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Studies

ANCIENT HISTORY

GORGONEION AND GORGON-MEDUSA: A CRITICAL RESEARCH REVIEW

Abstract: Our paper aims at a critical reviewing of the research that has dealt with the Gorgon-Medusa and Gorgoneion (decapitated head) apotropaic feminine beast, as recorded in various artifacts and monuments of the ancient Greek World, from early 19th century until today. Multiple works by ancient sources provide a wide-ranging and diverse picture of the fabled creature and her fateful encounter with the Greek hero Perseus. The use of ancient written historical sources is particularly emphasized and eastern influences on texts and iconography is discussed. As a natural consequence of the interactions, the association of Gorgons with other deities and the *Potnia theron* (*Mistress of Animals*) has been variously assessed by scholars with predominant its apotropaic property. Medusa appears in a variety of mythological stories and is depicted in a variety of ways in ancient art. The source of the artistic creation in painting and sculpture is founded on the legends and myths from the remote past, with a sudden appearance and apex in the Greek Archaic period. The review covers the period from prehistory to Late antiquity, whereas, the earliest form of a scarecrow is transformed to the known image of Gorgon/Medusa, and eventually from an ugly to beautiful, a metamorphosis which has been attaching various interpretations. The uniqueness of this “beast” form has emerged through its multifaced representations and mythological reports in the known ancient Greek World of the southeastern Mediterranean and its neighbor areas. Gorgon/Medusa-Gorgoneion in art as witnessed in archaeological remains has been shown to persist in all everyday activities of the ancient World and has been subjected to wide social, cultural, ideological considerations.

Keywords: *Apotropaic, myth, Gorgo, Perseus, Pegasus, Chrysaor, art, Hesiod, Homer, Potnia, Vases, painting, art.*

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Even today the Medusa is gaining attention and its allegory or symbolism attracts scholars, artists and writers to attribute to her everyday issues.¹ **Gorgon** (Γοργόνα) is the whole-body figure of the three sisters. Medusa is one of the three **Gorgons** (Γοργόνες).² **Gorgoneion** or **gorgoneio** (γοργόνειο) is the decapitated head of Medusa, both emerged in works of art in a variety of types. Medusa is a well-known figure from ancient Greek mythology. **Medusa** is well renowned for her snake-like hair and her ability to turn whomever she looked at into stone or petrify them. Homer and Hesiod of the 8th century BC, and the 5th-6th century BC lyric poet Pindar, among others, present a wide-ranging and diversified depiction

¹ This paper represents a part of the PhD thesis by Anna Lazarou, submitted and approved by the University of Peloponnese, in 2021 (unpublished).

² Not to be confused with mermaid – a female with fish tail – but represents a whole-body woman with the characteristic apotropaic face.

of the legendary beast. She was one of three Gorgon sisters born to Keto and Phorkys, primordial sea gods. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Medusa was mortal, while the others, Stheno and Euryale, were immortal. Her fateful encounter with the Greek hero Perseus is recounted in the most well-known story.³ At the time of her death, her two children were born from her severed neck: Chrysaor (Χρυσάωρ, the one who holds a golden sword) and the winged horse Pegasus (Πήγασος), product of her union with the god Poseidon.

The figure of whole-body creature appears at the Archaic art (700-480 BC) independently of the myth and also called **Gorgo** (Γοργώ). **Gorgon head** or **gorgon mask** or **gorgoneion** (plural form: **gorgoneia**) also appears at the art of Archaic period independently of the myth but its duration lasts longer. Gorgon mask (γοργόνειο προσωπείο) had mostly ritual use.

These stories may seem imaginable today, yet they were semi-historical to the ancient Greeks. Myths, as well as Homer's and Hesiod's stories, were thought to be part of a lost heroic past in which men and women were related with heroes, gods, and the supernatural, and moreover, seems to echo some real event in the past. The absence of the gorgoneion and the Gorgon/Medusa at least in the three centuries earlier than the Archaic period, however, is not proof of ignorance of the myths associated with them. The myths and mythical beings found in the poetic works of the 8th century BC reflect the mythology of earlier times. During the post-Mycenaean and geometric times where political, economic and social ferment took place, the need arose at the same time to reshape religion and consolidate the pantheon.⁴ At this time Homer and Hesiod composed their poems and consolidated many of the Panhellenic myths concerning the genealogy of the gods, the causes of rituals and the worship of the deities. For their work they draw evidence from already known myths and rituals, which they processed based on their current socio-political changes and worship needs.⁵ The earliest identification of gorgoneion and gorgon-medusa has already been highlighted and re-evaluated.⁶

The theoretical discussion of myth is characterized not so much by a critical approach to the relevant studies as by the convergence of many research methods and forms regarding the complex relationships between literature and myth. These investigations are so heterogeneous and connected with so many scientific and interdisciplinary issues, that it may be better to think of the critique of myth as a field for a series of complex and intensely challenging questions, so that the interpretation of the content of the myth is an ardent endeavor of researchers.⁷

Most researchers make a plausible hypothesis that the myth of Gorgon/Medusa, perhaps with some variation, as with most myths, dates back to prehistoric times - probably

³ Hes. *Theog.* 287. (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:tlg.0020.001:287>).

⁴ POLIGNAC 2000, 70; GRETHLEIN 2012, 15-35.

⁵ POLIGNAC 2000, 80.

⁶ LAZAROU 2019.

⁷ AURÉGAN/PALAYRET 1995, 9. "Throughout history there has been developed an authentic hermeneutics of myths, because they are an eternal 'source of inspiration'".

in the Bronze Age - and was passed down from generation to generation. The historical times. Besides, Perseus is the founder of Mycenae and his worship in the area continues until Roman times.⁸

The myth of Gorgon/Medusa and gorgoneion in the ancient Greek World is supported by archaeological traces in the long-lasting presence of the gorgoneia over the centuries which seems to be an apotropaic timeless symbol and at the same time a timeless amulet that constantly changes form, but its essence remains the same.⁹ The power of the apotropaic is summed up in the petrified gaze of Medusa, which gives flesh and blood to a myth that makes Perseus omnipotent through the use of this magic.

The present paper is an overview with critical reassessment of the major studies on the Gorgon-Medusa topic that unfolds the diachronic presence as evolution and interpretation in its form through art recorded by academic scholarship.

THE USE OF ANCIENT WRITTEN SOURCES

Many researchers have thoroughly dealt with the ancient sources and myths concerning Gorgon/Medusa, to describe and comment on the relevant iconography.

A. Zell, based on the reference of *Pliny the Elder* (Ch. 2.28), describes Gorgons as hairy creatures and uses the reference of *Diodorus Siculus* to the Gorgons of Libya (Ch. 2.19).¹⁰ A.L. Frothingham cites information from ancient sources to discuss cases of well-known Gorgons from Delphi, the sanctuary of Orthia Artemis in Sparta and the sanctuary of Artemis Gorgon in Corfu.¹¹ Seventeen years later, in 1928, the well-known archaeologist S. Marinatos, in his article "Gorgons and gorgoneia", comments on prehistoric and archaic works of art, while at the same time refers to various traditions and written sources.¹²

In the same year, K. Gerogiannis, in his article "Gorgon or Medusa?" makes extensive references to ancient sources, namely Homer, Hesiod and Pausanias. It sets out the views of Poseidon's relationship with the horse, whose origins go back to prehistoric times, since it is presumed, based on relevant findings, that already then, the horse had been domesticated and served man in various ways.¹³ Consequently, myths about horses have a primitive origin. But they do not concern the worship of animals but the worship of gods or demons, in which animals represent simple symbols.

Four decades later, T. Karagiorga, in her doctoral dissertation, dealt with the gorgonian head (gorgoneion) during the Archaic period.¹⁴ T. Karagiorga refers to the myths that deal with Gorgon, along with ancient sources and local traditions, to which she does not pay much attention. Instead, she focuses on the Hesiodic myth and Medusa's relationship with Perseus. At the same time E. Phinney

⁸ Pausanias II 18.1; NILSSON 2020, 40.

⁹ BAUMBACH 2011, 228, 229, 234, 235

¹⁰ ZELL 1911, 193.

¹¹ FROTHINGHAM 1911, 349.

¹² MARINATOS 1927-1928, 20, 27, 31

¹³ GEROGIANNIS 1927-1928, 148.

¹⁴ ΚΑΡΑΓΙΩΡΓΑ 1970.

wrote an article entitled “Perseus’ Battle with the Gorgons”, in which he deals only with the fossil power of Medusa’s gaze through myth, with references to Greek and Roman writers and poets.¹⁵

Fifteen years later, J.P. Vernant presents a monograph on Medusa entitled *La mort dans les yeux*, where he interprets the written sources in a peculiar way and suggests its own symbolism.¹⁶ Focusing on *Theogony*, the author points out that Gorgons are related to a whole generation of monsters, as with the Graies, since the parents of all of them are Phorkis and Keto (whose name reminds her of monstrous size, but also abyssal caves in the deeper depths of the sea and the land). As J.P. Vernant observes, all the children of this couple born from the union of Pontus with Gaia are monstrous and they live far from gods and humans, in underground places beyond the ocean, on the border of the night, where they become guards and intimidating by blocking its access to restricted areas. Here, J.P. Vernant associates Styx, and the terror that causes to the gods, with the “grumpy” Gorgons and the terror that cause to mortals.¹⁷ “Styx” is also called the owl bird, one disastrous omen that stands out with a big head, an evil eye and its night scream.¹⁸

J.P. Vernant observes that the vexatious sounds are so much a part of the universe to which the Gorgons belong, that Hesiod, in a relevant passage of *Aspis*, adds acoustic elements: “as they trod upon the pale adamant, the shield rang sharp and clear with a loud clanging” (Hesiod, *Shield of Heracles*, 231-233). As J.P. Vernant characteristically notes, citing other elements given by the text regarding sounds, among the monsters that originate from Phorkis and Keto, snakes have a special place.¹⁹ As they strike their jaws and whistle, they terrorize people, just like the Gorgons, with the sharp and stern sounds coming out of their larynx. Perhaps therefore the last ones are depicted with snakes coiled around their waists.²⁰

Unlike J.P. Vernant, S.M. Serfontein is mainly interested in the scene that precedes Medusa’s beheading.²¹ A decade later, S.R. Wilk presents a monograph entitled *Medusa. Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon*.²² He focuses on the *Shield of Heracles*, to interpret mainly archaic gorgons, while he is particularly concerned about the function of Perseus’ shield as a mirror, so that the hero can see only the reflection of Medusa and thus manage to repel the stone-throwing force of death. S.R. Wilk also refers to the multifaceted functions of Medusa based on Euripides²³ (*Ion*, on the blood of Medusa, 1003 et seq.).

In 2003, a collective volume entitled *The Medusa Reader* was published, edited by M. Garber and J.N. Vickers.²⁴ This work presents the views of contemporary writers and poets on Medusa, which are accompanied by analysis and commentary on ancient sources. Thus, information

¹⁵ PHINNEY 1971, 447-448.

¹⁶ VERNANT 1985.

¹⁷ VERNANT 1985, 66.

¹⁸ Isichios, s.v. «styx»; Ant. Lib. Met. 21, 5; Ov. Met. XV, 791.

¹⁹ VERNANT 1985, 68-69.

²⁰ VERNANT 1985, 68-69.

²¹ SERFONTEIN 1991, 18, 19, 22.

²² WILK 2000.

²³ WILK 2000, 145-160.

²⁴ GARBER & VICKERS 2003.

is presented, among others, by Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Euripides, Palaephatus, Apollodorus, Diodorus of Sicily, Ovid, Lucanus, Lucianus, Pausanias and Achilles Tattius, but also by Fulgentius and Ioannis Malalas. The texts are in the form of concise independent stories. No works of art are mentioned at all.

In the same year another collective volume was published, *The Centaur’s Smile*, by J.M. Padgett, where one chapter by D. Tsiafakis on fabulous creatures (Pelora) and the Gorgons section is based on the myth of Hesiod,²⁵ a mere sum up of earlier works, without a critical assessment. In addition, we have noted the various reports of Homer to Gorgon-Gorgoneion²⁶ alleged Gorgon/Gorgoneion of being a mythological figure, in contrast to Tsiafakis assertion.²⁷

A few years later, D. Ogden presents the monograph *Perseus*.²⁸ Chapter 3 refers to Medusa and her sisters Gorgons. As for the place of residence of the Gorgons, there are several references that refer to different versions. Specifically: In *Theogony* it is reported that they lived across the Ocean, at the end of the west, while in the *Cypriot Epics* they lived in Sarpedon, a rocky island (cf. Pherecydes, Palaephatus and Souda). Pindar, again, suggests that the Gorgons lived next to the far northern part of the known World (cf. Apollodorus), as is indirectly inferred from *Prometheus Bound* in combination with relevant information from Herodotus. However, other references to *Prometheus Bound* place the Gorgons and the Graeae beyond the easternmost tip of the ocean, but also to the south, linking them to the “black” Ethiopians.

The prevailing view in antiquity, however, was that the Gorgons (and the Graeae, in some references) lived in northwestern Africa, and in particular in Libya (see Herodotus, Pausanias, Aeschylus, and Apollonius, among others).

In the monograph of *Chthonia Gorgona*, S. Fritzilas mentions ancient sources that describe another Gorgon, a monster that was born on Earth and Athena defeated in the Battle of the Giants, to then take her hide and head and add them to her auspices.²⁹ S. Baumbach is impressed by Medusa’s descriptions of the Ovid *Transformations*.³⁰ Last, P. Themelis, on the occasion of the presentation of a relief palm that belongs to Perseus and holds Medusa’s head by the hair, makes an overview of the well-known myth.³¹

THE COMMENTARY OF EASTERN INFLUENCES

After A.L. Frothingham exposes the eastern influences, he associates the Mother-Goddess with the Minoan Goddess of Snakes, Artemis and Medusa. He quotes 17 images for his documentation.³²

S. Marinatos cites the views of archaeologists who with extensive arguments support the primal origin of the gorgoneion from the Egyptian Athor, citing the presence of

²⁵ TSIAFAKIS 2003.

²⁶ Hom. *Il.*: E, 740; Λ, 36; Θ, 349; Σ, 203-229; Ξ, 319-320 and *Od.*: λ, 633.

²⁷ TSIAFAKIS 2003, 85

²⁸ OGDEN 2008, ΚΕΦ. 3.

²⁹ FRITZILAS 2010.

³⁰ BAUMBACH 2011, 225-245.

³¹ THEMELIS 2017, 185-188.

³² FROTHINGHAM 1911, 366.

bovine ears and horns.³³ He explains that the gorgon mask (or gorgoneion) has long been believed to ward off the Basque eye and evil spirits - a belief that existed not only in Greece but also in other parts of the world (Peru, Mexico, etc.), some people even use it for this purpose today. With appropriate arguments he supports the view that the gorgoneion flees to the East after the destruction of the Cretan-Mycenaean civilization - specifically in Cyprus and Asia Minor - and returns to Greece with the head of Athor in the Archaic era, retaining the features, the predominant feature of the chthonic deity. Potnia's relationship with Gorgo and Artemis is also affected.³¹ The myth of Perseus seems to have returned as a counter-loan from the East, having previously passed through Cyprus, a view reinforced by the Cypriot word "kivisis/κίβισις" (which means sock) added to the myth.³⁴

K. Gerogiannis in his article "Gorgo or Medusa?", embraces the theory of the origin of the archaic mermaid from the wild and abominable lion's head, substantiating this view with an amber coin from Mysia.³⁵

T. Karagiorga has examined Eastern and Egyptian influences from gods and demons. Interpreting the ancient sources in his own way, Goldman, after resorting to general descriptions without referring to specific works of art, makes a brief reference to the origins of the Gorgon plastic model in the Middle East, the Cretaceous-Sumerian and Sumerian-Akkadian cultures, as well as and in the parallels of the Gorgonian mask with the Egyptian god Bess and the Assyrian giant Humbaba.³⁶ D. Ogden has also considered the possibility of influences from the Near East and Mesopotamia, and refers to Humbaba and the female demon Lamashtu.³⁷ With regard to the complex question of whether the Gorgonians or Medusa had been influenced by Mesopotamia and other parts of the Near East, we will now contrast the Potnia of beasts with Lamashtu and Humbaba, two cases which appear to answer the question, at least at the level of iconography.

While comparing the beheading of Medusa by Perseus with the beheading of the savage Humbaba by Enkidu and Gilgamesh in the epic of the same name, it is found that the heroes in both cases turn their heads elsewhere. The author Nonnos (5th c. AD) also associates the myth of Perseus with the myth of Dionysus and identifies similarities, such as, for example, the petrification of Ariadne.³⁸

THE ASSOCIATION WITH OTHER DEITIES AND THE POTNIA THERON

Since the 18th century many researchers have dealt with the gorgoneion and Medusa, examining their origins and relating them to other representations,³⁹ such

³³ MARINATOS 1927-1928.

³⁴ As S. Marinatos reports in 1927-1928, 36; Also, from Liddell-Scott (in the Greek edition 2007 Pelekanos Press, p. 700): κίβισις is a Cypriot word; see also about sack: Hesiod, *Shield of Heracles*, 224: «...οἶον ὁ Περσεὺς ἔφερεν» '«ἄμφι δέ μιν κίβισις θέε. ...ἀργυρέη».

³⁵ GEROGIANNIS 1927-1928.

³⁶ GOLDMAN 1961, 1-23.

³⁷ OGDEN 2008, 38.

³⁸ OGDEN 2008, 31.

³⁹ LEVEZOW 1832.

as Rondanini's Medusa,⁴⁰ which was developed by Goethe in 1786⁴¹.

K. Gerogiannis describes the pedestal of a colossal statue found in Senjirli in northern Syria and dates it back to the 9th or 10th century BC.⁴² It depicts a relief frontal figure in a street position, with a beard, the arms flattened and a short tunic, which K. Gerogiannis likens to the short tunics that were typical of the archaic Gorgons. He holds a lion in each hand and grimaces. Citing the views of Meyer and Ward, he suggests that images like this may be related to gorgoneia. The difference, however, lies in the fear caused by the abominable mask, something that is not found in Asian figures.⁴³ As for the shape of the head, which Meyer also considers to be of Asian origin, using the example of Senjirli, K. Gerogiannis contradicts it with the Middle Minoan seals of the runners found in Zakros and considers it rather Greek.⁴⁴

S. Marinatos notes the peculiarity of the snakes in the form of the Gorgon and emphasizes his connection with Athena, a pre-Hellenic deity of Cretan-Mycenaean origin, but also Aphrodite of Cyprus, who in one sense represents the goddess Aphrodite-Gorgon, the weeping goddess of death. According to these traditions, the relationship between Crete and Cyprus seems to be very close.⁴⁵

On the contrary, K. Gerogiannis examines the possibility that the Gorgon fell from a deity to a wicked demon and a coward, due to the prevalence of a new theocratic system.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the view is reinforced that spirits and demons pre-existed in the perception of primitive man because of the fear caused by disease and death. K. Gerogiannis concludes that the presence of evil demons and inferior mythological beings representing evil in the ancient religions, and especially in the Greek religion, is "normal" and there is no reason to consider them initially pure supreme deities, who over time degenerated and were transformed to demons.⁴⁷ K. Gerogiannis then relates the figures of Potnia beasts, the Great Mother and Artemis.

T. Karagiorga first points out the kinship between Gorgo and the queen of beasts, Potnia.⁴⁸ These two forces appear in their plastic representation connected but at the same time opposite. Their similarity lies in their metaphysical-symbolic dimension. Their opposition occurs on many levels. In the iconography of the Gorgonian mask, distinctive features were found that make the difference from Potniae obvious. The Gorgons are depicted on the front, while the Potniae on profile. The Gorgons are presented in motion, with the knees bent, while the Potniae are motionless, standing, in a priestly position. The Gorgons wear a short tunic, while the Potniae have a long one. There are also differences in the headdress - the decorative headbands that the Potniae wear on their long hair are mentioned, in

⁴⁰ BELSON 1980, 373-378.

⁴¹ BOYLE 2000, 432.

⁴² GEROGIANNIS 1927-1928.

⁴³ GEROGIANNIS 1927-1928, 164-165.

⁴⁴ GEROGIANNIS 1927-1928, 165, Fig. 14, 15.

⁴⁵ MARINATOS 1927-1928.

⁴⁶ GEROGIANNIS 1927-1928, 133.

⁴⁷ GEROGIANNIS 1927-1928, 137.

⁴⁸ KARAGIORGA 1970.

contrast to the pointed hair that characterizes the Gorgons. In addition, T. Karagiorga quotes the views of some writers according to which Gorgo symbolizes the dark side, the awful reverse of the Great Goddess, whose heir is Artemis.

J.P. Vernant notices some characteristics of Gorgo that make her look like Artemis.⁴⁹ Especially in the sanctuary of Orthia Artemis in Sparta, among the votive masks dedicated to the goddess (young people had to wear such masks to perform mimetic dances during the treatment), many depict the monstrous and scary face of Gorgo and then explains that this resemblance is superficial and does not support it.⁵⁰

The form of the Medusa has also been examined interculturally, based on ancient texts and various decorations in materials (written, engraved, embossed), in order to investigate its origin as well as its multifaceted functions.⁵¹ Medusa also has healing properties,⁵² in addition to its destructive properties, as reported by M.R. Dexter.⁵³ But because it is usually perceived as scary in Indo-European cultures, the other side is often overlooked. M.R. Dexter demonstrates that Medusa is a synthesis of mythology and iconography based on elements from Neolithic Europe, combined with Semitic and Indo-European elements.⁵⁴ Pictorially, two very different forms are combined in classical Medusa: the Neolithic Goddess of birth, death and rebirth, depicted as a bird, snake or bird-snake hybrid; and Humbaba, the Near East demon whose head, like Medusa, is used abominably.

DISCUSSION ABOUT THE WORKS OF ART AND THE ERAS THEY REPRESENT

An earlier report from Gimbutas mentions a Neolithic ceramic mask and plaster clay mask found in special anthropomorphic pottery.⁵⁵ This report takes us to the last stage of the early Neolithic era (ca. 6000 BC), a fact very important for Greece. Although earlier forms of gorgoneia dating to prehistoric times have been discussed,⁵⁶ their greatest spread is found during the Archaic period, after the two Greek colonies, and especially after the consolidation of the myth of Perseus and the Gorgon/Medusa. Indeed, because there are many illustrations, and with a varied typology, of myth in general and Medusa in particular, from the Late Geometric/early Archaic to the Late Archaic era, most writers focus on the Archaic period. Rarely do scholars focus on the Classical period - when Medusa transforms from ugly to beautiful - as well as Roman, due to the great influence of Ovid.

S. Marinatos initially points out the widespread use of gorgoneia and Gorgons in antefix but also in the decoration of Archaic temples, such as the citadel of Tiryns, the temple of Syracuse (clay relief) and the temple of Delphi.⁵⁷ He notices that in the Archaic representations Gorgon runs to the left

and notes the type of Archaic Gorgon with the appearance of a warrior. He mentions the Cretan-Mycenaean seals, such as those of Mochlos, as well as the prismatic seals from Phaistos and Zakros with a hexagonal mask, but also pots from Melos of Middle Minoan period, which he considers almost contemporary with the seals.⁵⁸ In fact, Medusa is a post terminus of the appearance of gorgoneia and Gorgon. In the study on the subject of the Boeotian vessel it is mentioned the petrified capacity of Medusa in relation to Perseus.

K. Gerogiannis refers to the monuments of art, such as the gorgoneia found in the sanctuary of Orthia Artemis in Sparta. The prehistoric works he mentions are the Melian vessels and the Minoan seals. Archaic temples of Artemis in which the Gorgon is depicted is the temple of Orthia Artemis in Sparta, as mentioned above, while Medusa and her children are depicted on the pediment of Corfu's Temple of Artemis. Mention is also made of the Mesopotamian cylinder, of Cypriot relief decorations, etc. T. Karagiorga, in contrast to K. Gerogiannis, focuses exclusively on the Archaic period, presenting various works of art of this period, such as sculptures, ceramics, metal, etc., in about 60 images. J.P. Vernant is also interested in the presentation and symbolism of the gorgoneion and Gorgon in Archaic painting, which is always depicted frontally.

The first detailed record is made in 1988 in the LIMC⁵⁹ entry "Gorgo / Gorgones" where the iconographic material is collected, classified both typologically and in terms of the category of materials, and includes commentary from Archaic to Roman times. This entry makes brief reference to the museums that host the relevant exhibits and to the bibliographic sources.

S.M. Serfontein examines the iconographic development of the gorgoneia and the full body Medusa through a total of 24 images on pottery and other objects, starting from the early Archaic era and reaching up to the 4th c. BC. Representations of an attractive Medusa, in the context of the myth of Perseus, first appear in the middle of the 5th c. BC. Earlier depictions of course present it as monstrous, abominable, and heinous.

S.R. Wilk refers to the stages introduced by W.H. Roscher⁶⁰ namely the three stages of the Gorgon, which are distinguished into *first stage* (Archaic era), *second stage* (transitional) and *third stage* (from the 4th century BC, when it begins to become beautiful), and appear successively, reaching Roman times.⁶¹ In the first stage (Archaic era) the theme of Gorgon in the shield of Hercules is analyzed. Its peculiarity, which makes it unique in ancient Greek art, is that it is always depicted in front and its head protrudes from the vase, relief or pediment, while at the same time the gods and heroes are depicted in profile (on the side). The bulging and dilated staring eyes, which are often larger than the other features of the face, reflect the monster's attempt to stun the viewer. The running Gorgons represent Medusa's two immortal sisters, Stheno and Evryali, who chase after Perseus after the beheading of their mortal

⁴⁹ VERNANT 1985.

⁵⁰ VERNANT 1985, 34-35.

⁵¹ WILK 2000, 145-160.

⁵² WILK 2000, n. 13

⁵³ DEXTER 2010, 29, 41.

⁵⁴ ROUARD 2022

⁵⁵ GIMBUTAS 2001, 25, EIK. 15.

⁵⁶ LAZAROU 2019

⁵⁷ MARINATOS 1927-1928.

⁵⁸ MARINATOS 1927-1928, 17.

⁵⁹ LIMC.

⁶⁰ ROSCHER 1896.

⁶¹ WILK 2000, ΚΕΦ. 3, which deals with art.

sister. In the middle or transitional stage (end of the 5th-end of the 2nd century BC) the mermaid's head shrinks and acquires a neck. The general savagery subsides somewhat. This type is overlapped by the Archaic and the newer type. In the third stage it emerges gradually, from the 4th c. BC. and then, the beautiful Gorgon Medusa. For the first time at this stage, she is depicted asleep, so that Perseus can behead her. It sometimes appears in three-quarter profiles. The most striking thing about this stage is that it has transformed from ugly to beautiful. Towards Roman times it acquires an expression of pity and flabby features and ceases to inspire fear. As young and beautiful she reappears in the Renaissance. Subsequent references in W.H. Roscher's dictionary revealed some ramifications to the evolutionary art tree of the Gorgon. Even the earliest Gorgon had unnatural characteristics. S.R. Wilk lists 40 images in the art chapter and argues that most of these parallel gorgoneia forms are independent of each other.⁶²

Although the gorgoneion was known from Early Corinthian art, it appeared in Attic laboratories when the Attic eye-cup cylix was introduced, around 535 BC, as it was then included as a standard decoration inside the cup.

D. Ogden deals systematically with Medusa and the Gorgons.⁶³ The earliest references to Gorgonian heads and Medusa, which, however, cannot be ranked chronologically due to divergent views, are found: 1) in the Homeric epics, 2) in Hesiod's *Theogony*, 3) in LIMC's entry "Gorgo / Gorgones" (no. 1-79), which includes the earliest depictions of gorgoneia, and 4) in the two earliest depictions of Perseus beheading Medusa (675-650 BC), where the masks are obverse.⁶⁴ Comparing the depictions on the pediment of the temple of Artemis in Corfu and Carchemish, D. Ogden observes striking similarities, which focus on the presence of pairs of snakes, either on the belt or on the neck or in the hands of the two terrible female deities.⁶⁵

S. Fritzilas focuses on black-figured Archaic vessels and gives the dimension of a Gorgon/creature of Hades (Chthonian) who in the iconography is depicted with a huge head in profile and brings out flames from her mouth.⁶⁶ He also gives the dimension of another Gorgon, a monster that was born on Earth and Athena defeated in the Battle of the Giants, where she took her hide and her head and placed them under her auspices. This unknown dimension of the Gorgon is interpreted based on ancient sources and has nothing to do with the known myth.

K. Topper refers to Archaic period (Boeotian pithos) but also to classic, red-figured vessels to base some of her views on the familiar Hesiodic myth.⁶⁷ Focusing on the classic, red-figured vessels, the author argues that the appearance of the beautiful Medusa, which has already been explained as an evolutionary phase that gradually follows the phase of the monstrous Medusa of the Archaic type, is determined more by the narrative context than by the

chronology. According to K. Topper, the painters used the beautiful Gorgon to convey some messages about Perseus' victory, although it is not always clear whether they sought to provoke grief or the impression of passion.

As for the body of the Medusa, it should be noted that in some cases it is depicted as a hybrid. A well-known pithos relief at the Louvre depicts Perseus facing a Gorgon whose human body ends in the body of a horse.⁶⁸ To date, it has proved difficult to explain the equine elements of this Medusa: some scholars cite lost narratives, others 7th c. BC artistic conventions and some others broad symbolic associations between Gorgons and horses. Focusing on the combination of equine and young virgins, K. Topper interprets the unusual form of Medusa based on a series of ancient Greek allegories that connect girls, horses, and mermaids.⁶⁹ She argues that recognizing the metaphorical logic of the depiction allows us to parallel Medusa's beheading with the sacrifices of young girls as portrayed in Greek art and literature - and therefore to sympathize with her death.

P. Themelis describes the left palm, with part of the wrist, of a male marble hand slightly larger than natural (and 0.261 m high), which holds tightly by the hair the severed head of a woman with a rich headdress of spiral tentacles, the which is recognized as the head of the "beautiful" Medusa.⁷⁰ Medusa's face is incomplete for the most part, while the hair is rendered with standard schematic wavy engravings. The finding brings to the fore the problem of the iconographic model of the statue of Perseus and the relationship of the monstrous hero with the city of Messina and its worship practices. The marble fragment was unveiled along with other sculptural fragments from Roman imperial times on the embankment of an underground vaulted gallery south of the Messina City Theater. An earlier publication with the findings of ancient Messina mentions a bronze head of a Hellenistic Medusa, as well as terracotta of the same era.⁷¹

It is indisputable that Medusa as an image fascinates over time, because it causes both attraction and disgust, combining the concepts of beauty and horror. Its various depictions in different eras contribute to the understanding of the ways in which "charm" is meant in images and texts, but also change what is considered "fascinating" or even scary.

C.L. Cooper, in her doctoral dissertation studied the relationship between the function and decoration of Corinthian ceramics. She focused on a case study of a unique type of decoration - the various types of winged forms that often appear in Corinthian pottery: sphinxes, sirens, north winds, griffins, panthers, winged horses, while she makes special mention of the Gorgo/Gorgon and the gorgoneia.⁷² She notes the unexpected absence of Gorgon in the Corinthian painting of vessels, which requires a re-examination of its development and a re-evaluation of its appearance in the vase painting of Corinth. The reason is that few Gorgons are found in Corinthian vase painting,

⁶² WILK 2000.

⁶³ OGDEN 2008, KEΦ. 3.

⁶⁴ Amphora of Berlin from Boeotia (nos. 151 and 117 from LIMC). Also, Perseus with the sack = "kivisis", again in a Proto-Attic amphora.

⁶⁵ OGDEN 2008, 38.

⁶⁶ FRITZILAS 2010.

⁶⁷ TOPPER 2010, 115.

⁶⁸ TOPPER 2010, 111.

⁶⁹ TOPPER 2010, 119.

⁷⁰ THEMELIS 1997.

⁷¹ THEMELIS 1994, Pl. 49.

⁷² COPPER 2007, Ch.6.

which is seldom noted by researchers, in part because of the higher frequency of the gorgoneion, and in part because of Payne's widespread acceptance that Gorgon was a Corinthian creation,⁷³ although Payne in list of Corinthian Gorgons examined, most of the examples turn out to be gorgoneia, rather than Gorgons with bodies.⁷⁴

C.L. Cooper discusses the depictions of Gorgon and gorgoneion in relation to myth and eastern influences. She claims that the Corinthian gorgoneion is independent of the myth with the head of Medusa, while the winged running Gorgon ("Knielauf", literally knee-run schema) in vessels precedes Corinth (early 7th c. BC) in relation to Attica (last quarter of the 7th c. BC) and concludes that the "Gorgo/Γοργώ" (C.L. Cooper's notation in quotation marks as "gorgon") either with its winged and curved appearance, or as a gorgoneion, may have been first created in Corinth, but it differs from the myth of the Gorgons.⁷⁵ According to C.L. Cooper, this "type of Gorgon" which would be known outside of Corinth because she appeared in the widely exported Corinthian pottery, should then be considered to have been quickly adopted for the form of the sung Gorgon⁷⁶ (probably with the term "sung" C.L. Cooper means the Gorgon-Medusa, which refers to the epic of Hesiod and the ode of Pindar). However, this transformation probably did not take place in Corinth, since the first of these Corinthian "Gorgons" in the mythological context appear in Attic and Sicilian art.⁷⁷ C.L. Cooper cites the view of Krauskopf and Croon, according to which the gorgoneion is represented by early masks found in various parts of Greece⁷⁸ and are considered to be used in initiation ceremonies that may date back to the Mycenaean period.⁷⁸

Baumbach's book discusses at length the charm that Medusa's figure can exert.⁷⁹ Images of Medusa which compose what the author calls "Medusamorphoses", selected from the literature and art of all times, but also from the popular culture of the last decades (for example, Ovid, William Drummond, Dante are mentioned Gabriel Rossetti, Sylvia Plath and Annie Lennox), are studied and analyzed in order to further explore the fascinating dimension of this emblematic figure, which emerges especially when there is an interaction of visual and verbal representations. The author examines the constant presence of Medusa in modern culture and analyzes the changing properties of the phenomenon called "Medusa effect".

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE IMAGE OF GORGON / MEDUSA FROM UGLY TO BEAUTIFUL

The discovery of a "beautiful gorgon", the Rondanini Medusa⁸⁰ by Goethe in 1786 led scholars to speculate as to

⁷³ PAYNE 1931, 88-89: "The principal tradition originated in Corinth and passed to Attica; from about the middle of the 6th century an Attic or Atticizing type became common property in the Aegean area."

⁷⁴ PAYNE 1931, 80-85.

⁷⁵ COPPER 2007, 243-245 (with related references).

⁷⁶ COOPER 2007, 250.

⁷⁷ COOPER 2007, 251.

⁷⁸ CROON 1955, 9-16 and mainly 13-15; JAMESON 1990, 213-223; BREMMER 1996, 643.

⁷⁹ BAUMBACH 2011, 225.

⁸⁰ BELSON 1980, 373-378.

its origin.⁸¹ Considering that it was a Roman copy of the 1st c. BC, A. Furtwängler has proposed to date his Greek original to the 5th c. BC.⁸² Later scholars have generally accepted this dating and attribute the work to one of the most famous sculptors of this century. E. Buschor claims that Rondanini's Medusa was placed in the center of the shield of Athena the Virgin created by Pheidias between 447 and 438 BC.⁸³ Although the rendering of Pheidias is generally accepted, scholars question the connection with Virgo, as all copies of the Virgin's shield depict an older, "grotesque" form of the gorgoneion. Alternatively, Robertson argues that the original could be found in another of Pheidias' works, the statue of Athena the Great, of which less is known.⁸⁴ K. Schefold agrees with this hypothesis, since the dating of Promachos around 460/450 BC, coincides with the first representation of beautiful Medusa in Greek pottery.⁸⁵ This Medusa, which is located on a pelike of Polygnotus, has a beautiful head and exposed breasts, while its gestures testify to despair and exude a sense of tragedy in view of its impending beheading.

The most complete references to the Medusa transformation began to appear from the end of the 19th century⁸⁶ and continued until many decades later.⁸⁷ In her targeted research, S.M. Serfontein made an effort to demonstrate the transformation of Medusa from a terrible monster into a beautiful woman.⁸⁸ She describes the evolution of Medusa's illustration as a full body and as a gorgon head in vases and other objects, starting from the earliest Archaic specimens and reaching up to the 4th c. BC. In this work he investigates when the transformation of Medusa began to be observed and whether this transformation occurred simultaneously in the full body form and in the gorgoneion.

In the depictions in Archaic and Classical vessels, always (with the exception of the Boeotian relief amphora) Medusa is presented as a demon and not as a mixture of animal and human features, such as the Sphinx or the Sirens. Medusa's image does not remain constant, but there is an obvious evolution that transforms her from monstrous and abominable in the Archaic era to a beautiful and weak opponent of Perseus in the later classical illustrations. This development is found in both the gorgon heads (gorgoneia) and the full-bodied form and is distinguished in three stages which is evident in vase scenes which attribute her beheading or the moment just before her death.

A. Furtwängler proposes his tripartite categorization system (differing from that of W.H. Roscher⁸⁹), which, however, does not fully incorporate the large variations of Medusa iconography observed during the same period.⁹⁰ From his system we accept the type of the beautiful Medusa, but in earlier stages of the classical period. The *1st stage* belongs to the Archaic period (700-480 BC). At this stage the beheading is depicted. Medusa's facial features are wild: her

⁸¹ BOYLE 2000, 432.

⁸² FURTWÄNGLER 1893.

⁸³ BUSCHOR 1958.

⁸⁴ ROBERTSON 1975, 313-314.

⁸⁵ SCHEFOLD 1988, 101-102.

⁸⁶ FURTWÄNGLER 1886-1890, 1701-1727.

⁸⁷ KRAUSKOPF & DAHLINGER 1988, 285-310.

⁸⁸ SERFONTEIN 1991.

⁸⁹ ROSCHER 1896.

⁹⁰ FURTWÄNGLER 1886-1890, 1697-1713; 1894.

eyes are swollen (probably because of her ability to stone with her gaze), her mouth is swollen (perhaps due to the ferocious roar she seems to make in trying to avoid her murder). Large feathers and snakes emerge from her hair or her belt. The *2nd stage* refers to the early Classical period (480-450 BC). The image of Medusa is now more human, but still a variety of its features are rendered distorted (wide open mouth, projected tongue, and sub-human nose). In this transitional or “middle” phase it retains its wings but loses its snakes. The increasingly frequent depiction of her with more human features is associated with a change in the narrative. Medusa is depicted sleeping and unsuspecting for the presence of Perseus, who approaches her to finish her - in contrast to the violent beheading scenes in the Archaic period. Since Medusa is rendered with her eyes closed, her ability to petrify people with her gaze is basically neutralized. Her once awesome appearance has now changed substantially.⁹¹

The appearance of Medusa as a beautiful woman and winged virgin takes place in the *3rd stage*, from the middle of the 5th c. BC and until the end of the mature Classical period (450-400 / 390 BC). At this stage, the brutality of the beheading is replaced by the uncertainty of early classical illustration. Such a depiction in a vase is of Polygnotus, as mentioned above, which highlights the posture of beheading of the Archaic period but retains the theme of the dormant of the early Classical period. In the late Classical period (390/400-300 BC) Medusa appears to have engaged in a futile struggle against the ruthless attack of Perseus. She is vulnerable, which is due to her erotic mood and her desperate gestures in the face of her impending end are interpreted as a manifestation of passion. The discrepancy between her mythological description as a dangerous monster and her illustration as a harmless woman undermines Perseus' heroic action. As A. Furtwängler notes,⁹² perhaps as a result of the existing incompatibility, the depictions of Medusa's beheading virtually disappear in vase representations around the end of the 4th c. BC.

In contrast to its full-length form, the Gorgonian mask presents features that change gradually throughout the 5th c. BC. The gorgon head acquires a more human appearance, until it finally becomes attractive during the 4th c. BC. This slower evolution of the gorgoneion in relation to the full-bodied Medusa could be related to its use as an abominable object that exorcises evil. Indeed, especially in Archaic art, the ugliness of the gorgoneion was considered to serve to defeat those persons who desecrated the sanctity of a worship or a temple.⁸⁷ When Perseus uses the gorgoneion to stone Polydectes, to frighten the Sirens and to defeat Dionysus, the head acts as an abominable emblem of triumph against evil in general, in addition to its role in this myth. In this context it is understood why the head retains traces of its monstrous appearance for a longer period than the full body Medusa, which sometimes survive until the 4th c. BC. In these cases, the sweet face appears with a protruding tongue and or snakes on the head.

Therefore, the three stages in the evolution of Medusa are represented by rich illustrations on pottery

⁹¹ FLOREN 1977.

⁹² FURTWÄNGLER 1885.

and other objects from the Archaic to the Classical period. But while her first transformation from an abominable monster to a more human-looking creature takes place at the end of the Classical period, her final transformation into a beautiful woman is not completed simultaneously in full-length depictions and gorgoneia. That is, while Medusa appears as a beautiful woman around the middle of the 5th c. BC, attractive depictions of the beheading are found with regularity only in the 4th century BC. At the end of this century, the full-length illustrations of Medusa have completely disappeared, but the gorgon mask remains a popular symbol throughout the Hellenistic period.⁹³

K. Topper, as mentioned above, focuses on the classic red figured vases for the beautiful Medusa and claims that some painters used the beautiful gorgon head to convey some messages about the victory of Perseus, although it is not always clear whether their purpose was to provoke laughter or the feeling of passion.⁹⁴ The author further claims that Medusa's death was considered a distortion of the sexual abductions that are common in Greek mythology and points out the kinship of the beautiful Gorgon with abducted virgins and beautiful women such as Persephone, Thetis and the beautiful Helen.⁸⁹

In 2018 Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York exhibition, the Gorgon Medusa is presented by K. Karoglou.⁹⁵ In this retrospective, the now established ascertainment is repeated that from the 5th c. BC. the legendary monster underwent a visual transformation from ugly and grotesque to beautiful and feminine. K. Karoglou notes that a similar transformation is observed simultaneously in the representations of other mythical female hybrid half-human creatures, such as the Sphinxes, the Sirens and the sea monster Scylla. The differentiated iconographic rendering of these inherently terrifying symbols of death and the Underworld, believed to have apotropaic (protective) powers, was the result of idealistic humanism in Classical Greek art (480-323 BC). Hybrid semi-human beings, however, continued to evolve in form and semantics after the classical period, and many continue to influence modern culture and artistic imagination.

THE IDIOSYNCRATIC NATURE OF THE GORGONEAN FIGURES AND ITS GREEK ORIGIN

S. Marinatos supports the Greekness of the gorgoneion and is the first to characterize the forms of the Melian vessels as gorgoneia. K. Gerogiannis also adopts the view that the gorgoneion, mainly in its Archaic form, as well as the shape of the street, is of purely Greek origin. Recently a diachronic presence and evolution of the alleged gorgoneion and Gorgon from Neolithic to Late antiquity in the ancient Greek World has been made in a dissertation by A. Lazarou.⁹⁶

T. Karagiorga in her dissertation, explores the creation of a symbolic figure by the Greeks, a unique and completely recognizable frontal monstrous representation: she is the face of “Gorgo”.

⁹³ FURTWÄNGLER 1886-1890.

⁹⁴ TOPPER 2007, 79, 80-81, 102.

⁹⁵ KAROGLU 2018.

⁹⁶ LAZAROU 2021.

J.P. Vernant speaks of the uniqueness of a form which, despite its loan elements or the changes it undergoes, emerges as a new creation, very different from the previous forms that remind it. This highlights the originality of the gorgoneion, which in Archaic Greece is associated with ritual practices, mythical narratives and finally with some supernatural force that is consolidated in a symbolic model.⁹⁷

O.A. Zolotnikova reconsiders the concept of the Gorgon/Medusa and explores the role of religious traditions carried by the Greeks to their colonies in Italy and Sicily in the introduction of the image of the beautiful Gorgon in Classical Greek decoration and mythology.⁹⁸

Medusa, due to its apotropaic and decorative dimension, seems to have had a special significance in Roman times. In the neighboring central Balkans with Greece, it causes fear of the people of the time. The visual material from this area demonstrates the widespread belief in the protective and apotropaic properties of Medusa. Gorgoneion was one of the well-known and representative symbols in architecture, burial art, crafts miniaturization and jewelry, as it indicated the importance of the protection of Medusa for all people, and especially for women.⁹⁹

THE INTERPRETATION AND SYMBOLISM OF THE GORGONEAN FIGURES

Since the 18th century the origin, interpretation and symbolism of the Gorgon/Medusa and the gorgoneion were investigated. Two schools of thought emerged: The first group focuses on zoological and cosmological data. K. Levezow, as early as 1832, concludes that the concept of the gorgoneion came from a fear of animals, which people probably felt in North Africa, in the same area where lions had been worshiped in Egypt.¹⁰⁰ In the 20th c. Wolters suggest the lion as a source of inspiration.¹⁰¹ Cook considers the gorgoneion “reminiscent of the owl-Athena”,¹⁰² while A.L. Frothingham argues that the aegis with gorgoneion was just a modified goat skin.¹⁰³

A. Zell, however, considers the Gorgon to be an adaptation of the monkey or gorilla, based on his conclusions both in the reference of Diodorus Sikeliotis and in the view of Pliny the Elder that the Gorgons were members of an “overly hairy tribe”.¹⁰⁴ R. Pettazzoni considers Gorgon an anthropomorphic monster that originated from the Egyptian goddess Athor and attributed the stylized forms of the Melian vases to originals from which the Gorgons, the Harpies and the Keres originated.¹⁰⁵ A.L. Frothingham and S. Marinatos associate the gorgoneion, through the goddess Artemis, with the Great Goddess Mother of the East.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁷ VERNANT 1985, 42-43.

⁹⁸ ZOLOTNIKOVA 2016, 357, 366.

⁹⁹ MILOVANOVIC & ANDELKOVIC GRASAR 2017.

¹⁰⁰ LEVEZOW 1832.

¹⁰¹ WOLTERS 1909, 270.

¹⁰² COOK 1914-1940, 844.

¹⁰³ FROTHINGHAM 1911, 354.

¹⁰⁴ ZELL 1911, 193.

¹⁰⁵ PETTAZZONI 1921, 495.

¹⁰⁶ FROTHINGHAM 1911, 349; MARINATOS 1927-1928, 35-40.

P. Weizsicker claimed that the early bearded gorgoneion was Phobos, who was personified.¹⁰⁷ His theory was apparently shaken when Blinkenberg argued that there were Gorgons with female bodies whose faces were also bearded, as well as those that P. Weizsicker had associated with Fear.¹⁰⁸ C. Blinkenberg himself returned to the limited view that the lion was the source of inspiration for the gorgoneion.¹⁰⁹

The second school or naturalist, mainly in the 19th century, interpreted the Gorgon based on natural phenomena such as sea vortices, ocean waves, volcanic eruptions, waste from Libya, and on the other hand the moon (focusing on the testimony of Clement of Alexandria that Orphics called the moon “gorgoneion”).¹¹⁰ The most academic interpretation was proposed by W.H. Roscher, according to her, gorgoneia were storm clouds.¹¹¹

The psychologist W. Wundt recognizes a global dimension in the gorgoneion as a mask derived from a mixture of human-animal characteristics, the type of which is common in the most primitive cultures.¹¹² H. Rose, for his part, sees the gorgoneion as expressing a subconscious fear of man, which he describes as a “ghost chase nightmare”.¹¹³

E. Phinney, after quoting the authors of Greek and Roman antiquity, correlates with today’s superstitions about the “evil eye”, which are widespread in the southeastern Mediterranean basin.¹¹⁴

J.P. Vernant, combines various human and animal elements in a variety of ways.¹¹⁵ The monstrous face of Gorgo is the expression of the frightening fear that causes the completely different, the unspeakable, the unthinkable, the absolutely chaotic. In the case of man, it is the death that Gorgo brings to those who meet her gaze, transforming any being that lives, moves and sees the light of day in an icy, blind and dark stone. J.P. Vernant points out Gorgos’ kinship with horses, emphasizing the meaning of the adjective “gorgos/γοργός” when attributed to the horse.¹¹⁶ In addition to the word, the verb “γοργουμαι” is also met, which means that the horse hits its front legs on the ground. The horse also, with its behavior and its characteristic sounds, can indicate the disturbing presence of some subterranean force that appears in the form of an animal.¹¹⁷

Beyond his very interesting remarks and thoughts, J.P. Vernant comes to temporary conclusions.¹¹⁸ He points out the contrast of the face of Gorgo with the faces of the gods and the people, in relation to its paradoxical character and its functionality. Therefore, the gorgoneion acts entirely in the realm of the supernatural, challenging the strict dividing line between gods, humans, animals, worldly levels.

¹⁰⁷ WEIZSICKER 1909, 2393.

¹⁰⁸ WEIZSICKER 1909, 2393; BLINKENBERG 1924, 267.

¹⁰⁹ BLINKENBERG 1924, 267.

¹¹⁰ ERSCH & GRUEBER 1862, 397-398, 401-403 (and related references).

¹¹¹ ROSCHER 1879, 114.

¹¹² WUNDT 1919.

¹¹³ ROSE 1928, 29-30.

¹¹⁴ PHINNEY 1971.

¹¹⁵ VERNANT, 1985, 13.

¹¹⁶ VERNANT 1985, 53.

¹¹⁷ VERNANT 1985, 69.

¹¹⁸ VERNANT 1985, 104.

This face, in which various characteristics are combined, becomes a whole grimace that ambiguously refers to both the scary and the grotesque.¹¹⁹ At the same time, Gorgo's gaze is so magnetizing that man cannot avert his face and enters the world where this power dominates. Then he feels that he is losing himself and terror takes over his soul.

J.P. Vernant believes that although Gorgo is a mask, one does not have to wear it to imitate the deity.¹²⁰ Because the face of Gorgo is the model of ourselves, the paradox, in mutual relation with our form, like our image through the mirror, a mirror where the Greeks see themselves only face to face and in the form of head. It reflects our gaze, grimacing the horror and terror in the face of the possibility of identification and petrification.

S.R. Wilk is impressed by the large geographical distribution and duration of the gorgoneion's time and believes that another explanation should be given to the phenomenon.¹²¹ After examining the possibility of zoomorphism, S.R. Wilk concludes that he does not consider it possible that this form corresponds to an animal, because, as he observes, no animal with similar characteristics neither lives nor has lived in such a large geographical area as the one in which gorgoneion was formed and spread. So, we have to look for another model, common in the experience of such different peoples, which has prevailed over the centuries, and which could be a source of inspiration for the anthropomorphic gorgoneion with the huge and rolled staring eyes, the flattened nose, the wide opening of the lips with clenched teeth, swollen protruding tongue, extreme (swollen) facial expression and stylized hair.¹²²

The model, according to S.R. Wilk, should probably be sought in the posthumous condition of an unburied corpse. As is well known, after death the body undergoes alterations and changes: its temperature drops, the blood stagnates and stiffness occurs, which later subsides. As the body's defense against bacteria ceases to exist, sepsis begins, and within a week or two, bloating occurs due to the pressure of the gases created by the decomposition. The results of this procedure are shocking: the tongue begins to swell and come out of the snarling mouth. The eyes are also swollen and protrude from the eye sockets. Sometimes a bloody fluid is poured from the membranes around the eyes. The face swells, after all its features are deformed. The lips are repelled by the fangs. The strands of the hair are straightened on the forehead and scalp. In other words, the person begins to acquire the characteristics of a "gorgoneion". According to S.R. Wilk, the gorgoneion is the stylized representation of an unburied corpse one or two weeks after death. And it's scary, because it shows us the transformation of a human into an image of death. In the gorgoneion, however, the most abhorrent aspects of the death process have been softened. The eyes are enlarged but not repulsive, and they are not forced out of their sockets in an absurd manner. The protruding language is neater. The swelling of the face has been attributed to a flattened nose and large cheeks. Hair separation has turned

¹¹⁹ VERNANT 1985, 102-103.

¹²⁰ VERNANT 1985, 105.

¹²¹ WILK 2000, 185.

¹²² WILK 2000, 186.

into stylized curls and skin lesions into normal spots and lines. The set has become more acceptable.¹²³

S.R. Wilk also raises the issue of Perseus's shield used as a mirror. He wonders why it became necessary to see Medusa's head only in the form of an image on his gleaming shield. It is a fact that the Gorgon's face was very often depicted on shields, originally painted, and later carved. After all, according to the legend, Perseus had beheaded Medusa with the help of Athena, and this is probably how the tradition of Medusa's head to Athena is interpreted to be placed either on her shield or under her auspices or on the front of her helmet or simultaneously at all of these points. According to him, the name "Perseus" means "he who cuts". Etymologically, this name comes from the verb "pertho/πέρθω", which means to expel, to plunder, to desert, to destroy, while for persons it means to kill, slaughter, exterminate.¹²⁴ S.R. Wilk uses the myth of Perseus facing Medusa's head through a shield-mirror to explain why Medusa's face was firmly imprinted on the surface of the shields.¹²⁵

S.R. Wilk, finally, considers that the myth of Perseus also has astronomical significance, which in any case, however, begins to be mentioned from the 2nd century AD and later.¹²⁶ If one, according to S.R. Wilk, imagined that the star Algol was the head of Medusa, then one would see a figure with a sword and a horse jumping from that point: it is Chrysaoras and Pegasus, born of her cut neck. Astronomically, Perseus was associated with the Perseids, the prolific meteor shower (the shooting stars), associated with the point from which they appear to hail (called the radiant) that is the constellation Perseus. These were considered by some to be the golden rain that came from the miraculous fertilization of Danae by Zeus.¹²⁷ In addition, the "harp", the lethal weapon borrowed by Perseus to decapitate Medusa (double star Algol), is sickle-shaped and could correspond to the convex star shape in which Perseus's right hand ends up in the constellation of the same name¹²⁸ (Fig. 1). Algol is a shining star in the constellation of Perseus, specifically the beta of Perseus, and is one of the most famous ecliptic double stars. The Arabic word alcohol means "the demon". Alcohol comes from the word Algol. Alcohol decomposes and dries, metaphorically stoning, which is why it has been given astrological significance.¹²⁹

In the *Tetravivlos*, the astrological text of the Alexandrian astronomer Claudius Ptolemy of the 2nd century AD, Algol is referred to as "the Gorgon of Perseus" and is associated with death by beheading: a theme that reflects the myth of the hero Perseus' victory over the serpent-hair Gorgon/Medusa.¹³⁰

¹²³ WILK 2000, 190.

¹²⁴ LIDDELL AND SCOTT 1997, see lemma «πέρθω».

¹²⁵ WILK 2000, 190.

¹²⁶ WILK 2000, 128.

¹²⁷ WILK 2000, 227.

¹²⁸ WILK 2000, 240. Other faces, such as Zeus against Hurricane, Hercules against Hydra, Saturn against Uranus of the Greek mythology that used "harp" are mentioned, too.

¹²⁹ TESTER 1987.

¹³⁰ ROBBINS 1940, 43.



Fig. 1. The constellation of Perseus by Philippe La Hire (Andromeda and Cassiopeia – detail from Planisphere celeste, Philippe La Hire 1705) (under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License, published on 3.9.2019).

D. Ogden, in chapter 5 of the monograph *Perseus*, analyzes the use and falsification of the myth of Perseus.¹³¹ The image of Perseus is used to legitimize city-states, dynasties and individuals. It also facilitates comparisons between Greek and non-Greek city-states. On the one hand Perseus was the greatest Greek hero, whose adventures were recognized in places, on the other hand he was the ancestor of the tribe that was the greatest threat to anything Greek: the Persians. As a Greek hero and traveler, Perseus was an ideal figure for the Greeks of the Hellenistic diaspora. His travels to Persia and Syria made the Greeks of the Seleucid kingdom feel local, while his travels to Egypt and Libya favored the inhabitants of the Ptolemaic kingdom. The rational investigation of Perseus's figure followed a different line. The rationalist writers, in interpreting the myth, followed their own traditions, which went hand in hand with the mythological point of view, although several times their interpretation was influenced even by the tradition of their own time. However, the investigation of the myth by the rationalists prepared the ground for the allegorical presence of the myth during the Middle Ages.

D. Ogden presents the image of Perseus after Antiquity.¹³² The myth of Perseus, as it has already begun to spread widely since antiquity, is inextricably linked to the central unresolved issue, the nature of the Gorgon. The prevailing view is that it is ultimately a narrative or a series of narratives that interact and give birth to many versions: an impeccable hero, a classic search structure, a majestic act of revenge, romance laden with eroticism,

¹³¹ OGDEN 2008.

¹³² OGDEN 2008, Chapter 6.

entrenched popular themes and a bizarre and awesome monster.¹³³ It is generally considered difficult to attribute a specific personality to Perseus, because the evidence of tradition is not enough to conclude that the hero was faced with any dilemma or emotional contradiction, so that his personality could be outlined. Even the oracle for the murder of Akrisios's grandfather, because it was an accident, cannot characterize him. Perseus simply does what is right, subdues nasty monsters and hostile deities with relative ease, and returns to his homeland with his beloved wife. In addition, there are not enough written sources. The only source that survives to this day and could provide information is the Ovid *Metamorphoses* (transformations) but Perseus's personality does not interest Ovid at all.

K. Topper demonstrates that Medusa's death was perceived as a perversion of sexual abductions, common to many Greek myths, and notes the kinship of the beautiful Gorgon with abducted daughters.¹³⁴ She believes that we cannot understand the depictions of the beautiful Medusa unless we know that their purpose is to glorify Perseus or to make the monster look nice, or even to provoke laughter or another completely different reaction. K. Topper's argument begins with a small group of illustrations showing Perseus fleeing with Medusa's beautiful sister. These depictions place Perseus in a context of erotic claim, while the replacement of the beautiful Gorgon with a monster is one of the many upheavals covered in the strange nature of the scene.

The images of the sleeping Medusa, as K. Topper claims, redefine Perseus's achievement as a victory of the strong over the apparently weak, a victory that may seem either ridiculous or sad, depending on the narrative context in which the scene takes place.¹³⁵ K. Topper, as mentioned above, also focuses on the well-known relief jar from Boeotia located in the Louvre Museum (CA 795) and depicts Perseus facing a Gorgon whose human body ends in a horse body.¹³⁶ According to K. Topper, the appearance of equine features is inexplicable, and the various interpretive attempts clashed with the lack of narratives or invoked the artistic conventions of the 7th c. BC, and the symbolic associations between Gorgons and horses. In this article she interprets the unusual form of Medusa with reference to a series of ancient Greek metaphors that connect daughters, horses, and gorgons.

DISCUSSION

The published works on Gorgon/Medusa refer on the interpretation of the myth and its versions from ancient sources, the known iconography, for the past about 200 years. Although the commentary by modern scholars¹³⁷ on the origin of the myth of Medusa and the Gorgonian mask is a complex issue¹³⁸ we consider that the mask is a universal

¹³³ Eros and erotism, red-shaped loutrophoros (bathwater or carry vessel) from Apoulia, 350-340 BC (LIMC, AP. 189, Lemma «ΠΕΡΣΕΑΣ»).

¹³⁴ TOPPER 2007, 73-105.

¹³⁵ TOPPER 2010, 110-111, 115.

¹³⁶ TOPPER 2010, 109-119.

¹³⁷ GEROGIANNIS 1928; MAPINATOS 1928; KARAGIORGA 1970; GOLDMAN, 1961, 1-23; BUSCHOR 1958

¹³⁸ HOWE 1954, 209; LEVEZOW 1832

symbol and the myth of Perseus resembles that of Gilgamesh, seems to be a world legend of the then known world.

Regarding the peculiarity of the Gorgonean form and its emergence in cultures inhabited in the Greek region or not¹³⁹ compared to neighboring cultures¹⁴⁰ it has already been shown an apparent diachronic sequence in the today's Greek region starting from the Neolithic period.¹⁴¹

Since the 18th century, an attempt was made to de-symbolize and interpret the myth of Perseus with Medusa and the gorgoneion as an abominable or repulsive symbol¹⁴² thus discussing the case of zoomorphism¹⁴³ the dual role of the gorgoneion, as a demon with abominable power but also a symbolic amulet¹⁴⁴ perversion of sexual abductions, reflect different views of researchers.¹⁴⁵ Also from the 18th century, the discovery of a "beautiful Gorgon", Medusa Rondanini¹⁴⁶ by Goethe¹⁴⁷ led scholars to speculate as to its origin. From the end of the 19th century, A. Furtwängler has suggested that the model work of a beautiful Medusa -including that of Rondanini- should be dated to the 5th c. BC.¹⁴⁸ He supports that the 2nd stage (480-450 BC) -of the three stages he proposes-, for the image of Medusa in the most human, and states that her appearance as a beautiful woman and winged virgin takes place in the 3rd stage, from the in the middle of the 5th c. BC, and until the end of the mature Classical period (450-400/390 BC), dating accepted by later scholars.¹⁴⁹ Especially, and alternatively, for the model of the beautiful Medusa, they refer to the statue of Athena Promachos, for which less things are known¹⁵⁰ while others consider that the beautiful Medusa coincides with her first depiction in Greek pottery.¹⁵¹ No other research effort in the 1990s identified the early humanization and femininity and beautification of the mermaid, but the view remained that Medusa's transformation from a formidable monster to a beautiful woman took place in the Classical period in pottery and other objects studied, from the early Archaic to the 4th c. BC.¹⁵² Finally, in the 2000s the beautiful gorgoneion is still part of the Classical period.¹⁵³

Current opinion when exactly the gorgoneion exhibits human and feminine features but also a tendency to beautify, sways towards the early Classical period. The transformation from ugly to beautiful does not only concern Medusa and the Gorgoneion, but also takes place in the representations of other mythical female hybrids, such as the Sphinxes, the Sirens and the sea monster Scylla, following rather aesthetic "orders" of the time. The differentiated iconographic

¹³⁹ MARINATOS 1927-1928; KARAGIORGA 1970; VERNANT 1985; ZOLOTNIKOVA 2016.

¹⁴⁰ PETTAZZONI 1921, 491; HOPKINS 1934, 341, 358.

¹⁴¹ LAZAROU 2019

¹⁴² VERNANT, 1985, 104.

¹⁴³ WILK 2000, 185, 186, 190.

¹⁴⁴ TSIAFAKIS 2003; MULLER, 2011, 196 Fig.2

¹⁴⁵ TOPPER 2007, 73-105.

¹⁴⁶ BELSON 1980, 373-378.

¹⁴⁷ BOYLE 2000, 432.

¹⁴⁸ FURTWÄGLER 1893

¹⁴⁹ BUSCHOR 1958.

¹⁵⁰ ROBERTSON 1975, 313-314.

¹⁵¹ SCHEFOLD 1988, 101-102.

¹⁵² SERFONTEIN 1991.

¹⁵³ TOPPER 2007, 79, 80-81, 102.

rendering of these inherently terrifying symbols of death and the Underworld, believed to have apotropaic/protective powers, was the result of idealistic humanism in Classical Greek art (480-323 BC). Hybrids, however, continued to evolve in form and semantics after the Classical period, and many of them still influence modern culture and artistic imagination.¹⁵⁴ The appearance of the "beautiful" type in ancient Greece, we believe can be associated with the dawn of the philosophical view of aesthetics by the pre-Socratics, where the artisans emerged with the representations of integrated forms, with the aim of serving as an ideal sanctified standard.

In our view there appears that an artistic emergence of gorgoneion and gorgon/Medusa has a local Greek region (mainland and Aegean islands), from the Neolithic period through to the Bronze Age in Greece, supported by the mask of Sesklo, the Melian vessels and the Minoan seals.¹⁵⁵ Absence in some periods may imply either not yet unearthed findings or a differentiated artistic interest.

During the present research review, it was noted the absence from the bibliography of a thorough overall diachronic evolution of the Gorgoneion and the Gorgon/Medusa,¹⁵⁶ which prompted to a reconsideration of the categorization of the various representations.

A NEW CATEGORIZATION OF DIFFERENT TYPES

An important observation was that the widespread use of individual heads (gorgoneia) over time had not been discussed and included in the artistic trends of each era. Thus, to highlight the evolution of Gorgo/Medusa with the emergence of the characteristics and trends of art in each era, a more specific classification of depictions was deemed necessary. Previous researchers have used limited primary data, and this limits a complete and classified database and interpretation. Indicatively, we mention the following authors and the number of artists who studied to draw their conclusions: T. Karagiorga, Archaic period, 61 images; S.M. Serfontein Classical period, 24 images; K. Topper, 12 images, both focusing only on the transition from obscene to embellished; A.L. Frothingam connected Medusa - in 17 images - with the myth of Apollo and the great Mother, and E. Phinney with two images of the beheading scene of Medusa, goes back to the relevant ancient Greek literature.

In relation to the so far limited studied artifacts in our present review a large number of 564 objects of Gorgo/Medusa/Gorgoneion from Prehistoric ages till Late Antiquity has been composed in the form of database (Fig. 2).¹⁵⁷

This way it was devised a new taxonomy of the representations from which future investigations of these artifacts can refer. The study of the depictions of Gorgoneia/Gorgons/Medusa was carried out for first time by material category and by types (types 1-6) which essentially merged the 17 types of LIMC.

¹⁵⁴ KAROGLOU 2018.

¹⁵⁵ LAZAROU 2019.

¹⁵⁶ LAZAROU 2021.

¹⁵⁷ LAZAROU 2021, unpublished PhD.

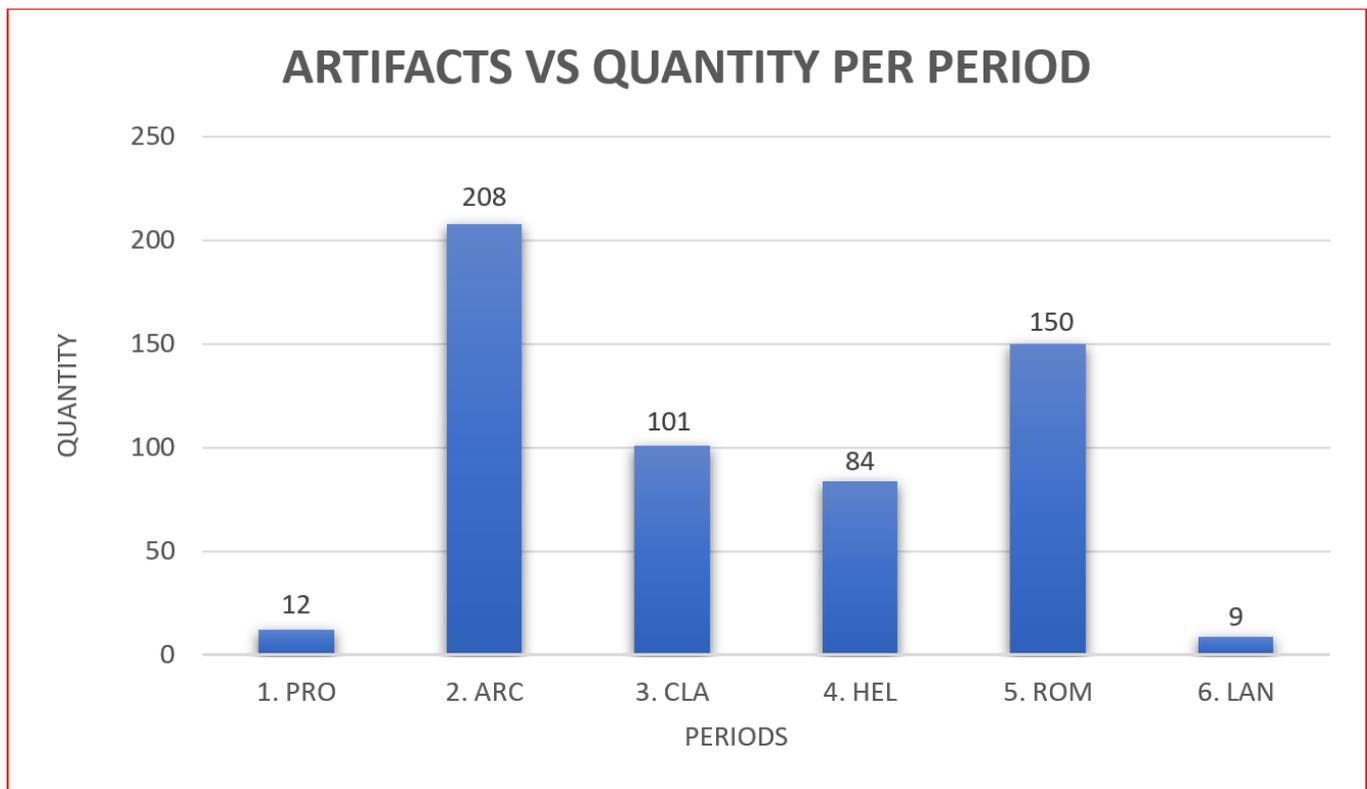


Fig.2. Number of artworks per period (total 564 artworks).

1. Prehistory, PRO=12, 2. Archaic, ARC=208, 3. Classical, CLA=101, 4. Hellenistic, HEL=84, 5. Roman, ROM=150, 6. Late Antiquity, LAN =9.

Type 1. Individual heads/masks(gorgoneia),

Type 2. Mixed Gorgonean monsters,

Type 3. Gorgo with animals,

Type 4. Gorgo in "Knielauf" position literally knee-run schema or bending the foot, and/or swift-running,

Type 5. Chthonia Gorgon,

Type 6. The myth of Hesiod.

The merging of the 17 types presented by LIMC into 6 major categories was deemed necessary, for practical and academic reasons, to manage the large number of items (Fig.3).

CONCLUSION

A review of the research on the Gorgoneion and the Gorgo/Medusa was presented. The Homeric Gorgo head was associated with the masks and at the same time the apotropaic and precautionary character of the scary creature was noted, which is preserved even when beautiful. We believe that this change is achieved over time and results from the analysis of individual iconographic elements, such as the fangs and the extinct tongue that disappear, the snout of an animal that gives way to the human nose, and the differentiated integration of snakes in the iconographic ensemble.

Indeed, the commentary by modern scholars on the origin of the myth of Medusa and the Gorgonean mask is a complex issue that was attempted to be partially clarified through the ancient Greek literature. Regarding the correlation with other deities and the Potnia of beasts,

certain characteristic iconographic differences and/or similarities were recognized between Potnia beasts and Gorgons.

Since the 18th century, an attempt was made to de-symbolize and interpret the myth of Perseus with Medusa and the gorgoneion as an abominable or repulsive symbol, thus discussing the case of zoomorphism, the dual role of the gorgoneion, as a demon with abominable power but also a symbolic amulet and perversion of sexual abductions, reflect different views of researchers.

Given that for many and varied reasons there are interactions between cultures in works of art, in this review it was presented the development of gorgoneion and Gorgo/Medusa in the wider ancient Greek world and connections to the non-Greek origin of various typological features. At any rate, researchers discuss that individual typological imported features were assimilated and effectively led to the creation of a regional monstrous figure in the ancient Greek world, and that could be attributed to a Greekness of the Gorgonean form at least since the early Archaic period.

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(A)



(B)



(C)



(D)



(E)



(F)

Fig. 3. Representative images of the six types of Gorgoneion / Gorgon/Medusa.

A) Type 1. Individual heads/masks(gorgoneia). Ceramic antefix of gorgoneion. From Taranto, Sicily. 500-475 c. BC (LIMC IV-2, 1988, 169, fig. 68a, Museo Nazionale Archeologico Taranto); B) Type 2. Mixed gorgoneian monsters. Official bronze shield from Olympia, 550-500 BC Archaeological Museum of Olympia, No. B 4490. (Photo: A.L.); C) Type 3. Gorgo with animals, 600-570 BC. Black-figure Corinthian skyphos from Pontecagnano, Salerno (LIMC IV-2, 1988, 182, fig.288); D) Type 4. Winged Gorgo in "Knielauf" position, literally knee-run schema and/or bending the foot and swift-running, 500-510 BC (Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 75(3): pp. 7-8, fig. 4.). Bronze statuette, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, No. L.2013.63.2; E) Type 5. Chthonia Gorgon. Late Archaic period, 530-490/80 BC. Hercules and the chthonic gorgon. Theseus' Painter. National Archaeological Museum, No. 1306 (Photo: A.L.); F) Type 6. The myth of Hesiod. ca. 460 BC. Beheading scene, attributed to the painter of Pan (Beazley Archive No.206339, Walters 1893, vase E181), British Museum, No.1873,0820.352.

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