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Medusa, the daughter of the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto, was the most feared of the Gorgons. It was said that anyone who looked directly at her was immediately turned to stone. Medusa was often depicted as a terrifying winged female with snakes instead of hair. Many later versions of the myth claimed that she was once a beautiful maiden loved by Poseidon. But the young Medusa offended Athena and was therefore cursed to be a terrible monster, forever hunted by men.Medusa was eventually killed by Perseus, one of Zeus' heroic sons. With the help of several gods, Perseus tracked Medusa down to her remote lair and beheaded her. He then used her severed head as a weapon during his travels, turning his enemies to stone. Medusa's head was finally given to the goddess Athena, becoming part of the armor she wore into battle.The name Medusa was likely derived from the Greek verb μεδω ("to guard, protect"). This root also appears in other Greek names, including Medea, Medon, and Diomedes.[muh-DOO-zuh_ -suh]/mɪˈdjuːzə_ -səMedusa was sometimes called Gorgo.In one of his poems, Pindar applied the epithet euparous ("fair-cheeked") to Medusa.[1]Medusa and her sisters were called the Gorgons. They lived together in a remote part of the world. According to the seventh-century BCE poet Hesiod, they could be found "beyond glorious Ocean in the frontier land towards Night."[2] Later sources, however, usually placed them in Libya.[3] Other authors have proposed still more remote dwelling places, including the obscure Gorgonean Plains near Cisthene in Asia Minor[4] and the island of Sarpedon.[5]In most ancient sources, Medusa and the Gorgons were imbued with a terrifying appearance. Aeschylus, for example, in his fifth-century BCE tragedy Prometheus Bound, described them as "three winged sisters, the snake-haired Gorgons, loathed of mankind, whom no one of mortal kind shall look upon and still draw breath."[6] It was said that anybody who looked upon Medusa (or her sisters) was immediately turned to stone. According to many sources, however, Medusa was beautiful as well as terrifying. Pindar, an early Greek poet who lived in the fifth century BCE, described Medusa as "fair-cheeked."[7] In ancient art, Medusa was usually depicted as a female monster. In addition to being snatched by winds and depicted with fangs and a wide, menacing face, Depictions of this Gorgon head were often believed to be apotropaic, meaning they could ward off evil. By the fifth century BCE, however, Medusa and the Gorgons were increasingly depicted as beautiful women in the visual arts in literature.[8]Gorgon heads on terracotta tiles, South Italy (c. 540 BC).Wikimedia CommonsPublic DomainMedusa was one of the three Gorgons, daughters of the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto. The other two Gorgons were named Stheno and Euryale. Medusa was the only one of the three who was not immortal.Medusa was said to have once been a lover of Poseidon. According to Ovid, this is what first got her into trouble: when Medusa slept with Poseidon in a temple of Athena, Athena turned her hair into snakes as a punishment. From then on, all who looked upon her were turned to stone.[15] In another version of the myth, Medusa became the enemy of Athena because she claimed that she could rival the goddess in beauty.[16]Medusa was killed by the hero Perseus, a son of Zeus and the mortal Argive princess Danae. Perseus had been sent to fetch Medusa's head by Polydectes, a cruel king who wished to have Perseus out of the way so he could marry his mother, Danae. Perseus was assisted by the gods, who provided him with a mirrored shield, winged sandals, a helmet of invisibility, an adamantine sword, and a magical satchel that could carry Medusa's head. When Perseus found the Gorgons, he used the helmet of invisibility to sneak up on Medusa. He then used the mirrored shield to look at her, looking at Medusa's reflection rather than directly at her so that he would not be turned to stone. After Perseus had beheaded Medusa and put her head into his satchel, he used his winged sandals to quickly fly away from the other two vengeful Gorgons.[17]After Medusa was killed, her two children by Poseidon were born from her blood. One was the Giant Chrysaor, who became the father of the monster Geryon. Much later, Geryon was killed by Hercules. Medusa's other child was Pegasus, the beautiful winged horse. Pegasus was eventually tamed by the hero Bellerophon.[18]The death of Medusa by Edward Burne-Jones (1892).Wikimedia CommoThe venomous vipers of the Sahara were also sometimes said to have been born from Medusa's blood. In this myth, the vipers emerge from the breasts of Medusa, and Perseus flew over the Sahara with the Gorgon's severed head.[19]According to Ovid, the corals of the Red Sea were formed when Perseus set Medusa's head down in the seaweed after saving Andromeda. Medusa's blood caused the seaweed to harden and become beautiful coral.[20]After killing Medusa, Perseus used her severed head as a weapon, turning many of his enemies to stone. In Libya, he used Medusa's head to kill the monster Cetus and save Andromeda, who became his wife. When Andromeda's former fiancé Phineus attacked him, Perseus killed him, too, using Medusa's head. Upon returning to Seriphos, Perseus showed the king Polydectes the head and turned him to stone, thus saving his mother.In some traditions, Perseus also met Atlas, the Titan charged with holding up the heavens, during his travels. The two quarreled and Perseus angrily forced Atlas to look upon Medusa's head. Atlas immediately turned to stone, thus becoming the Atlas Mountains.[21]Perseus eventually gave Medusa's head to Athena, who placed it on her breastplate or shield, called the aegis. According to another tradition, however, the head was kept in the city of Athens, buried underneath a mound in the agora.[22] Medusa by Michelangelo Caravaggio (1595–96).Wikimedia CommonsPublic DomainThe serpentine locks of Medusa's hair had an effect very similar to that of the head; while they did not necessarily turn people to stone, they could scatter entire armies. One such lock was sometimes said to protect the Greek city of Tegea.[23]Medusa's blood was sometimes thought to have magical or medicinal properties. According to Apollodorus, Asclepius received a phial of her blood from Athena and used it to cure the sick.[24] Medusa's blood was also used for witchcraft by some mythical figures.[25]Not all ancient sources interpreted the myth of Medusa literally. According to Athenaeus, a Greek author who lived during the late second and early third centuries CE, the Gorgons were long-haired beasts, so terrifying that all who looked upon them were paralyzed and killed.[26]Other authors believed the Gorgons were an ancient race of tall, hairy women.[27] The antiquarian Dionysus of Sicily claimed that they were wiped out by Hercules when he traveled through Libya.[28]Medusa has made several appearances in modern pop culture. She was portrayed using stop motion animation in the 1991 film Clash of the Titans. She also appeared in the 2010 remake as a monster with a serpentine lower body. The BBC One series Atlantis (2013–2015) features Medusa before she became a monster. Medusa is also a character in the first installment of Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson and the Olympians series and is portrayed by Uma Thurman in the 2010 film adaptation.Medusa or her Gorgon sisters appear in many video games and role-playing games, including Dungeons and Dragons, God of War, and Final Fantasy.The head of Medusa is used as the logo of the Italian fashion company Versace.Avi Kapach is a writer, scholar, and educator who received his PhD in Classics from Brown University.The terrible, snake-haired, winged Gorgons were daughters of the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto who made their home at the very edge of the world. In the standard tradition, the Gorgons were named Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa. Though Stheno and Euryale were immortal, Medusa was not, and the Argive hero Perseus was sent to kill her and bring back her head. This head famously turned all who looked upon it to stone. There were a number of different traditions surrounding the Gorgons in antiquity, in art as well as literature. For example, a Gorgon's head—usually identified as the head of Medusa—was placed on the aegis, the great shield of the goddess Athena. The Gorgons also inspired the iconography of the Gorgoneion, a sinister representation of a Gorgon head that was believed to possess protective qualities.The etymology of the name "Gorgon" (Greek Γοργών/Γοργώ, translit. Gōrgōn/Gōrgō; pl. "Gōrgōnes," Greek Γοργόνες, translit. Gōrgōnes) is somewhat obscure. It is often thought to be of Indo-European origin, likely from the same root as the Sanskrit garḡ, meaning "to make a deep sound, rumble, roar, thunder, growl."[1] The names of the individual Gorgons seem to emphasize their imposing, powerful, and frightening nature: Sthenno (Σθεννώ, translit. Sthenno; also spelled Σθενώ/Sthenō and Σθενούσα/Sthenousa) means "strong, forceful" (from the Greek σθένος/sthénos, "strength"); Euryale (Ευρύαλη, translit. Euryále) means "broad" (from the Hesperiid root, the snake-monster Echidna,[24] the Hesperiid root [25] Scylla,[26] and Thosa (mother of the Cyclops Polyphemus).[27] There are occasional references to the Gorgons in Greek literature to gods, Gorgons born under different circumstances and in different ways, such as emerging from the earth, the helmet of invisibility, so about the Gorgons chased him. 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The myth of the Gorgons entered the Greek imagination at an early period; it was already familiar by the fifth century BCE.[28] Similarly, the Roman poet Ovid claimed that drops of Medusa's blood that fell into the sea turned the seaweed into coral.[16] In other accounts, the blood of the Gorgons was said to possess both poisonous and healing properties.[17] From an early period, ancient authors associated the Gorgons with the sea.[18] Their parents were the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto, and they were favored by the sea god Poseidon, who was a lover of Medusa. The Gorgons were a popular subject in ancient Greek art by the sixth century BCE. They were most commonly featured in depictions of the myth of Perseus, with the hero beheading the fearsome Medusa; sometimes the other Gorgons could be seen pursuing him. Images of the goddess Athena commonly showed her with a Gorgon's head upon her shield or even her breastplate. 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three old women who shared a single eye between them. Perseus sneaked up on the Graiae and snatched away their one eye, which he agreed to give back only after they told him where to find the Hesperides. When Perseus reached the Hesperides, he was given a special satchel that could safely carry Medusa's head. The other gods also helped supply Perseus for his quest: from Athena, he received a shield with a polished face; from his father, Zeus, he received an unbreakable sickle; from Hades, he received a helmet that rendered him invisible; finally, from Hermes, he received winged sandals.Vase painting showing Perseus beheading a sleeping Medusa, attributed to Polygnotus (450–440 BCE). Perseus looks to Athena and away from Medusa to avoid turning into stone. Metropolitan Museum of ArtPublic DomainThus equipped, Perseus went to the cave of the Gorgons. When he found Medusa, he was able to approach her without turning to stone by looking at her reflection in Athena's shield. He then cut off Medusa's head using Zeus' sword. When Medusa's blood spilled to the earth, the winged horse Pegasus and his brother Chrysaor were born. Using Hades' helmet of invisibility, Perseus snatched away Medusa's severed head and escaped. As Perseus made his way home, he passed through Ethiopia. There, he witnessed a strange and terrible scene: a beautiful young girl was bound naked to a rock, waiting for a sea monster to emerge from the depths and devour her. Cassiopeia, the queen of Ethiopia, had boasted that she was more beautiful than the fifty daughters of the sea deity Nereus.[11] This angered Poseidon, who brought destruction on Ethiopia and would only be appeased if Cassiopeia sacrificed her daughter Andromeda to him. Andromeda was thus left in chains at the sea's edge for Poseidon's sea monster Cetus.This was the scene that was unfolding as Perseus arrived in Ethiopia. Approaching Cassiopeia and her husband Cepheus, the king of Ethiopia, Perseus offered to save Andromeda's life in exchange for her hand in marriage. Cassiopeia and Cepheus agreed (though no version of the myth explains why they abandoned their plans for sacrifice). Perseus subsequently killed Cetus and set Andromeda free.Perseus and Andromeda by Jan Keynooghe (1561). MauritshuisPublic DomainThe wedding of Perseus and Andromeda was disturbed, however, by the arrival of her uncle Phineus, who had originally been engaged to Andromeda. A quarrel erupted. In the end, Perseus turned Phineus and his supporters to stone by displaying Medusa's head.Perseus finally came back to Seriphos with his new bride, only to find that Polydectes had continued to pursue his mother, Danae. Perseus decided to end Polydectes' unwanted advances once and for all. Going to Polydectes' palace, Perseus showed the lecherous king the "gift" he himself had requested: the head of Medusa. Polydectes, disbelieving, looked at the Gorgon's head and turned to stone.The Wedding of Perseus interrupted by Phineus by Hugues Taraval (1767)Wikimedia CommonsPublic DomainAfter setting up Dictys as king of Seriphos in place of his brother Polydectes, Perseus returned to Argos, the kingdom of his grandfather Acrisius. When Acrisius learned of Perseus' return, however, he fled the city, still dreading the prophecy that had predicted he would be killed by his grandson. While Perseus was taking part in athletic games in the city of Larissa, he threw a discus, which struck an old man in the audience and killed him immediately. Later it was discovered that the victim was none other than his grandfather, Acrisius, thus inadvertently fulfilling the prophecy. Saddened, Perseus buried his grandfather and gave the kingdom of Argos to his cousin Megapenthes. According to many traditions, Perseus then ascended the throne of Tiryns and founded the city of Mycenae.[12] He would become famous for building the formidable walls of Mycenae, made of boulders fitted tightly together without mortar. These fortifications, which are still standing today, were called "Cyclopean" in antiquity because they looked like they could only have been built by the giant Cyclopes.Perseus founded the powerful House of Perseus, which supplied generations of kings and heroes. Through the children he had with Andromeda, Perseus became the ancestor of many important people, including the Persians, Heracles, Helen of Troy, and the Dioscuri (Castor and Polydeuces).Perseus was sometimes worshipped as a hero in ancient Greece. The earliest evidence of his cult has been found in Mycenae: an inscription from the late sixth century BCE mentions "priestly analysts" of Perseus (an obscure term probably referring to record-keepers who also performed religious functions).[13] Pausanias, a geographer who lived in the second century CE, wrote that in his own time the most important sanctuaries to Perseus were in Seriphos and Athens. He also described an altar to the hero on the road from Mycenae to Argos.[14] However, these cults do not seem to have existed before the Hellenistic Period (323–31 BCE). Aside from these scraps, little is known of the hero worship associated with Perseus.The myth of Perseus does appear in contemporary popular culture, even if Perseus is not as familiar as some other Greek mythical figures (such as Heracles). The 1981 film Clash of the Titans (remade in 2010) is loosely adapted from the myth of Perseus. Percy Jackson, the main character of Rick Riordan's book series Percy Jackson and the Olympians, is named after Perseus. In his modern portrayals, Perseus is generally a rather one-dimensional hero: brave, chivalrous, determined, noble. This is more or less in line with Perseus' representation in ancient myth, where he was chiefly motivated by a desire to defend the weak (his mother, Andromeda) and never shrank from even the most daunting tasks.Avi Kapach is a writer, scholar, and educator who received his PhD in Classics from Brown University