12.
[183] Eur. *Ion*. 963-965.
[184] Although Athena's association with snakes is less overt than the Gorgon's, it was an aspect of her figure and will be explained below when discussing her links to snakes and birds.
[185] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 46.
[186] Dumoulié 2016: 781.
[187] Verg. *Aen*. II. 172-173.
[188] Pi. *P*. XII.

distinction between Medusa and Athena. This sense of identification between the two figures is enhanced through their linked origins. Both Athena and Medusa are said to originate from Libya. Diodorus Siculus has Medusa as a Libyan Amazon, and Hesiod has her living beyond Okeanos[189] – a wild, untameable origin for the wild female monster.[190] Athena's Libyan origins align her with the Amazons, warrior female figures outside of the normal gender relationships.[191] As discussed in Chapter 1, the Amazons were female warrior figures who operated outside of male influence and control; dominant women who acted superior to men. This link between the Amazons and Athena, while not unusual due to her position as a goddess of battle, is outside her normal association as a goddess of the city of Athens. In several myths, then, Medusa and Athena share similar origins, indicating a relationship between their figures and entwining them closer together.

Like the Gorgon, Athena has close links with both snakes and birds. A known attribute of Athena is the owl.[192] In the ancient world, owls were a symbol associated with death, due to their hunting of live prey and ability to see in the dark.[193] Later, they are also seen as a symbol of prophecy, wisdom, and the epiphany of Athena, Hekate, and the Gorgon.[194] In her role as a war goddess, Athena was also associated with destruction

[189] Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist*. III. 52; Hes. *Theog*. 274.
[190] Dolmage (2009: 16) argues that this suggests Medusa's links to the North African Goddesses which can be found dating back as far as 1400 BCE. Diodorus Siculus' refers to Medusa as an Amazon and places her home as the marsh Tritonis in Libya, giving her a water-based, Libyan origin. As for Athena, Herodotus (*Hist*. IV. 180:) states that: "The Auseës claim that Athena is the daughter of Poseidon and Lake Tritonis, but that she got angry for some reason with her father and put herself in Zeus' hands, and he made her his daughter." Apollodorus (*Bibl*. I. 4. 6:) offers another account of Athena's Libyan origin: "When the time arrived for [Athena] to be born, Prometheus, or according to others, Hephaistos, struck the head of Zeus with an axe and from the top of his head, near the River Triton, leapt Athene, fully armed."
[191] Deacy 2009: 288.
[192] Boardman 1974: 204. For a depiction of Athena with her owl, see Fig. 66 in the appendix.
[193] Marler 2002: 20.
[194] *ibid*.

and the winged Furies. In Aeschylus, the chorus of Furies pledges their allegiance to her:

> I accept this home at Athene's side. I shall not forget the cause of this city, which Zeus all powerful and Ares rule. Stronghold of divinities, glory of Hellene gods, their guarded altar.[195]

Athena is also compared to birds in the *Odyssey*, where "she departed like a bird soaring high in the air".[196] She also shows a close association with snakes, mainly through her patronage of Athens. In his *Library*, Apollodorus recounts how Athena and Poseidon had gone into conflict for possession of the city. After she won, the city was awarded to Athena and she then named Athens after herself.[197] Another of Athena's associations that links her to snakes is that "Cecrops, who was born from the earth and had the body of a man and a serpent joined into one, was the first king of Athens".[198] The first king of her patron city was a serpentine man. This is supported in *Ion* where his image is described on a tapestry where he is called "Athens' first king, snake-king".[199] This association is furthered through the myth of Erichthonios, who in some myths was borne to Hephaestus and Athena. When Hephaestus tried to lay with Athena, he was rebuked by the maiden goddess, his ejaculation was then wiped with a piece of wool from her thigh then thrown to the earth which is where Erichthonios grew from.[200] This baby was then placed in a chest and given to Cecrops' daughters to watch. When opened against the goddess' wishes, the basket contained the baby and a snake. The daughters were then killed and Athena raised Erichthonios herself who later became king of Athens after expelling Amphictyon.[201] Here the Athenian lineage is shown as earth-born, indigenous, and as the result of two rapes. Dasteridou argues that these rape motifs represent a struggle to move from the wild to the civilised, from

[195] Aesc. *Eum*. 916-920.
[196] Hom. *Od*. III. 319-320.
[197] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 14. 1.
[198] *ibid*. III. 14.
[199] Eur. *Ion*. 1129-1130.
[200] Apollod. *Bibl*. III. 14. 6.
[201] *ibid*.

reliance on nature to an ordered civilisation.[202] This is a transition that mimics the change in religion and culture that resulted in the creation and rise of the Greek Pantheon.

Snakes, due to the first king's hybrid nature, were important to Athenian cult.[203] Herodotus noted that:

> The Athenians say that a large snake, the guardian of the Acropolis, lives in the sanctuary. This is not just something they talk about; they also act on it, by serving the snake a monthly quota of food—honeycake, to be specific.[204]

Athena is also associated with the Snake goddess who was alleged to be the House and Palace Goddess at Crete for the Minoan king at Knossos.[205] This is where female figures were found with snakes curled around their shoulders in house sanctuaries.[206] Haland has argued that these figures may be related to the Cybele prototypical cult in Asia Minor.[207] Although she may have been civilised and respected, Athena was certainly not an unthreatening figure. Instead, like the Gorgon, she was terrifying. This is best seen through her role as a war goddess. While she promotes intelligence in warfare, she is also associated with fury and terror.[208] She is shown as vicious, unrelenting, and terrifying in war: "Athene… Great goddess, weariless, waker of battle noise, leader of armies, a goddess queen who delights in war cries, onslaughts, and battles".[209] The same goddess who is called on by the Trojans as "lady, Athene, our city's defender"[210] allows the city to be destroyed. While she is accepted by men, she

[202] Dasteridou 2015: 57-58.
[203] Håland 2011: 124.
[204] Hdt. *Hist*. VIII. 41.
[205] Håland 2011: 126.
[206] *ibid*.
[207] *ibid*.
[208] Deacy 2009: 286.
[209] Hes. *Theog*. 924-926.
[210] Hom. *Il*. VI. 304-305.

is still horrifying to them, but she is a horror they rely on. She is invoked in times of warfare and for the welfare of the city and its people. War is not gentle or comforting but the goddess is a guiding force through this horror. Her powers, while awe-inspiring and based on bloodshed, were a part of the culture at the time. She was a necessity and a guiding protector but in a different way to the *Gorgoneion* figure. In this, the Neolithic Bird-hybrid goddess can be seen preserved in Athena.

The Gorgon is the less 'pure' form of the female and therefore needs to be destroyed. Athena, the virgin goddess, is opposed to a wild, sexually desired Medusa in the myths where Medusa is linked with Poseidon but not Athena's temple.[211] In other myths she is opposed to an impure Medusa who defiles Athena's temple by being raped by the god:

> "But it is said that Neptune ravished her, and in the temple of Minerva, where Jove's daughter turned away from the outrage and chastely hid her eyes behind her aegis. So that this action should not go unpunished, she turned the Gorgon's hair into foul snakes; and she, to overwhelm her foes with terror, bears on her breast the serpents she created."[212]

While Medusa is cast into the role of the defiling influence, Athena is portrayed as chaste; unable to look upon the impure act, she hides herself behind her shield, and later takes the power of Medusa for herself. Medusa's punishment is a means of controlling and categorising her. The punishment of transgressions functions to take the chaos of experience and set it into order, exaggerating the differences between things such as male and female to create order.[213] Athena and Medusa's divergences in characterisation are emphasised in this instance, and Medusa is punished for how she differs from Athena. Athena denied her sexuality, opting out of the societal expectations prescribed by sex and gender. This allows her both to act as support for

[211] Hes. *Theog.* 270-283.
[212] Ov. *Met*. IV. 1087-1094.
[213] Douglas 2003: 4.

male heroes and to move in the world of men and the *polis*.[214] The Medusan mythology is again being used to bring that which is wild, female, feared, and outside of male control, such as female sexuality and power, back under the control of an acceptable order; in this case under the control of the civilised, virginal, city goddess who protects men and heroes.

Athena and Medusa also share an association with horse imagery. The horse, with the snake and the bird, is a symbol of the Mother goddess.[215] This link with the horse is partly through Poseidon. Prior to his role as Ruler of the Sea, he had an association with the earth, and in archaic myth was the ancient earth goddess Gaia/Demeter's consort.[216] Mimicking the Medusan myth, Poseidon transforms into a stallion to mate with Demeter when she hides from his advances as a mare.[217] Here Demeter takes the same position as Medusa, as the victim of Poseidon's pursuit. Pausanias gives a version of this Poseidon-Earth goddess coupling:

> When Demeter was wandering in search of her daughter, she was followed, it is said, by Poseidon, who lusted after her. So she turned, the story runs, into a mare, and grazed with the mares of Oncius; realising that he was outwitted, Poseidon too changed into a stallion and enjoyed Demeter.[218]

After this, Demeter gives birth to an unnamed daughter and a horse called Areion, and this is given as the reason why the Arcadians call Poseidon 'Horse'.[219] This occurs in the same manner of events in which Medusa, raped by Poseidon, gave birth to her horse-son Pegasus. Jooste argues that depictions of Medusa as a centaur in early

[214] Diorio 2010: 59.
[215] *ibid*. 48.
[216] *ibid*. 50.
[217] *ibid*. 50-51.
[218] Paus. *Description of Greece*. VIII. 25. 5.
[219] *ibid*. 7.

Boeotian iconography may be due to this relation to Poseidon, to please the god of horses before her image had a set depiction.[220]

Athena was closely associated with horses in her Mycenaean incarnation and bore the name Hippia, goddess of horses, celebrated in a cult at Corinth.[221] Pindar refers to her as "Athene of the horses",[222] and Poseidon as "ruler of horses".[223] This represents another link between the goddess and the monster, where Athena retained her ruling, assertive role as the goddess of horses, while Medusa was controlled by the god of horses and gave birth to one. Opposing aspects of the same symbol, both have longstanding associations with the horse. Medusa and Athena are involved either directly, as Medusa is, or indirectly, as Athena is, with aggression by Poseidon.[224] By the time of the Olympian era, this association became less prominent, with Athena more closely linked to Poseidon's aggression and Medusa seen as his victim.[225] Ovid states that Poseidon rapes Medusa in Athena's temple, and they are now connected more through Poseidon's act than the symbol of horses itself. Medusa and Athena's original association through horses, by the time of the Olympian era, has been distorted and replaced by a connection via a male force, Poseidon. Medusa and Athena have been moved further from their previous origins and their story altered to better fit the new Greek religious framework.

[220] Jooste 2018: 69.
[221] Diorio 2010: 51.
[222] Pi. *Ol*. XIII.
[223] Pi. *P*. IV.
[224] Diorio 2010: 51.
[225] *ibid*.

Parallels Between Athena's Birth and Medusa's Death

Athena's birth from Zeus' head is possibly a male adaptation of a Mother goddess myth,[226] as a sixteenth century BCE marble statuette from the Aegean islands shows a small figure, evidently a child, on the mother's head.[227] In this myth, Zeus subsumes Metis for himself to secure his rule:

> Zeus had intercourse with Metis, although she changed into many different forms in the hope of escaping it. While she was pregnant, Zeus forestalled future developments by swallowing her; for [Ge] declared that after having the girl who was due to be born to her, Metis would give birth to a son who would become the ruler of heaven. It was for fear of this that he swallowed her down. When the time arrived for the child to be born, Prometheus, or according to others, Hephaistos, struck the head of Zeus with an axe and from the top of his head, near the River Triton, leapt Athene, fully armed.[228]

Not only does Athena's birth mimic the marble idol, but we also see the female being taken in and adapted by the male for control and power, just as happened with the Neolithic and Mother goddesses. Metis was an impressive goddess and played an important role in Zeus' plan to usurp his father:

> … [Zeus] enlisted the help of Metis, the daughter of Oceanos, and she gave Cronos a drug to swallow, which forced him to disgorge first the stone and then the children whom he had swallowed…[229]

Female cunning allowed Zeus to rescue his siblings and enact his takeover. But to ensure that this power would never be used against him, Zeus took the embodiment of cunning intelligence when he consumed her.[230]

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[226] See Fig. 67 of the appendix for a depiction of the birth of Athena from Zeus's head.
[227] Frothingham 1911: 372.
[228] Apollod. *Bibl*. I. 4. 6.
[229] *ibid*. 2. 1.
[230] Dolmage 2009: 3.

Metis' intelligence is "forcibly masculinize[d]",[231] whereby Zeus takes a threat to his male control and turns it into his own weapon in the same manner that Athena takes the Gorgon symbol for herself:

> … she knew more than all the gods or mortal people. But when she was about to be delivered of the goddess, grey-eyed Athene, then Zeus, deceiving her perception by treachery and by slippery speeches, put her away inside his own belly.… For it had been arranged that, from her, children surpassing in wisdom should be born, first the grey-eyed girl, the Tritogeneia Athene; and she is the equal of her father in wise counsel and strength; but then a son to be King over gods and mortals was to be born of her, and his heart would be overmastering: but before this, Zeus put her away inside his own belly so that this goddess should think for him, for good and for evil.[232]

This subsuming of Metis continues then in her erasure, consumed by Zeus, she is now written off. Cunning is not the only female power that Zeus appropriates within this myth; he also commandeers the birth of Athena. When men domesticate female procreative power, it is a blessing and a life-giving force.[233] This appropriation of gestation and birth is a means of gaining control over a female ability – in much the same way that rape and pursuit narratives are a means of establishing male dominance and control over female sexuality and procreation. Not only does Zeus hijack Athena's birth, but he also takes over the position as her sole parent. Athena firmly aligns herself with the masculine to such an extent that she denies being born to a mother. She is from this point the daughter of Zeus, as Athena claims in the *Eumenides* when she puts herself firmly on the side of Orestes, who murdered his mother to avenge his father: "There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth... I am always for the male with all my heart, and strongly on my father's side."[234] Athena was known as a supporter of heroes and a beloved, maiden daughter of Zeus. She was born from the head, the *logos* ('logic') of the masculine; it is her mind, not her body,

[231] Dolmage 2009: 13.
[232] Hes. *Theog*. 887-900.
[233] Håland 2011: 128.
[234] Aesch. *Eum*. 736-738.

that is her power.[235] Unlike Medusa, she does not pose a sexual threat. Athena is a restrained and self-contained 'appropriate' female deity within the male-ruled pantheon.[236] Disregarding the 'female' Athena discards all frightening elements of the female to appease the male, while Medusa is punished for her frightening femininity.

Greek culture often employed polarity as a means of structuring reality, with gendered differentiations and associations serving as a primary method for achieving this.[237] In Greek poetry, a set of polarities which frequently occurs is that of the feminine μῆτις (cunning intelligence), contrasting with the masculine βίη (force, strength) or logical, abstract, philosophical thought.[238] While μῆτις (metis) was inherently linked to the feminine and associated with skills such as manipulation, deception, hiding, and binding, it was also recognised as fulfilling necessary societal and cultural functions, making it valuable to men.[239] Zeus was not the only male depicted as possessing μῆτις in early Greek literature. Prometheus, Hephaestus, and Odysseus, among others, demonstrate μῆτις in an acceptable manner, using it to establish order rather than oppose it, a contrast to when it was employed by women.[240] When wielded by women in literature, μῆτις was frequently viewed unfavourably, as evidenced by Agamemnon's murder in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. In this play, Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover and accomplice, asserts that "clearly the deception was the woman's part"[241] in orchestrating the murder. In this tragedy, Clytemnestra employs cunning against societal order to murder the king, a representation of male authority and control. In contrast, in *Prometheus Bound*, during the battle for supremacy and control among the gods and titans, Themis prophesied that it is "not

[235] Diorio 2010: 56.
[236] *ibid*.
[237] Holmberg 1997: 2.
[238] *ibid*.
[239] *ibid*. 2.
[240] *ibid*. 2-3.
[241] Aes. *Aga*. 1636.

by strength nor overmastering force the fates allowed the conquerors to conquer but by guile only."[242] Furthermore, in the *Odyssey*, both Odysseus and Hephaestus are portrayed as cunning without negative connotations. Foley suggests that when the feminine is utilised to describe the masculine, or vice versa, it indicates the social order's disruption and restoration.[243] Zeus' rise to power necessitated not only victories in masculine battles of physical strength but also in confrontations between male and female, wherein the two most powerful feminine traits – reproduction and μῆτις – are appropriated, assimilated, and controlled by the masculine.[244] The possession of μῆτις was an essential element in enabling Zeus' governance to succeed.

Athena's birth and the masculinisation of Metis closely mimic Medusa's death and the birth of her children. Again, the Mother goddess myth may be imitated in this tale. In Apollodorus' *Library,* Medusa is decapitated and gives birth to Pegasus and Chrysaor.[245] In this myth, the threat of Medusa is first taken by Perseus and used to gain himself a wife by petrifying his competitor: "he showed the Gorgon to Phineus and his fellow plotters, turning them to stone on the spot."[246] He also then used it to save his mother, turning Polydektes, her forceful suitor, to stone.[247] He thus uses the Gorgon's head as a tool, under male control and now benefitting a hero rather than a monster. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Perseus is called "gallant" for using his "strength and cleverness" to gain the Gorgon's head.[248] His possession and use of the head do not bring about scorn but are embraced as a feat of power. This power is then further 'civilised' when he "gave the Gorgon's head to Athene... and Athene fixed the

[242] Aes. *Pro*. 215-217.
[243] Foley 1978: 8.
[244] Holmberg 1997: 3.
[245] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 4. 2.
[246] *ibid*. 3.
[247] *ibid*.
[248] Ov. *Met*. IV. 1050-1052.

Gorgon's head to the centre of her shield."[249] Just as Metis was transformed into a civilised, masculine power, so too was Medusa. In the same manner, just as Athena was born from Zeus, so too did Medusa give birth to her children. There is overlapping imagery and an intertwined past shown in the numerous similarities.[250] Medusa and Metis themselves are linked through etymology, where Metis, Medusa, the Sanskrit word *medha*, and the Egyptian word *met* all represent female wisdom.[251] They predate the male logic-dominated societal beliefs. Metis and Medusa are parallel stories with a similar origin. They also have a similar ending. Just as Medusa is always decapitated, her head's powers harnessed by others and her blood used for magic, Metis is always eaten and imprisoned in Zeus' stomach, and her cunning is used by him.[252] In both stories, the feminine and birth are appropriated by the male. Medusa gives birth through her death at Perseus' hands, and Metis' pregnancy is subsumed by Zeus. Similarly, Medusa's petrifying ability and Metis' wisdom are also appropriated by male forces. Both Metis and Medusa have been turned into tools and objects for male control and use.

Medusa and Athena are aspects from an earlier era that were split into extremes. In the Minoan and Mycenaean eras, they were part of a greater whole coming from the same source that was then split in the creation of the Olympian pantheon.[253] Medusa and Athena are inseparable and interlinked. While Medusa represented the dangerous aspect of women, her power and sex a source of fear for men, Athena was the safe, protective feminine form that was not a threat or a lover to men. Through wearing Medusa's head on her aegis, Athena is, as Dexter argues, "subsuming Medusa."[254] Taking in the dangerous aspects she inherited and co-opting them in an 'acceptable'

[249] Apollod. *Bibl*. II. 4. 3.
[250] Diorio 2010: 51-52.
[251] Dolmage 2009: 14.
[252] *ibid*. 16.
[253] Diorio 2010: 48.
[254] Dexter 2011: 192.

manner that benefits men while allowing them to triumph over what they find so monstrous. Allowing Medusa to become a symbol of protection and power, now that her origin story is not one of feminine power. Athena's wild, dangerous double has been overcome and assimilated into civility.

Asclepius: The Healing Draconian Male

Another inheritor of similar aspects to Medusa is Asclepius, a male god who is associated with the Gorgon, snakes, and healing. Aspects of these associations, as well as his birth and mythology, will be examined to display that it is likely that Asclepius was a masculine, civilised inheritor of the previous Mother goddesses. Physical disease and the horror of death are often portrayed by tragic poets as female monsters.[255] In Aeschylus' *Eumenides* the chorus of Furies threatens to bring a plague to the land as punishment for Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra:

> I, disinherited, suffering, heavy with anger shall let loose on the land the vindictive poison dripping deadly out of my heart upon the ground; this from itself shall breed cancer, the leafless, the barren to strike, for the right, their lowlands and drag its smear of mortal infection on the ground.[256]

In Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* Herakles, the son of Zeus, is accidentally killed by his wife Deianeira after she puts blood from the hydra on his cloak, thinking it was a love potion.[257] Female and serpentine monsters bring suffering and death in their wake.

While female and serpentine monsters typically bring suffering and death, snakes and healing are also intertwined symbols, priests and healers can often be found

[255] Dasteridou 2015: 5.
[256] Aesch. *Eum*. 780-787.
[257] Soph. *Trach*. 831-837: "His sides lathered by force of a clever scheme, / Death-spawned venom, / Clinging to his sides, dragon-spawned / From the bright-scaled serpent— / How could he expect to see the sun come up again / Now that he is surrounded / By the dreadful power of the Hydra?"

associated with snakes in Greco-Roman mythology, such as the priest Umbro in Vergil's *Aeneid*:

> Even a priest from Marruvium came... Ordered to war by his ruler, Archippus, the utterly fearless Umbro's more usual species of contact was serpents: aquatic Venomous snakes. He could charm them to sleep with a touch or by singing, Calm down their anger, alleviate bites with his curative powers.[258]

Here the duality of snakes can be seen: both their deadly venom, and their association with healing. This more favourable association with snakes is invoked through a masculine controller. As with Medusa's head, snakes, when under the control of the rightful rulers, men, are viewed favourably. Zeus, when worshipped in his chthonic form, is invoked as Meilichios, the 'Mild One', and is represented in the form of a snake.[259] Similarly, Asclepius is positively linked with serpent imagery. When explaining their descent from the Epidaurans, the Boeotians emphasise the link between the snake and Asclepius.[260]

The snake symbol is consistently associated with the god's healing abilities. For example, when explaining the constellation Ophiuchus, Hyginus notes that many believe it is Asclepius, placed by Jupiter in the stars for Apollo's sake.[261] In his *Constellations*, Pseudo-Eratosthenes agrees with the assignment of Ophiuchus, the figure standing close to Scorpio holding a snake with both hands, as Asclepius.[262] Hyginus explains the connection between Asclepius and snakes telling us that

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[258] Verg. *Aen*. VII. 750-755.
[259] Håland 2011: 131.
[260] Paus. *Description of Greece.* III. 23. 6-7: "They also say that a snake, which they were bringing from their home in Epidaurus, escaped from the ship, and disappeared into the ground not far from the sea. As a result of the portent of the snake together with the vision in their dreams they resolved to remain and settle here. There are altars to Asclepius where the snake disappeared, with olive trees growing round them."
[261] Hyg. *Poet. Astr.* II. 14: "For when Asclepius was on earth, he excelled in the medical arts to such a degree that he was not content with alleviating human pain, but aspired to restore the dead to life… On account of this transgression, Jupiter destroyed Asclepius' house with a thunderbolt, but placed him, because of his skill and for the sake of his father Apollo, among the stars, holding a serpent."
[262] Pseudo-Eratosthenes. *Constellations*. VI.

Asclepius holds a serpent because once he was imprisoned and ordered to heal Glaucus, while trapped and holding his staff a snake crept up it, which he then killed with his staff, later another snake appeared with a herb in the dead snake's mouth, which resuscitated.[263] Asclepius then used this herb to bring Glaucus back to life, and the snake was placed under his safekeeping in the stars.[264]

Asclepius inherited this symbolism from the earth gods in ancient Egypt and the earth deities of archaic Greece, which had established the snake as a symbol of healing, wisdom, and immortality.[265] Asclepius is also often depicted with a snake coiled around his staff, another symbol that was possibly inherited from pre-existing divinities. The bishop's staff can be traced back to the third millennium BCE Assyrian saviour god Ningizzida.[266] One of the oldest images of a staff with a double serpent (a *caduceus*) is on a vase portraying Ningishzida, a Mesopotamian vegetation deity.[267] There is also a relief of the Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna, where she is depicted holding a staff entwined with two snakes.[268] The symbol of the snake wrapped around trees can be found elsewhere in Greek myth.[269] In Pausanias, when he describes the treasuries dedicated by the Epidamnians he describes them as decorated with images such as the "the apple-tree of the Hesperides, with the snake coiled round the apple-tree."[270] This is the guardian serpent of the golden apples. This emphasises the protective aspect that serpent imagery could portray in Greco-Roman mythology. Asclepius' staff is therefore entwined with a guardian snake, associated with powers

[263] Hyg. *Poet. Astr.* II. 14.
[264] *ibid.* This link between snakes and staffs recalls the earlier mentioned symbolism found in the Mother goddess Diktynna of snakes coiled around trees.
[265] Antoniou et al. 2011: 217.
[266] Håland 2011: 132.
[267] Weappa 2018: 27.
[268] *ibid.*
[269] To see an image of Asclepius with his serpentine staff see Fig. 68 in the appendix.
[270] Paus. *Description of Greece*. VI. 19. 8. To see the snake as a figure wrapped around a tree in the Hesperides' Garden see Fig. 50 of the appendix.

of healing and rejuvenation, around the tree of healing and knowledge.[271] Through Asclepius, there is also an association between snakes and healers in Greco-Roman mythology: "Instructed by this event, Asclepius's successors handed down the knowledge to others, so that physicians are skilled in the use of snakes."[272] This is not the destructive snake imagery seen with the Gorgon in the Perseus-Medusa myth and other monsters.

Asclepius embodies the rebirth aspect of the serpent from the previous Mother goddesses through his healing. Pindar speaks of Asclepius being raised by Chiron and taught to heal, he is later killed by Zeus for raising the dead Kronion for money.[273] In statues, Asclepius is recognisable from his staff and the snake coiled around it.[274] He also appears in the shape of a snake himself, with his priests at Epidaurus looking after the ceremonies and sacred snakes kept at Tholos.[275] Pausanias describes Asclepius' statue at Epidaurus where his principal cult was located:

> The god is sitting on a seat grasping a staff; the other hand he is holding above the head of the serpent; there is also a figure of a dog lying by his side. On the seat are wrought in relief the exploits of Argive heroes, that of Bellerophontes against the Chimaera, and Perseus, who has cut off the head of Medusa.[276]

He also comments that "serpents, including a peculiar kind of a yellowish colour, are considered sacred to Asclepius, and are tame with men."[277] Asclepius is thus a draconian male god with healing abilities. He is respected and revered as a healer; it is only when he cures death, threatening the natural order established by the Olympians, that he is punished. While not viewed consistently as a chthonic deity, he

[271] Antoniou et al. 2011: 219.
[272] Hyg. *Poet. Astr.* II. 14.
[273] Pi. *P*. III.
[274] Håland 2011: 133.
[275] *ibid*.
[276] Paus. *Description of Greece*. II. 27. 2.
[277] *ibid*. 28. 1.

is the only Greek deity to experience death and then return to life after Zeus kills him.[278] He is a god of healing and death, punished for his breaking of the 'correct order' and thus being a threat to the god's powers. He maintains aspects of the previous Mother goddesses and is an example to show the clear lines the Greco-Romans put between life and death. Medusa brings life through her death and is therefore considered monstrous. While both Asclepius and Medusa are punished for this blurring of boundaries, it is the male healer who recovers from this punishment, not the female destroyer.

Asclepius also has undeniable ties to the Gorgon. While some myths have him gaining the healing herb from a snake, others, such as that found in Apollodorus, have him using Medusa's blood to raise the dead:

> … he not only prevented some people from dying, but even raised them from the dead. For he had received from Athene blood that had flowed from the veins of the Gorgon; and he used the blood that had flowed from the veins on the left side to put people to death, and that which had flowed from the right, to save them—and it was by this means that he raised the dead.[279]

Not only does Asclepius have associations with life and death beyond his associations with chthonic serpent imagery as a healer, but Medusa herself also retains some of the previous Mother goddesses' healing ability in addition to her destructive and fertility associations.[280] Euripides explains the reason behind the dual nature of Medusa's blood: "One drop seeped from the hollow veins… Repels disease, nurtures life. And the heartblood's second drop? Kills. Poison from the Gorgon snakes."[281] The blood from the Gorgon's body and veins could heal, while that from her snakes could kill.[282]

[278] Weappa 2018: 23.
[279] Apollod. *Bibl*. III. 10. 3.
[280] Dexter 2010: 29-30.
[281] Eur. *Ion*. 985-989.
[282] Dasteridou 2015: 59.

In this myth, Medusa is divided into divergent uses and abilities. She is shown with the ability to both give and take away life. In these uses it is her human body that brings life and her monstrous features that take it. This separates her monstrous and mortal aspects, showing that it is her superhuman abilities and powers that make her monstrous.

The Gorgon is not the only female healing power Asclepius is associated with. Asclepius is also linked to Hygieia, the goddess of health and hygiene in the *Orphic Hymn* to Asclepius:

> Asklepios, lord Paian, healer of all, you charm away the pains of men who suffer. Come, mighty and soothing, bring health, put an end to sickness, then to the harsh fate of death. O blessed spirit of joyful growth, O helper, you ward off evil, honoured and mighty son of Phoibos Apollon. Enemy of disease, consort of Hygieia the blameless,[283]

Hygieia is a goddess invoked in such a way that she has connotations with fertility and healing. In her hymn she is invoked by the Orphics as the "Charming queen of all, lovely and blooming, blessed Hygieia, mother of all, bringer of bliss, hear me. Through you vanish the illnesses that afflict man".[284] Combined with the tale of his birth, this showcases Asclepius' link to the prior Mother goddesses of the earth, life, death and rebirth. Asclepius' birth is another example of female fertility being co-opted by the male – just like the births of Athena, Dionysus, and Medusa's children. Asclepius was taken from his mother's womb and born in such a way that it was a masculine birth rather than a feminine one. When Asclepius' mother slept with a man other than Apollo he took revenge:

> Coronis he put to death; and as she was consigned to the flames, he seized her [unborn] baby from the pyre, and took him to Cheiron the

[283] *Orphic Hymn*. LXVII To Asclepius. 1-9.
[284] *ibid.* LXVIII To Hygieia. 1-4.

> Centaur, who brought him up and taught him the arts of medicine and hunting.[285]

Once again "the ordinary power of a human female giving birth was violently bypassed",[286] whereby a myth is created to curb the masculine lack of control in the feminine arena of birth in a male-dominated society. Asclepius is an inheritor of certain aspects of the previous earth goddess societies, he is the opposite of Medusa. Like Athena, he is an accepted god, not a monster. Asclepius is a male, serpentine healer. He transgresses the line between life and death and is punished for it. However, he is not disparaged as the monstrous Gorgon is. His myth shows the societal beliefs of the separation between life and death. He is a male force of healing who, once punished for his powers over death, is accepted into the androcentric pantheon. Medusa never recovers from her transgression, she is slain and taken possession of. The combination of her wildness, femininity, and power was simply too transgressive and therefore required her total destruction.

The Tomb, the Womb, and the Moon

Snakes are symbols of the world of the dead, chthonic gods, witchcraft, healing, and sickness.[287] In Classical Greece, the snake, particularly when bearded, was found as a divinity associated with tombs, the ghost of an ancestor.[288] Medusa, too, was a bearded serpent.[289] Her *Gorgoneion* form, with its androgynous features, evokes this chthonic aspect of snakes. This was not the only way in which her power was evoked in connection with burial. The prehistoric Mother goddesses in the upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic ages had three functions: life-giver, death goddess, and regenerator.[290]

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[285] Apollod. *Bibl*. III. 10. 3.
[286] Weappa 2018: 24.
[287] Håland 2011: 131-136.
[288] Marler 2002: 19.
[289] *ibid*.
[290] Gimbutas 1987: 11.

These Old European Mother goddesses evolved within a belief system which saw life as a process of eternal transformation; a constant flux throughout the changes of life, death and rebirth.[291] This is reflected by the three phases of the moon: new, waxing, and old. This motif is repeated in the form of triplet deities who embody three functions: the maiden, nymph, and crone.[292] The Gorgon can be found in such a triplet along with Hekate and Artemis.

The Gorgon's associations with the elements of birth, death, and regeneration will be discussed, as well as these aspects' connection to symbolism of the womb, tomb, and the moon. This idea of multiple aspects was not uncommon to the Greco-Romans. In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, Isis speaks to Lucius as his saviour and the all-authoritative Goddess figure:

> I, mother of the universe… representing in one shape all gods and goddesses. My will controls the shining heights of heaven, the health-giving sea-winds, and the mournful silences of hell; the entire world worships my single godhead in a thousand shapes… The Phrygians, first-born of mankind, call me the Pessinuntian Mother of the gods; the native Athenians the Cecropian Minerva; the island-dwelling Cypriots Paphian Venus; the archer Cretans Dictynnan Diana; the triple-tongued Sicilians Stygian Proserpine; the ancient Eleusinians Actaean Ceres; some call me Juno, some Bellona, others Hecate…[293]

Hekate and the Egyptian deity Isis were often syncretised with each other, and both had strong magical associations.[294] Here, Isis encompasses all divinity, from that of life and death, Ceres and Proserpine, Hekate and Minerva. When joined together in this triplet form, Isis, these other divinities, and the Gorgon serve to represent the Mother Goddess and her all-encompassing nature. The previously divided aspects of the goddess are reunited in her inheritors' triplet form.

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[291] Gimbutas 1987: 12.
[292] *ibid*.
[293] Apul. *Met*. XI. 5.
[294] Casadio and Johnson 2021: xii.

The tomb and the womb have associations and parallel imagery within the Greco-Roman world, which was a remnant of these Old European Mother goddesses. With the tie between death and rebirth in Neolithic Europe, the tomb was associated with rebirth and the womb. Medusa and Ereshkigal both bring death through their abilities, but also give birth.[295] Their powers and abilities, which are associated with death, do not contradict, but rather strengthen their form as feminine life-bringers. Womb-shaped forms of Old European graves are typical, and in Greece *tholoi*, circular domed tombs, which were *omphalos* shaped, were found in Greece.[296] It was also common to find pots with seeds stored near the house's hearth in ancient Greece, to symbolise the dead who rest in the pot-womb, to be resurrected (planted) in the spring, where the dead were also called *Demetrioi*, belonging to Demeter, the grain earth goddess.[297] Palaeolithic caves and caverns were natural manifestations of the Mother's womb, where these were marked or painted entirely in red, symbolising regenerative organs.[298] Here, burial is seen as parallel to a seed being planted in the earth.[299] In his *Libation Bearers,* Aeschylus draws upon these dual aspects of Demeter when Electra calls upon the Earth Mother to contact the dead.[300] Snakes, both on the Gorgon's head and in tombs, had ties to regeneration and death, and the frequent iconography of snakes in Greek tombs carries this double meaning.[301] Double images of crescents, snakes, birds, and goddesses in Old Europe showed abundance, and this use of duplication is also found in Minoan iconography.[302] Duplicate depictions of double yolks, snakes, birds, or crescents are well established in Cucuteni vase painting (4500 - 3500 B.C.) and on Minoan seals and vases (2000 – 1500 BCE), with double pairs of

[295] Dexter 2010: 33.
[296] Marler 2002: 19.
[297] Gimbutas 1987: 15.
[298] *ibid.* 21.
[299] *ibid.*
[300] Aesch. *Lib.* 126-129: "Tell Earth herself, who brings all things to birth, who gives them strength, then gathers their big yield into herself at last. I myself pour these lustral waters to the dead…"
[301] Marler 2002: 19.
[302] Gimbutas 1987: 25.

serpents being a typical design motif that has been discovered on Middle Minoan ivory seals.[303]

Through a cross-cultural analysis of female display figures, Dexter and Mair argue that the tomb-as-womb symbolism also has a further association, one that is sexual and *apotropaic*.[304] This function can explain details of the protective power associated with the *Gorgoneion*. The tomb, as well as the cavernous mouth of Medusa, has connotations of female sexuality. With its wide-open mouth, the *Gorgoneion* can be seen to represent a cavern opening to the underworld, the Earth Mother's womb, and a second vulva. Dexter and Mair argue that this is a terrifying form for the male, embodying the masculine fear of castration and a fear of decapitation.[305] This gynophobia adds to the power of the *apotropaic* devices, like when Baubo exposes her genitals to Demeter.[306] This act of female exposure is shown to have power in the Greco-Roman mythology. Plutarch relates such a tale of the *apotropaic* power of this exposure in the tale of Bellerophon.[307] This display of vulvas can be found on magical figures with both fertility and *apotropaic* functions in the Neolithic era in East Asia and the Mesolithic era in Europe.[308] The *Gorgoneion* thus has more than just symbolic power behind its protective abilities, but also psychological powers. This may also be a link to the power of Medusa's death-blood, which, as Weappa suggests, may have been meant to represent menstrual blood and that her mask may therefore have

[303] Gimbutas 1987: 25-26.
[304] Dexter and Mair 2004: 97-111.
[305] *ibid*. 111.
[306] Clement of Alexandria. *Exhortation to the Greeks*. II. 17.
[307] Plu. *Mor*. IX. 248A-B: "Iobates was most unjust with him. Because of this, Bellerophon waded into the sea, and prayed to Poseidon that, as a requital against Iobates, the land might become sterile and unprofitable. Thereupon he went back after his prayer, and a wave arose and inundated the land. It was a fearful sight as the sea, following him, rose high in air and covered up the plain. The men besought Bellerophon to check it, but when they could not prevail on him, the women, pulling up their garments, came to meet him; and when he, for shame, retreated towards the sea again, the wave also, it is said, went back with him."
[308] Dexter and Mair 2004: 117-118.

evoked menstrual taboos and anxieties in men.[309] This menstrual symbolism was not only a source of male anxiety, but it also connects Medusa to the moon and fertility. Menstrual blood was viewed as the primary life force,[310] often tied to moon symbolism. The Greek philosophers Aristotle, Diodes, Empedocles, and the Hippocratics, among others, believed that women's menstrual cycles were synchronised with the moon.[311] Both Aristotle and Empedocles thought that women's periods occurred during the waning moon.[312] Dean-Jones argues that the persistence of this idea of the moon and menstruation being linked, regardless of the lack of evidence, makes it likely to have been a long-standing belief absorbed into Greek culture at a fundamental level.[313] The *Gorgoneion* as a menstrual symbol thus further links her to male anxieties regarding childbirth and female sexuality that were discussed in Chapter 1 in 'Medusa and Women in Ancient Society'. Medusa and the *Gorgoneion* do not lose power and strength through being a feminine force but rather gain power from it. Without the female association, a large portion of the fear and the symbolism of her image is lost; she cannot be cut off from her source and its power without destroying her completely. The androcentric societies that use her image may gain power over it, yet they still fear what it represents.

An example of the *Gorgoneion* as an exposure image can be found in iconography associated with Lake Pergusa, near Enna in Sicily. Dating back at least as far as the Greek colonisation, the ancient symbol of Sicily is the Trinacria, which depicts a Gorgon head at the centre of three rotating legs.[314] The head's positioning in this image is noted by Rigoglioso to mark it as the 'vulva/womb', the area associated with birth

[309] Weappa 2018: 32.
[310] Rigoglioso 2005: 14.
[311] *ibid*.
[312] Aris. *GA*. 767a. 2-6, Soranus. *Gynec*. I. 21.
[313] Dean-Jones 1989: 190.
[314] Rigoglioso 2005: 16.

and menstruation.[315] This is not only an example of an area where the *Gorgoneion* is depicted overtly as an exposure image, but also a location where the previous life and death goddesses were taken over by the Hellenic pantheon. Before Greek colonisation, Lake Pergusa shows archaeological evidence of being a sacred area of an earlier goddess or goddesses. Circular enclosures symbolising the womb of female divinity in Palaeolithic and Neolithic Europe were discovered at a site less than 400 meters from the lake.[316] In early times, bodies of water were an important characteristic of goddess worship sites.[317] This holds true in Sicily, where it is known that several lakes and grottoes around Etna were sacred to the indigenous Sicilians (Sikels).[318] Lake Pergusa's positioning near a centre of worship is thus unlikely to be a coincidence. This is further underscored by the remarkable nature of the lake's waters, which are slightly salinated and sulphurous, and periodically turn deep red due to the presence of a red, sulphur-oxidising bacterium.[319] Rigoglioso argues that the reddening phenomenon of this lake would have led to Pergusa being associated not only with the goddess but the menstruating goddess.[320]

Sicilians of the late Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods had tomb-wombs as a central part of sacred life, and Kore Persephone is seen as a remnant of the early people's goddess of life and death.[321] Archaeologists agree that the Greeks imposed their worship of Demeter and Persephone over the indigenous cult at Lake Pergusa and Enna, as it strongly resembled the earlier tradition surrounding the two goddesses or their precursors associated with the lake.[322] The Greeks began colonising the island in

[315] Rigoglioso 2005: 16.
[316] *ibid*. 7.
[317] Rigoglioso 2001: 74.
[318] Retallack 2019: 952.
[319] Rigoglioso 2005: 6.
[320] *ibid*. 14.
[321] *ibid*. 12.
[322] *ibid*. 8.

the eighth century BCE, and an archaeological layer dating to the fifth century BCE contains stone remnants of a sanctuary of either Demeter, Persephone, or both, along with statuettes and sacred objects.[323] Enna, the mountain town near this lake, was a celebrated religious centre dedicated primarily to Demeter.[324] When the Romans occupied the island in the late third century BCE, the goddesses' cult at Enna and Lake Pergusa continued, and the goddesses came to be known by their Roman names, Ceres and Proserpine.[325]

In the eighth to sixth centuries BCE, the entire region surrounding Lake Pergusa was one large necropolis.[326] The number of tombs suggests that the religious activities may have included death rites invoking Persephone in her chthonic aspect.[327] Persephone's association with both spring and the underworld is strongly linked to Enna and Lake Pergusa in myth. The earliest surviving historical reference to Enna is in *De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus*, attributed either to Aristotle or his school; here, it is stated that in Sicily, near Enna, there is a cave by which a quantity of flowers grows, and this chasm is said to be the subterranean passage through which Hades carried off Persephone.[328] Diodorus Siculus supports this story in his account of the abduction of Persephone from a meadow near a cave in the navel of Sicily (Enna).[329] Furthermore, Ovid specifies that it was near Lake Pergusa that Proserpina was picking flowers when the Lord of the dead abducted her through a subterranean passage.[330] The repeated mention of the cave from which Hades emerges to abduct Persephone in these myths is significant to the area as a sacred site. The gods and goddesses of the underworld were typically

[323] Rigoglioso 2005: 8.
[324] *ibid.*
[325] *ibid.*
[326] *ibid.* 12.
[327] Rigoglioso 2001: 37-38.
[328] *De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus*. 82.
[329] Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist*. V. 3.
[330] Ov. *Met*. V. 551-560.

worshipped in areas with caves, rock outcrops, and other rock formations.[331] A meadowed area near a lake, situated in a region with various caves and rock formations, is therefore a fitting location for the worship of a chthonic fertility goddess. Here, the belief system of the previous life-giving, death, and menstrual goddess, along with her symbols, has been assimilated into the Greek religious tradition in an area that was then symbolised by the *Gorgoneion* Trinarcia. In this location the Gorgon is associated with an area sacred to Demeter and Persephone, but Medusa can also be found in association with other Hellenic goddesses.

Artemis, Hekate, and Medusa can be viewed as a triad of moon-associated beings, both together and as separate entities. Hekate is commonly invoked as a triple goddess in her own right. She is a triple-bodied crossroad goddess, allowing her to face all three directions, and she has associations with the sea, sky, and earth. She is both an Olympian and a chthonic deity and is invoked as such in her Orphic Hymn: "Lovely Hekate of the roads and of the crossroads I invoke. In heaven, on earth, then in the sea, saffron-cloaked, tomb spirit revelling in the souls of the dead".[332] The *Gorgoneion* and the masks representing Hekate resemble one another.[333] Both beings also stand at the end of the life cycle.[334] Medusa is a chthonic monster, and Hekate is associated as a guardian of the underworld. This underworld aspect is an inheritance Hekate gained from assimilation with the Sumerian goddess Ereshkigal, who was Queen of the underworld.[335] Hekate has strong associations with magic and witchcraft. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medea calls on her for power:

> "O Night," she cries, "most faithful guardian of secrecies, and you, O golden Stars, who with the moon relieve the blazing sun; and you as

[331] Retallack 2019: 952.
[332] *Orphic Hymn*. I To Hekate. 1-4.
[333] Marler 2002: 17.
[334] *ibid*.
[335] Faraone 2021: 206-207.

> well, three-headed Hecate, who are aware of our undertakings, and who assist the mage's spells and arts [336]

Hekate is also found as a power invoked on curse tablets, in spells, and *apotropaic* amulets. Symbols of the Gorgon and Hekate can be found on *apotropaic* amulets to avert attacks and to protect slaves from their master's cruelty.[337] Hekate is also often invoked in the *Greek Magical Papyri*:

> Prayer to Selene for any spell: "Come" to me, O beloved mistress, Three-faced Selene… To you, wherefore they call you / Hekate, Many-named, Mene, cleaving air just like Dart-shooter Artemis, Persephone… Who roam the mountains, goddess of crossroads / O nether and nocturnal, and infernal, Goddess of dark, quiet and frightful one… you're Moira and Erinys, torment, Justice and Destroyer, And you keep Kerberos in chains, with scales Of serpents are you dark, O you with hair Of serpents, serpent-girded,[338]

Here Hekate is shown as associated with serpents, the moon, and Artemis as doubles and duplications to invoke her power.

The moon was known to have strong associations with fertility and life. Cicero wrote that "the moon, which draws its light from the sun, is the agent of pregnancies and births and periods of ripening."[339] Artemis, Selene, Isis, Hekate, Persephone, and Ereshkigal are all seen on amulets and curse tablets evoked as lunar goddesses, unusually without the common Greek division of the heavenly and chthonian domains:[340]

> 'Hail, Holy Light, Ruler of Tartaros… Thrice-bound goddess… Bestir yourself, Mene, Who need the solar nurse, guard of the dead… Minoan,

[336] Ov. *Met*. VII. 162-167.
[337] Faraone 2021: 215.
[338] *PGM*. IV. 2785-2890.
[339] Cic. *De Nat. Deo*. II. 119.
[340] Faraone 2021: 213.

> goddess of childbirth, Theban, Long-suffering, astute, malevolent. With rays for hair, shooter of arrows, maid…[341]

In these cases, the linked nature of death and life Mother goddesses are apparent:

> 'Queen of heaven, whether you are Ceres, nurturing mother and creatrix of crops… or whether you are Proserpine of the fearful night-howling and triple countenance…[342]

From the fifth century, Artemis, Hekate, and Medusa are all equated as parts of the same lunar goddess, with a life cycle which begins as young and beautiful and ends as old and wizened.[343] Hekate and the Gorgons also have several parallels. Hekate is threefold: a triple goddess who lives in the underworld and has control over the sky, earth and sea. She is represented as three masks or a statue with three faces.[344] Similarly, there are also three Gorgons, living in a cave by the sea in the wilderness, two immortal and one, Medusa, mortal.[345] Medusa is seen here again as the deathly aspect of an accepted goddess. Artemis in this triplet symbolises the maiden and childbirth. Hekate is the symbol of magic and the threshold between aspects. Finally, Medusa is the deathly aspect. Through this triplet association, all three aspects are exemplified: birth, death, and the border between them, thereby sharing and enhancing their meaning and symbolism. Artemis, the pure maiden goddess, is fully accepted as a protective symbol. Hekate is a feared yet respected goddess, known both as a means of protection and as dangerous because of her magic. Lastly, Medusa is seen as a death mask, bringing life through her death. Together, they are symbols of the underworld – death, magic, and fertility – all compounded together to make an impactful symbol of protection.

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[341] *PGM*. IV. 2241-2358.
[342] Apul. *Met*. XI. 2.
[343] Marler 2002: 20.
[344] *ibid*. 17.
[345] *ibid*.

Bird-Snake Opposition

The Greco-Romans may have adopted the bird-snake imagery, but it was further adapted and categorised. While bird and snake symbolism had many overlapping meanings, these creatures were often put in conflict and opposition with each other. Prophecy was one area of Greco-Roman society where both birds and snakes frequently appeared. Due to their association with the Earth Mother, snakes were believed to have prophetic powers.[346] They could be used as signs and omens:

> … the child who had been left behind was killed by a snake; and when Adrastos and his companions reappeared, they killed the snake and buried the child. Amphiaraos told them that this was a sign foretelling what would happen in the future: so they named the child Archemoros.[347]

And birds were often omens, as is supported by the *Homeric Hymn* to Demeter when she searched for news of her daughter: "But no one would tell her the truth, neither god nor mortal man; and of the birds of omen none came with true news for her."[348] Eagles were the divination bird par excellence in Greco-Roman society.[349] They were birds of light and magic, which was a common use for their symbol in many civilisations.[350] The use of both these symbols is common in the Greco-Roman world, where an eagle carrying a snake is a common omen that can be found in fighting scenes.[351] This usage first appears in the *Iliad*, where it depicts what will happen in the battle to come:

> As they were urgent to cross a bird sign had appeared to them, an eagle, flying high and holding to the left of the people and carrying in its talons a gigantic snake, blood-coloured, alive still and breathing, it had not forgotten its warcraft yet, for writhing back it struck the eagle that held it by chest and neck, so that the eagle let it drop groundward in pain of

[346] Dasteridou 2015: 18.
[347] Apollod. *Bibl*. III. 6. 4.
[348] Hes. *Homeric Hymn To Demeter*. II. 46-48.
[349] Wittkower 1939: 308.
[350] *ibid*.
[351] Boardman 1974: 204.

> the bite, and dashed it down in the midst of the battle and itself, screaming high, winged away down the wind's blast. And the Trojans shivered with fear as they looked on the lithe snake lying in their midst, a portent of Zeus of the aegis.[352]

Frequently in omens and prophecy, the battle between a snake and a bird is a sign of conflict, often conflict between good and evil.[353] The snake is once again the inheritor of the negative stigma, with the bird being associated with the godly and divine and the snake with the chthonic and evil. Symbols with the same meanings are yet again separated into positive and negative, or benevolent and malevolent, in this new Greco-Roman culture.

It must be noted that these designations and separations into positive and negative categories were entirely contextual and not strict classifications; the snake did not always symbolise evil, as discussed previously regarding its associations with healing and certain deities. The same aspects of the snake could be applied to either a force of 'good' or a force of 'evil'. This is because the concept of 'evil' within Greco-Roman culture does not conform to the stringent categories seen in modern society; whether a characteristic was denoted as good or evil depended on the context in which it was applied. Polytheistic cultures in the ancient world depicted gods that could exhibit dispositions that were not entirely positive; they were shown to have both admirable and problematic aspects.[354] The Greco-Romans did not believe in a singular perfect creator God nor one supreme evil force as an opposition to him.[355] Consequently, there were no specific forces or actions that were inherently and undisputedly associated solely with a malevolent source. Traditionally, the Greeks regarded both good and evil as being portioned out by the gods and fate.[356] An example of this is shown in the

[352] Hom. *Il*. XII. 200-209.
[353] Wittkower 1939: 308.
[354] Angier 2019: 1.
[355] *ibid*.
[356] Chappell 2019: 131.

Iliad when Zeus is depicted as being able to dispense both blessings and harm upon mortals:

> There are two urns that stand on the door-sill of Zeus. They are unlike for the gifts they bestow: an urn of evils, an urn of blessings. If Zeus who delights in thunder mingles these and bestows them on man, he shifts, and moves now in evil, again in good fortune.[357]

In this context, evil is what impedes those who act justly according to morals and society, or it is something that is wrong or unfitting.[358] When used to feature the conflict between good and evil, the snake is used to symbolise that which goes against the gods, societal order, and morality. It is these specific negative associations that snakes could have that were employed and termed as 'evil' in contexts where birds and snakes were set up as oppositional symbols.

This motif of the battle between the sky and the earth, the heavenly and the monstrous, the divine masculine power and the evil serpent is common in Greco-Roman mythology. It begins with Zeus slaying Typhoeus in the *Theogony* to assert his male dominance and rule,[359] and is replicated throughout other myths. Apollo battles an evil dragoness to gain dominion over what would ultimately become his centre of power and prophecy:

> Whosoever met the dragoness, the day of doom would sweep him away, until the lord Apollo, who deals death from afar, shot a strong arrow at her… Thus said Phoebus, exulting over her: and darkness covered her eyes. And the holy strength of Helios made her rot away there; wherefore the place is now called Pytho, and men call the lord Apollo by another name, Pythian; because on that spot the power of piercing Helios made the monster rot away.[360]

[357] Hom. *Il*. XXIV. 526-530.
[358] Maeiser and Taliaferro 2019: ix.
[359] Hes. *Theog*. 826-878.
[360] Hes. *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*. III. 355-374.

Apollo destroys the wild, female dragon asserting order and civilisation over the primitive. Battles between snakes and eagles are not a Greco-Roman invention. In the Babylonian *Etana* myth, a snake is shown at the base of a poplar tree with an eagle in its crown.[361] They later come into conflict when the eagle breaks their peace pact and eats the serpent's young.[362] The god Shamash, to whom they swore their oath, instructs the snake on the eagle's punishment:

> 'Open up its innards, slit open its stomach, Make a place to sit inside its stomach. All kinds of birds will come down from the sky and eat the flesh. The eagle too [will come down] with them. [Since] it will not be aware of danger to itself, It will search out the tenderest morsels, will comb the area (?), Penetrate to the lining of the innards. When it enters the innards, you must seize it by the wing, Cut its wings, feather and pinion, Pluck it and throw it into a bottomless pit, Let it die there of hunger and thirst!'[363]

This tale shows the battle between the snake and the eagle as a potent existing symbol. It was not a creation of the Greeks, but already had power and meaning. The Babylonian myth of the snake and the eagle continues. The eagle is found by Etana, the thirteenth king of Kish, through the direction of the god Shamash.[364] This is done so that the eagle can guide Etana to the plant of birth, which will allow him to beget a son.[365] The eagle flies Etana to the heavens in this journey for the plant:

> The eagle hunted around [in the mountains (?)] But [the plant of birth] was not [to be found there]. 'Come, my friend, let me carry you up [to the sky], [Let us meet] with Ishtar, the mistress [of birth].[366]

The eagle here is shown as a symbol of fertility and a link to the fertility goddess. The symbol of the staff and the Snake is found here again.

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[361] *Etana*. II. 8-9.
[362] *ibid*. 16.
[363] *ibid*. 20.
[364] *ibid*. 22.
[365] *ibid*.
[366] *ibid*. III. 27.

This use of an eagle to get to the heavens is also found in Greco-Roman mythology. In Roman mythology, the eagle is a symbol of apotheosis.[367] In the *Metamorphoses* Ganymede is immortalised after being carried to the sky on the back of Zeus who has transformed into an eagle.[368] The eagle is noted to be the only strictly divine bird in Greek mythology and was a symbol of light and the sun.[369] This association of the eagle and light appears in Aeschylus' *Suppliants:* "O Zeus, compassion ere we die. If Zeus is willing, this will end well. And now that bird of Zeus invoke. Preserving rays of the sun we call."[370] The eagle as a symbol of apotheosis and resurrection is also found on Roman tombstones.[371] The eagle and the snake battling was also a symbol of the triumph of the divine realm over the chthonic powers, in Dionysian accompaniments it can symbolise the liberation of the soul.[372] Alexander the Great decorated the funeral pyre of his closest companion, Hephaestion, whom he later deified, with the eagle-serpent iconography.[373] The opposition of snakes and birds was thus a recognisable and effective symbol within Greco-Roman mythology. It carries a strong connotation of the dominance of the new cultural and religious beliefs and is an important actor within myths. The eagle is the symbol of Zeus, the new master of the male-dominated pantheon. It represents Zeus and embodies his triumph and control of civilisation and order. The eagle fighting the snake is the divine Olympian bird triumphing over the chthonic snake symbol. The new order triumphed over the old maternal-centred beliefs.

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[367] Wittkower 1939: 296.

[368] Ov. *Met*. X. 213-229: "The king of heaven once burned with desire for Trojan Ganymede; Jupiter found an identity pleasing him more than even his own did: no bird but the eagle, bearer of Jove's thunderbolt, could deserve this distinction. Without delay, as his counterfeit wings beat the air, he captured the boy, who, in spite of Juno's objections, mixes his nectar and serves him above now in heaven."

[369] Wittkower 1939: 307-308.

[370] Aesch. *Supp*. 210-213.

[371] Wittkower 1939: 311.

[372] *ibid.*

[373] Diod. Sic. *Bib. hist*. XVII. 115. 2: "The next level up, the second, consisted of carved torches, each fifteen cubits long and with a golden wreath on its handle; above the flaming ends of the torches were eagles with their wings spread and heads bowed, looking down, and at their bases were serpents looking up at the eagles."

The Perseus-Medusa myth's inheritance of these aspects thus has a wealth of symbolism behind it. This myth perpetuates the conflict between the andro-dominated and the maternal-dominated societies during the transition of culture and religious belief. Through the figure of Perseus, the myth exemplifies the male triumph over the previous goddess-centric religion to replace it with masculine-centred ideals.[374] This conflict between hero and monster, bird and serpent has an ethical meaning behind it.[375] It is the representation of the new ideals, morality, and beliefs of the Greco-Roman culture, made from an amalgamation of what came before. Perseus and Medusa have a similar relationship to Medusa and Athena. Medusa is Perseus' monstrous double with whom he maintains association when he uses her head for himself.[376] Perseus and Medusa are the separated components of the life and death, bird and snake goddesses. There is, however, also more snake imagery within this myth. After Perseus kills Medusa, he faces a giant sea monster to rescue Andromeda, a maiden exposed for her mother's hubris, on the condition that afterwards, he may take her as his wife.[377] Once she was rescued, Andromeda's former suitor, Phineas, "plotted against Perseus; but when Perseus learned of the conspiracy, he showed the Gorgon to Phineus and his fellow plotters, turning them to stone on the spot."[378] Perseus thus destroyed another serpentine monster and used Medusa's head to defend his claim to Andromeda. He secured the masculine inheritance and legacy he would gain through a wife by destroying those who threatened his claim to her.

Andromeda is a female, threatened by a serpent and saved by the son of Zeus, Perseus. She is not only the victim of this tale but also a foil to Medusa. Andromeda is a 'good' woman; she is not a threat, she is pure and modest, helpless and blameless:

[374] Dumoulié 2016: 782.
[375] Boyer 2016: 504.
[376] Dumoulié 2016: 781.
[377] Apollod. Bibl. II. 4. 3.
[378] *ibid*.

> At first the maiden would not address the man, for modesty, and would have used her hands to hide her face were they not tightly bound; her eyes, however, as they welled up with tears, said everything.[379]

She is a suitable woman for the royal demigod to marry. She is passive and may either meet her death or, if saved by a masculine agent, be married.[380] Perseus' defeat of the sea serpent here is symbolic of the triumph of the divine masculine bird over the monstrous feminine snake:

> And just as when Jove's bird, the eagle, sees a snake sunning itself idly in a field, he strikes from behind, avoiding the fierce maw, and sinks his talons in the scaly back; so Perseus, through the resistless air swoops and dives at the monster from behind…[381]

Medusa was the product of corruption, a symbol of the perverted, female-controlled birth of Pegasus and Chrysaor. Perseus kills her and takes her power. He uses the Gorgon head to gain a wife with whom he can make a legitimate heir. Andromeda becomes a symbol of male control over birth, while Medusa becomes a warning against the dangers of female sexuality and an embodiment of male anxieties about female control over birth.

This appropriation of the fertility and life cycle of the previous Mother goddesses to be under male control is seen throughout the Greco-Roman pantheon. This act is a forced appropriation of female-dominated aspects by a male god to instil the supremacy of the new male dominance within the Greco-Roman religion. Female birth is seen as a threat from the start. Typhoeus, the threat to the Olympian Pantheon's rule, is sometimes portrayed as the child of Hera when she is out of Zeus' control:

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[379] Ov. *Met*. IV. 942-947.
[380] Khalifa-Guetta 2021: 224-225.
[381] Ov. *Met*. IV. 975-980.

> "I may bear a child apart from Zeus, no wit lesser than him in strength —nay, let him be as much stronger than Zeus as all-seeing Zeus than Cronos." Thus she cried and lashed the earth with her strong hand. Then the life-giving earth was moved: and when Hera saw it she was glad in heart, for she thought her prayer would be fulfilled… But when the months and days were fulfilled and the seasons duly came on as the earth moved round, she bore one neither like the gods nor mortal men, fell, cruel Typhaon, to be a plague to men.[382]

Zeus then kills this serpentine monstrous symbol of female fertility and this gains him his power as king, just as Perseus does later. The pre-patriarchal serpent-goddess are destroyed by the patriarchal warrior heroes.[383] Perseus was also the son of Danaë, a woman entombed in the earth's womb, hidden from marriage and fertility until Zeus brought her to sight:

> [Danae] went from the light to the brass-built room, bedchamber and tomb together. Like you, poor child, she was of great descent, and more, she held and kept the seed of the golden rain which was Zeus.[384]

When Zeus overtakes the earthly womb for himself, he brings his masculine order and control to the dark realm of the older chthonic goddess that reigned previously. He has conquered the dark chthonic earth to create his male heroic descendant. The fertility of the earth is overtaken by the new masculine superior god. This association with death and marriage is found throughout Greco-Roman myth. One of the most famous examples can be found in Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Antigone is an example of this, "O tomb, O marriage chamber, hollowed-out house that will watch forever".[385] A normal bride has the death of her old life at their wedding and the start of their fertility and procreation. In contrast, maidens who die, as Antigone did, and Andromeda almost did, are banished to the tomb and the earth's womb. These maidens are sacrificed to ensure the smooth running of the male *polis*. Medusa the

[382] Hes. *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*. III. 337-353.
[383] Dexter 2011: 189.
[384] Soph. *Ant*. 944-950.
[385] *ibid*. 891-892.

dragon-woman is killed, while Andromeda is saved by her separation from this serpent. It is important to note that Athena and Hygieia, the two goddesses who are most regularly associated with snakes, are eternal maidens.[386] Their association with the serpent must be blunted, their fertility and sexuality removed, to allow them to be glorified and fit within the male-centric pantheon.

Conclusion

Myths are neither created nor perpetuated by an individual. They are experiences and beliefs that are given symbolic form by their storytellers for a particular audience.[387] Medusa is not a figure in isolation. She did not arise from nowhere or nothing but from the roots of the Neolithic cultures of the ancient world that spread to the Greek world.[388] She retains the remnants of a hybrid, cyclic goddess, and goddess of nature, the wild and the earth. Her creation is the result of the fear these factors inspired in the Greek world. She is not the only hybrid monster, but one of many that represent this fear of the monstrous, hybrid creatures of the underworld:

> Many additional monsters lurk [in the underworld], bestial hybrids: Centaurs have stables adjoining the gates, as do Scyllas—part human, Part beast—Briareus, too, with his hundred arms, and the Hydra Hissing out terror; Chimaera, whose weapons are flames; then the Gorgons, Harpies, and Cerberus' shape with its three-bodied shadow.[389]

She has shared history with other monstrous beings and embodies similar fears. What made her monstrous was the perception of the Neolithic death and Mother goddesses in the new civilisation, who believed death to be an end rather than a continuation of existence.[390] However, it is not only with monsters that Medusa shares aspects. Her

[386] Khalifa-Guetta 2021: 226.
[387] Dabezies 2016: 962.
[388] Marler 2002: 15.
[389] Verg. *Aen*. VI. 285-289.
[390] Dexter 2010: 32.

powers, once celebrated, are not solely representative of the dark side of the Greek categorical approach. She represented the divine feminine and a cyclic perspective of life, where the wild and dangerous earth is also the source of all life. She is not restricted to binaries but is all-encompassing, life and death, male and female, protective and dangerous. Medusa is an amalgamation of aspects she had many origins, not all known; cultures, ideas, and perceptions that have been spread, shared and passed down.

Medusa is thus an amalgamated remnant of powers terrifying to the male. She embodies the fearsome aspects of the earlier cultural religions, metamorphosed into a new figure within the Greek pantheon. She is complex and multifaceted, having been adapted and reshaped as society evolved to suit the culture in which she existed. She also maintained connections and associations with gods and monsters with similar origins to her own. Gods preserved those aspects that aligned with the new ideals and were acceptable to the people. Although Medusa and the *Gorgoneion* came to be regarded as monstrous, this does not diminish their significance. She has endured as a figure of interest because she holds potent symbolism. Her image and later her mythic story, are crucial as they offer insight into the people who created her. The authors, artists, and audiences of the time can be understood through their utilisation of her as both a protectress and a monster. The gods she shares aspects with – such as Athena, Artemis, Asclepius, Demeter, and Dionysus – along with the monsters she is feared alongside, are formidable entities. Their similarities are as striking as their differences as they trace the change in people, ideologies, and beliefs. Protective and Monstrous Medusa are not unrelated interpretations of the same figure. They are mutations formed from a conglomeration of older sources reformed to fit into Greek ideals when they were carried into this new society.

Conclusion

The Gorgon Medusa is a societal construction that was created through repeated mutations and transformations, evolving and adapting over time to ultimately become the figure that we recognise as Medusa today. The Gorgon first evolved from an amalgamation of mythologies and religions. This Dual Gorgon figure was created from fractured associations, powers, and beliefs from the religious landscape which existed before the Greeks. Medusa is a descendant of powerful ancient goddess figures that were coopted and minimised in the new Greek pantheon. She is not the sole inheritor, but one of many, including the Sirens, Furies, Athena, Hekate and various other Greco-Roman mythological figures.

Because of her association with the feared elements of the previous goddesses, Medusa was demonised as a monster. She became the personification of the darker side of these goddesses. In the Greek mind, life and death were polarities, as were male and female, the wild and the city, chaos and order.[1] This resulted in the uncontrollable, the wild and the feminine being seen as threats to the civic order of the male-dominated *polis*. Medusa shares aspects, origins, and influences with numerous gods such as Athena, Artemis, Asclepius, Demeter, and Dionysus, as well as various monstrous beings, such as Sirens, Harpies and the Furies. These figures inherited select aspects from the same sources, yet some were revered and others feared. Which aspects they inherited differed according to the new formation of opposing categories in the belief system into which they were assimilated. In the new order, the monsters gained that which was feared, and the gods that which was

[1] Thornton 1997: 6: "[I]n Greek literature human identity is linked to the human mind's reordering of the raw material of nature, its survival dependent on the order it projects onto the world…"

revered. The previous goddesses' aspects that fit the new societal ideology were subsumed first by the Greek and then the Roman deities.

Although Athena inherited very similar aspects to Medusa, she was under the control of the male-dominated pantheon. She submitted to Zeus and used her abilities to aid men, completely opting out of sexual dynamics as an entirely maiden, male-born goddess. Medusa, on the other hand, became a monstrous protective figure. A symbol of danger used to avert other dangers. Medusa's protective aspect was shaped by the power of the goddesses and mythological beings she was influenced by, which fashioned her into a powerful liminal being. Both her chthonic associations and lack of masculine control set her up to be a monster. Medusa's destructive aspect was formed through the amalgamated remnant of the various powers she inherited that were so terrifying to the male consciousness. This monstrosity then had to be conquered. The Perseus-Medusa myth turned the Gorgon into a tale of victory. She was destroyed to limit her power, turning her into a trophy of masculine dominance. Just as the previous female deities had been conquered by the male-dominated Hellenic pantheon, so now was Medusa conquered in their place in myth.

To the Greeks, Medusa represented all that was 'wrong' with the previous belief system. She was created from aspects of the previous goddesses that had now become threatening and unseemly. As a result, she needed to be killed and subjugated back under male control, destroying her representation of the previous feminine powers and crushing them under the new male order. And so, Medusa became both a protector and a destroyer. Inheriting aspects from Neolithic, European, and Indo-European cultures, beliefs, and mythologies, together with the outside influences on her iconographical *apotropaic* characterisation from Egypt and Mesopotamia, the

Gorgon became a mutation; a confluence of the various cultures and beliefs that shaped her.

The exact fear or 'wrongness' Medusa embodied shifted according to the authors who wrote about her at the time. She became a malleable figure with multiple representations, undergoing various transformations and representations in her role as an adversary to men. The figure of the cursed mortal woman, doomed to be slayed by Perseus, encompasses several societal fears across time. As the personification of the fears of an androcentric society, Medusa served as an ominous and ever-present warning of what might befall society if men ever lost their control. To alleviate this fear, Medusa is destroyed by Perseus, and so becomes an allegory for the rightful reinstatement of masculine order and control. Monstrous Medusa is therefore the perfect medium to embody fears and anxieties as with her these fears will inevitably be destroyed and overcome.

A feminine power cannot be allowed to prevail over a masculine one; even amongst the gods. Aphrodite's powers are so potent that she can make even Zeus fall in love.[2] But this makes her a threat, and so Zeus forces her to fall in love with Anchises, to ensure she does not have power and superiority over the other gods.[3] Even a goddess' power must be censured to maintain male dominance. In Greco-Roman mythology, women with power are frequently portrayed as the source of social conflict and unrest. Atalante, one of the few mythical heroines, occasions the conflict that follows the

[2] Hes. *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. V. 35-38: "But of all others there is nothing among the blessed gods or among mortal men that has escaped Aphrodite. Even the heart of Zeus, who delights in thunder, is led astray by her; though he is greatest of all and has the lot of highest majesty, she beguiles even his wise heart whensoever she pleases…"

[3] Hes. *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. V. 45-53.

Calydonian boar hunt.[4] Helen is responsible for the Trojan War.[5] And Clytemnestra wreaks utter devastation upon Agamemnon's return from Troy when she murders her husband[6] and brings Atë, the goddess of Ruin, to the palace. Many of the destructive godly personifications in Greco-Roman mythology are female, displaying the inherent dangers of women with power:

> And she, destructive Night, bore Nemesis, who gives much pain to mortals; and afterward cheating Deception… and overbearing Discord. Hateful Discord in turn bore… Forgetfulness, and Starvation, and the Pains, full of weeping… and Lawlessness and Ruin, who share one another's nature…[7]

Although these devastating goddesses habitually bring suffering and death, they are all under the control of the male-dominated pantheon, answering to a higher masculine authority. Powerful mortal women, on the other hand, are always in the end silenced and brought firmly under male control. Clytemnestra is murdered by her son Orestes; Helen is returned to Menelas; and Medusa is destroyed by Perseus,[8] and her power, origins, associations, and representations are now always associated with the caveat of male superiority. In her new uses in iconography and myth, Medusa becomes both a symbol and a tool of male control and domination.

The patriarchal society's fear of female power and intractability transformed Monstrous Medusa into the dangerous woman par excellence. She illustrated the male anxieties that arose from the tension between society's dependence on women for procreation and its desire to safely contain them. Simply put, Medusa is a monster

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[4] Apollod. *Bibl*. I. 8. 2-3.
[5] Hom. *Il*. II. 588-590, and III. 155-159; Aes. *Aga*. 1455-1462.
[6] Aes. *Aga*. 1231-1236: "No, this is daring when the female shall strike down the male. What can I call her and be right? What beast of loathing? Viper double-fanged, or Scylla witch holed in the rocks and bane of men that range the sea; smouldering mother of death to breathe relentless hate on those most dear."
[7] Hes. *Theog*. 223-230.
[8] Aes. *Lib*. 971-979.

because this is what Greco-Roman culture needed her to be. Just as she is ultimately reduced to a tool for Perseus' own security and advancement, so too does she become a tool for society, created to embody cultural taboos, fears and anxieties. And yet this is not all that Medusa represented; she might have been transformed into a monster, but the figure of the Gorgon survived, morphing and gaining in popularity due to her powerful symbolism. The *Gorgoneion* retained the powerful associations and protective abilities of the prior goddesses. This power was used in various religious and secular contexts: buildings, rituals, medicine, and as a guardian to the afterlife. The *Gorgoneion* was a bridge between gods and mortals, as well as between mortals and the afterlife, sharing both influences and functions with figures such as the Egyptian Bes and the Mesopotamian Humbaba. While the exact influences of the grotesque depictions of these *apotropaic* figures are still debated, their use is more easily understood. These prevalent figures were unmistakably guardians. Even as the *Gorgoneion's* portrayal in iconography mutates over time, her image retains its power and widespread use. Her chthonic, divine origins, and even remnants of her associations with birth and abundance, are invoked for health, protection, and a blessed afterlife.

Medusa has also survived as a figure in contemporary society. To this day, Medusa is still being appropriated to represent societal ideas and fulfil a certain role. An in-depth examination of Medusa's later reception would easily provide enough material for a separate research paper; here, I intend to provide just a general overview. As culture changes, so does the perspective on certain cultural symbols. After antiquity, the Perseus-Medusa myth was recoded into a Christian allegory of the victory of virtue over vice during the medieval (5th-15th century) and Renaissance (14th-17th century) periods.[9] Artists from the Romantic period (late-18th-mid-19th century) remoulded her

[9] Foster 2003: 183.

again. Fascinated by her power and betrayed innocence, they turned her into a focus of evil.[10] Here she is transformed into a victim who is innocent of the horror she created.[11] The Italian poet Arturo Graf wrote a collection of poetry titled *Medusa*[12] (1920), which dealt with transgressive figures of matriarchal lineage who are associated with the underworld and death. [13] Freud wrote a psychological interpretation of the Perseus-Medusa myth in a work entitled *Medusa's Head* (1922), where he theorises that the decapitation of Medusa is an expression of the male fear of castration.[14] There is also a psychological complex surrounding the petrification or freezing of human emotions that is called the 'Medusa complex' that was first coined by Gaston Bachelard in 1948 and continues to be used to this day.[15] Spector (1996) used the lens of the Perseus-Medusa myth and the transformation of the previous matriarchal powers into evil monsters by the Greeks and Romans as a means to investigate the representations of women during the French Revolutions in 1789 and 1830.[16] In the contemporary video game culture, Medusa is a monster who needs to be killed rather than sympathised with.[17] In other modern literature, Medusa is hailed as a survivor, embodying the experiences of victims of violation.[18] Although she is a victim, Medusa uses her gaze to avenge her rape and decapitation.[19] Medusa's gaze now becomes an amulet, giving victims the power to switch places with their abuser.[20]

As women's rights and voices began to gain greater strength in mainstream culture, so too did Medusa, and her Monstrous portrayal shifted once again. While she still

[10] Bowers 1990: 224.
[11] *ibid.*
[12] Graf. *Medusa.* 1920.
[13] Defendi 2000: 26.
[14] Freud 1922: 273-274.
[15] Gleyzon 2010 209; Zaslow 2004: 1044.
[16] Spector 1996: 25-51.
[17] Duffy 2020: 11.
[18] *ibid.* 1-7.
[19] Alban 2013: 164.
[20] *ibid.* 165.

serves as a blank canvas to symbolise the beliefs and perspectives of those who use her, the ideals she represents have broadened considerably. In popular twenty-first century culture, Medusa's portrayal as a monster is challenged by feminist scholars, by whom she is often used as a symbol of feminine power and sexuality.[21] This has resulted in almost a reversion to her previous associations with her Mother goddess origins. Medusa is reimaged as a formidable force that represents the power of the female gaze and a celebration of the female self.[22] For Cixous, Medusa is a symbol of how the world should not be viewed through the previous male perspective, but through an empowered female perspective.[23] The image of the Gorgon Medusa has also been adopted by large numbers of feminist philosophers, who identify with Medusa as an expression of their own rage.[24] In her poem *Medusa* (2001), for example, Ann Standford recognises Medusa's victimhood and the violation of her erotic power through a first-person poetical account of Medusa's rape by Poseidon.[25] Medusa did not fade from our cultural imagination as the Greco-Roman belief system and pantheon lost prevalence, but instead continued to adapt and gain additional symbolic meanings and representations.

Medusa is a Monster, a Protectress, a force for healing, and a symbol of death and the afterlife. The Gorgon is a force of life and death, birth and destruction, healing and

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[21] Duffy 2020: 13.

[22] Bowers 1990: 235.

[23] Cixous 1975: 424: "Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a hard-on! for themselves! They need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes. What lovely backs! Not another minute to lose. Let's get out of here."

[24] Leeming 2013: 74-75.

[25] Stanford. *Medusa*. 2001. 9-14: "It is no great thing to a god. For me it was anger- / no consent on my part, no wooing, all harsh / rough as a field hand. I didn't like it. / My hair coiled in fury; my mind held hate alone. / I thought of revenge, began to live on it. / My hair turned to serpents, my eyes saw the world in stone."

mortality. She is a deterrent to enemies and the hero's adversary. A source of fear for men and a champion for women. Medusa is the amalgamated mutation of various cultures and belief systems embodied within one figure for multiple uses and contexts. Over the centuries, the Gorgon accumulated cultural beliefs, fears, and symbols and preserved them in the figure of Medusa; a figure that has retained this capacity to adapt and transform, shifting as the perception of her symbolism has changed through time. Regardless of the ways in which Medusa has been used, her image has survived, and despite millennia of different people and cultures trying to reduce her to one specific role, she has consistently transversed these boundaries, still spurning all attempts to limit her to one static representation.

Fig.1.1

Fig.1.2

Terracotta *lekythos* with Perseus flying away with Medusa's head in a sack, while Pegasus springs forth from Medusa's neck.

Attributed to the Diosphos Painter. Greek (Attic), Archaic, white ground, ca. 500 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 06.1070.

Fig. 2

Terracotta *pelike* with Perseus on the obverse side beheading the sleeping Medusa.

Attributed to Polygnotos. Greek (Attic), Classical, red-figure, ca. 450–440 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 45.11.1.

Fig. 3

Terracotta *lekythos* with Athena holding a spear and helmet, wearing her *aegis* with snakes on either side.

Attributed to the Tithonos Painter. Greek (Attic), Classical, red-figure, ca. 480 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 27.122.6.

Fig. 4

Terracotta stand with *Gorgoneion*— a frontal depiction of the face of a Gorgon with large eyes, tusks, bulbous nose, a beard, tusks, and a protruding tongue.

Signed by the Potter Ergotimos and the painter Kleitias. Greek (Attic), Archaic, black-figure, ca. 570 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 31.11.4.

Fig. 5

Stone sculpture, limestone Geryon, the three-bodied figure who lived with his dog in the west as a herdsman. Decoration on the garment and shield, tunic skirt shows two men in a heraldic scene with two lions. The leftmost shield shows Perseus accompanied by Athena while he beheads Medusa. The central shield shows Herakles carrying away one Kerkops while another attacks him. The rightmost shield, damaged, shows Herakles shooting a centaur.

Cypriot, Archaic, 2nd half of the 6th century BCE. Limestone. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Cesnola Collection. Accession Number**:** 74.51.2591.

Fig. 6

Terracotta *kylix* with winged, running Gorgon in the tondo. On the exterior obverse (not pictured), Achilles chasing Troilos and Polyxena; on the reverse, horsemen.

Attributed to the Corinthianising Painter. Greek (Attic), Archaic, black-figure, ca. 575 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 01.8.6.

Fig. 7.1

Fig. 7.2

Terracotta *kylix* eye-cup. On the exterior, two eyes on either side of a warrior; on the tondo, a *Gorgoneion*.

Greek (Attic), Archaic, black-figure, ca. 520 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number**:** 56.171.36.

Fig. 8

Terracotta painted *Gorgoneion* antefix with traces of vivid paint (the colours red, yellow, and blue).

Greek, (South Italian, Tarentine), Archaic, ca. 540 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 39.11.9.

Fig. 9

Terracotta relief fragment depicting Achilles holding a spear and a *Gorgoneion* shield over a figure that is mostly lost. The name 'Achilles' is inscribed in the top right-hand corner.

Greek, Attic, ca. 600 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 42.11.33.

Fig. 10

Carnelian intaglio, with a head of beautiful Medusa, carved in profile, with wings in her hair.

Greek, Hellenistic 3rd–1st century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 48.12.4.

Fig. 11

Silver roundel with the head of beautiful, mournful Medusa, with snakes in her hair and knotted below the chin, and wings emerging from her head.

Roman, 150–235 CE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 96.AM.207.

Fig. 12

Bronze and silver finial with the head of Medusa (possibly from a ship).

Roman, 1st century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 67.11.19.

Fig. 13

Tufa *acroterion* with Medusa head.

Etruria, 300–275 BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 78.AA.10.

Fig. 14

Two-handled terracotta vase from a burial, with Erote handles and Medusa decoration on the body, showing snakes and wings in her hair.

Greek (South Italian, Apulian, Canosan), Early Hellenistic, late 4th–early 3rd century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 06.1021.246a, b.

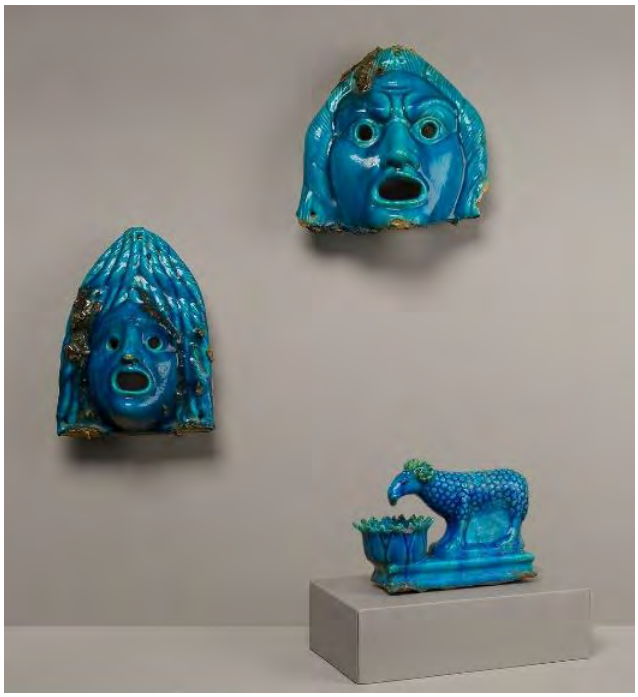

Fig. 15

Two faience theatre masks and a ram eating from a lotus vessel votive.

Egypt, Roman period 2nd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 26.7.1019–.1021-related.

Fig. 16

Bronze decorative perforated disk (attached to shields or leather breastplates for additional protection).

Italic, early 7th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 96.9.438.

Fig. 17

Black-figure terracotta *oinochoe* decorated with a departing warrior scene, and radial shield decoration.

Greek, Attic, Archaic ca. 550 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 06.1021.64.

Fig. 18

Bronze bust of Jupiter wearing an *aegis* with *Gorgoneion* over his left shoulder.

Roman, Early Imperial, late 1st century BCE–1st century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 17.230.2.

Fig. 19

Bronze statue of Minerva (with missing shield and spear) in the archaic style, wearing a *Gorgoneion* aegis with a griffin on her helmet.

Roman, 50 BCE–25 CE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 96.AB.176.

Fig. 20

Alexander and Bucephalus, a section of the Alexander Mosaic, depicting Alexander, wearing a *Gorgoneion*, riding his horse in the Battle of Issus.

Roman, ca. 100 BCE. Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Naples. Wikipedia image. Public Domain. CC BY-SA 3.0.

Fig. 21

Bronze greave with a *Gorgoneion* decoration.

Greek, South Italian, Classical, 4th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 1991.171.45.

Fig. 22

Amber, bronze and ivory *prometopidion* with an upper warrior face and a lower *Gorgoneion*.

Greek, South Italian, ca. 480 BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 83.AC.7.1.

Fig. 23

Fragmentary terracotta architectural Antefix with a bearded *Gorgoneion* painted in polychrome.

Greek, Campania, ca. 500 BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 75.AD.107.

Fig. 24

Terracotta Dionysus mask with suspension hole.

Cypriot, Late Hellenistic 2nd century BCE(?). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Cesnola Collection. Object Number: 74.51.1758.

Fig. 25

Gold *Gorgoneion* pendant.

Greek, Cypriot, Classical ca. 450 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Cesnola Collection. Accession Number: 74.51.3397b.

Fig. 26

Silver ring with a *Gorgoneion*.

Greek, 525–500 BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 81.AN.76.62.

Fig. 27

Ring stone carved from peridot, decorated with a sleeping Medusa head.

Roman, Late Republican or Imperial ca. 1st century BCE–3rd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 81.6.120.

Fig. 28

A chain with two pendants: a Medusa head in a green stone, and three standing women (possibly the Muses).

Egypt, Roman period 2nd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 10.130.1527.

Fig. 29

Intaglio carved from red jasper, with the head of Medusa and text.

Roman, Imperial ca. 2nd–3rd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 81.6.315.

Fig. 30.1

Fig. 30.2

Onyx intaglio amulet with inscribed incantation in Greek letters on both sides.

Roman, Imperial ca. 2nd–3rd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 15.43.317.

Fig. 31

Jasper intaglio amulet with an Ouroboros surrounding Harpocrates, who is sitting on a lotus.

Roman, Imperial ca. 2nd-3rd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 41.160.638.

Fig. 32

Faience Bes Amulet.

Egypt, Late Period, Dynasty 26–29, 664–332 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 26.7.1040.

Fig. 33

Steatite Bes head disk.

Egypt, Late Period, Dynasty 27–30, 664–332 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 42.5.19.

Fig. 34

Black-figure terracotta column krater, with a mask of Dionysus between two eyes.

Greek, Attic, Archaic ca. 520–510 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 06.1021.101.

Fig. 35.1

Fig. 35.2

A carnelian scarab, engraved with a *Gorgoneion*.

Greek, ca. 500 BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 81.AN.76.3.

Fig. 36.1

Fig. 36.2

A scarab in green jasper, showing Bes fighting a griffin.

Phoenician, ca. 500 BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 81.AN.76.110.

Fig. 37

Limestone male figure wearing the double crown of Egypt, with a quiver, and clothing decorated with winged *uraei*, an eye, and the head of either the Egyptian god Bes or the *Gorgoneion*.

Cypriot, archaic mid-6th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Cesnola Collection. Object Number: 74.51.2603.

Fig. 38

Terracotta loom weight with yellow slip. Frontal *Gorgoneion* with U-shaped snakes above.

South Italian, 3rd–2nd century BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Object Number: 73.AD.10.I.11.

Fig. 39.1

Fig. 39.2

Terracotta loom weight with yellow slip. Decorated with a mother and child (38.1) and an *apotropaic* squatting pregnant figure (38.2). The head and body have a similar portrayal to a demon or the god Bes and his female counterpart, Beset.

Greek, South Italian, 3rd–2nd century BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 81.AD.187.29.

Fig. 40

Amber *Gorgoneion*.

Roman, 1st–2nd century CE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 71.AO.355.

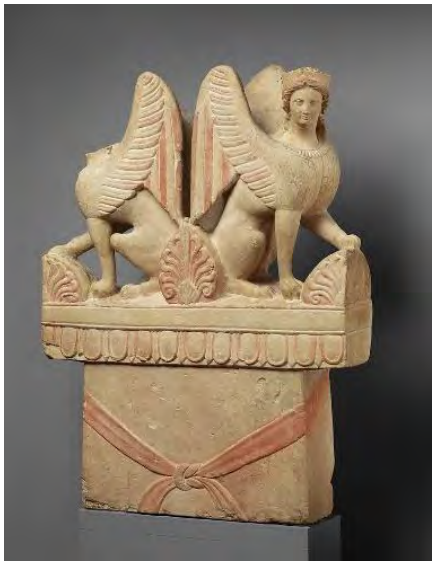

Fig. 41

Limestone funeral *stele* with two Sphinxes with palmettes.

Cypriot, Classical, last quarter of the 5th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Cesnola Collection. Accession Number: 74.51.2499.

Fig. 42

End panel of a lead sarcophagus. Decoration temple façade design, with vegetation and a *Gorgoneion*.

Roman, Late Imperial, late 2nd to mid-3rd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 65.148a–f.

Fig. 43

Front of a Phrygian marble sarcophagus, with Erotes holding up oak garlands resting on sea monsters, and Victories at the broken sides holding the garland ends. Above the garlands are tragedy masks and *Gorgoneia*, and acorns, birds and grapes cover the surface.

Roman, 140–170 CE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 72.AA.152.

Fig. 44

A marble sarcophagus, decorated with oak garlands supported by two Erotes, with four Victories decorating the sides, and Medusa's head above the garlands, except in the centre where there is a black inscription tablet. On the front face, six Erotes hunt wild animals with two others standing upright at the corners.

Roman, Severan ca. 200–225 CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 70.1.

Fig. 45

Bronze sickle-sword (*harpe*). A curved sword with a cuneiform inscription.

Northern Mesopotamia, Middle Assyrian ca. 1307–1275 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 11.166.1.

Fig. 46

Black-figure terracotta *kyathos* decorated with Perseus, wearing his winged cap and sandals, and holding his *harpe* sword, pursuing three winged Gorgons. Attributed to the Theseus painter.

Greek, Attic 510–500 BCE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object Number: 86.AE.146.

Fig. 47

Gold ring with cameo gem, white on brown sardonyx, featuring Perseus wearing winged sandals, holding the head of Medusa in his right hand, and his *harpe* sword in his left hand.

Roman, 25 BCE – 25 CE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object number: 87.AN.24

Fig. 48

Metadiorite cylinder seal, and a modern impression, with a snake god that has a human upper half and a snake lower half with a long tail. There are also minor deities. One of the deities is winged, another has feline appendages at the hip, and they have hands and feet in the form of scorpions, goats, and snakes. Behind the snake god is an anthropomorphic god with a mace.

Mesopotamia, Akkadian, ca. 2350–2150 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 55.65.5.

Fig. 49

Cosmetic container made from engraved shell with incised design of a female deity with four wings, lotus plants and two winged Sphinxes.

Levant, Iron Age 700–600 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 1999.81.

Fig. 50

Red-figure terracotta hydria, decorated with Herakles surrounded by women, Pan, and satyrs in the garden of the Hesperides. There is a tree with a snake in the background. Attributed to the Hesperides Painter.

Greek (Attic), Classical, red-figure, early 4th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 24.97.5.

Fig. 51

Grey and black jasper cylinder seal with a modern impression. Design of a cultic scene with a scorpion male figure and a second male figure wearing a long garment on either side of a deity standing on a winged lion. There is also the goddess Ishtar, with a winged sun disc above. In front and upwards of the male deity are a crescent moon and a male bust.

Mesopotamia, Assyrian, Neo-Assyrian 8th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 1987.200.1.

Fig. 52

Bronze amulet with the goddess Ishtar sitting enthroned before a worshiper.

Mesopotamia, Assyrian, Neo-Assyrian ca. 8th–7th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 86.11.3.

Fig. 53

Hematite intaglio decorated with the Mummy of Osiris on the back of a lion, Anubis and two flanking winged goddesses, Isis and Nephthys, with inscriptions around the margin.

Roman, Imperial ca. 2nd–3rd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 10.130.1393.

Fig. 54

Facsimile by Charles K. Wilkinson. Tempera on paper. Original from Egypt, Upper Egypt, Thebes, Valley of the Queens (Biban el-Malikat), Tomb of Nefertari (QV 66). Queen Nefertari being led by Isis.

New Kingdom, Ramesside Dynasty 19, ca. 1279–1213 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 30.4.142.

Fig. 55

Limestone plaque with the head of a king.

Egypt, Late Period–Ptolemaic Period 400–200 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 07.228.7.

Fig. 56

Limestone relief plaque. Obverse decorated with a vulture and a cobra on baskets. The reverse is decorated with a falcon.

Egypt, Late Period–Ptolemaic Period 400–30 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 11.155.12.

Fig. 57

Sandstone sculpture of the Lotus-Headed Fertility Goddess Lajja Gauri in birthing posture.

India (Madhya Pradesh), ca. 6th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Samuel Eilenberg Collection. Object Number: 2000.284.13.

Fig. 58

Ceramic plaque of Humbaba.

Mesopotamia, Babylonian, Old Babylonian ca. 2000–1600 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 1974.347.3a, b.

Fig. 59

Bronze mirror. The support is the figure of a nude girl standing on a curled-up lion. She has a pomegranate in her left hand and wears a necklace and strap with a crescent-shaped amulet and ring. On her shoulders, also supporting the mirror, are two winged griffins.

Greek, Laconian, Archaic 2nd half of the 6th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 38.11.3.

Fig. 60

Bronze plaque with three figures. Central figure a nude female flanked by two male figures wearing kilts, all supporting an upper bracket which contains two forward facing lions (which are usually associated with Inanna/Ishtar).

Mesopotamia Babylonian, Old Babylonian ca. 2000–1600 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 1998.31.

Fig. 61

Marble statue of Cybele, seated mother of the Gods, wearing a towered wall crown, holding wheat and poppies, with a rudder and cornucopia under her left arm and a lion sitting at her feet.

Roman, ca. 50 CE. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Villa Collection. Object number: 57.AA.19.

Fig. 62

Gold Greek pendant with a *Potnia Theron* (Mistress of Animals).

Greek, Archaic 7th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 1999.424.

Fig. 63

Terracotta red-figure *lekythos*. Decorated with Artemis on the body, who is running and holding a bow. She is drawing an arrow from her quiver, with a fawn running beside her. On the shoulder, Nike is depicted winged and in flight. Attributed to the Providence Painter.

Greek, Attic, Classical ca. 480 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 41.162.18.

Fig. 64

Terracotta *alabastron*. Winged Artemis (in the form of *Potnia Theron*) holding two swans. Attributed to the Potnia Painter.

Greek, Corinthian, Early Corinthian ca. 620–590 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 76.12.3.

Fig. 65

Terracotta red-figure *pelike*. Apollo and Artemis pour a libation at an altar. Apollo is holding a *kithara* and a *phiale*, which Artemis is pouring the libation into, and which Apollo then pours onto the altar. Attributed to an artist influenced by the Chicago Painter.

Greek, Attic, Classical mid-5th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 06.1021.191.

Fig. 66

Bronze statuette of Athena flying her owl.

Greek, Classical ca. 460 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 50.11.1.

Fig. 67

Terracotta black-figure *kylix*. The birth of Athena from Zeus' head, with the newly born Athena on top of the seated Zeus, who is surrounded by other figures. Attributed to the Painter of the Nicosia Olpe.

Greek, Attic, Archaic ca. 550 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 06.1097.

Fig. 68

Plasma ring stone depicting Asclepius leaning on his staff, which has a serpent wound around it.

Roman, Late Republican or Imperial 1st century BCE–3rd century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Object Number: 81.6.92.

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