Snakes on a Mane: Medusa, the Body and Serpentine Monstrosity

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Medusa and the Hybrid Body

This investigation will focus on the physicality of Medusa's monstrosity. Although her petrifying power operates through the non-visible attribute of her gaze, there is always an element of bodily disfigurement in Medusa stories and representations. This disfigurement comes in the addition of snakes to her person, either on her head, around her waist or in place of the lower half of her body. These visible appendages are what mark Medusa's body as monstrous and through the hybrid composite of human and animal parts, Medusa is made into a liminal creature. Her ambiguity and duality ultimately make Medusa monstrous to the viewer, who cannot place her within strict categories of good or evil, human or beast, earthly or otherworldly.

This paper will explore how and why snakes are associated with Medusa and what meaning these snakes may have. It seems that it is not only her disfigurement but also the nature of the animal with which she is associated that makes her monstrous. From her earliest depictions in Greek art and myth, Medusa is connected with snakes, which are seen as earthly or chthonic elements, and relate to the underworld and rebirth in the ancient world. Snakes are portrayed as both good and bad agents in Greek myths and their own ambiguity echoes that of Medusa's body.

One possible reason for the addition of snakes to Medusa's body could be related to her apotropaic function in Greek culture. Perhaps this function could only be carried out with more terrifying, outward signs of her monstrosity. Finally it is interesting that in the majority of representations, the snakey head of Medusa is found to be the source of power and must be separated from her female body in order to be used for good.

Snakes are not always associated with evil in the ancient world. A snake is wrapped around Asclepius' staff which is the symbol of healing and medicine. Snakes are also wrapped around Hermes' caduceus which he carries to escort souls to and from the underworld. These snakes may signify the ability to travel between worlds, the earth and the underworld, which is not an easy task in the ancient world. In fact Hermes is one of few with the ability to leave the underworld once entering its gates. As mentioned earlier, Medusa also has the ability to operate between and in both worlds. She is seen as a guard in the underworld in the later tradition of Dante's Inferno and
her connection with snakes emphasizes her liminal position between the underworld and the earth.

**Origins of Medusa in Greek Myth**

Many scholars argue that Medusa is one of three Greek goddesses that were adapted from the Minoan 'Snake Goddess'. Not much is known about the Snake Goddess as much of the Minoan language is still undeciphered and material remains are inconclusive. However, seal impressions and statuettes connect her with snakes, hence her name, and large felines. She is often considered an underworld goddess. Possible aspects of Snake Goddess worship include a yearly rite where a young god or priest helps to revive the goddess for another year (Castleden 125).

The Minoans seem to relate several goddesses to each other or rather the separation between different female deities often becomes blurred. The Snake Goddess is often visibly tied to the Lady of Animals who controls snakes, lions and bulls amongst others. Cross-identifications are also made with the Lady of Birds, whose symbol is a white dove, and is in charge of fertility and love in the earthly realm. The reason that these goddesses get related to each other is because their symbols often appear mixed together on sculptures, paintings and seal representations (Castleden 125). It seems the identity of the Snake Goddess herself was ambiguous or at least was changeable, much like that of Medusa.

On Minoan dedication lists there are mentions of Potnia or Lady 'at- an-a', which modern scholars have taken as an early linguistic form of Athena (Castleden 124). The Snake Goddess can also be related to Athena through their shared association with snakes which can be seen in the *Athena Parthenos* (fig. 1) statue found in the Parthenon. In this sculpture, a snake is seen crawling up the goddess' shield and many more snakes and a gorgon head are depicted on her aegis, or protective collar. Athena's shield also features Medusa's head in the centre with snakes forming a border around it. Athena is able to command snakes as evident in the story of Erichthonius, whom Athena took in as an infant and protected in a chest with a serpent. When the chest was opened against Athena's warning, two sisters were either killed by the serpent or were driven to suicide because of the insanity that the sight induces (Apollodorus 3.14.6). In other versions of the story, Erichthonius is a snake himself.

One of Athena's distinctive attributes is the possession of metis. Metis is the ancient term for the wisdom that women hold over men. Generally it refers to the knowledge women have about the father of their children. More broadly it refers to the wily, crafty type of wisdom that women often possess. This may extend to their knowledge of medicine, practical remedies and fertility. Because of their monthly menstruation, women were often thought to have a more direct connection with the earth
and the moon, which was a mark of privilege. Athena's mother was Metis, the personification of this special type of knowledge. Metis was the first wife of Zeus but he swallowed her after they were married on the advice of Gaia who warned that their grandchild would over throw him (Hesiod 886-900). Once Metis was digested, Zeus developed a splitting headache which could only be relieved by having his head opened by Hephaestus. Once Hephaestus obliged, Athena sprung forth fully grown and dressed for battle. Athena's connection to warfare is through strategy and innovation. Homer states that Athena was the one who gave Odysseus the idea for the Trojan Horse (Homer 8.487). This is a prime example of the cunning women are thought to possess, as the Greeks use trickery rather than force to enter the city and destroy the Trojans.

Athena's shield on the **Athena Parthenos** features Medusa's head encircled by vignettes of the battle between the Amazons and the Athenians. Essentially this dispute is a gender war between the warrior women who are considered barbaric and the 'civilized' men from Athens. These women are uncivilized because they interrupt the normal reproduction cycle by mating only once a year and not living in a patriarchal society, like their counterparts in civilized Greece. Separating the gorgon head and the war scenes is a chain of serpents linked tail to head in a circle. Here the snakes function as a division and transition between the semi-divine realm of Medusa and the human plain of the Amazons and Athenians. Again snakes are privileged with the ability to transgress natural and spiritual boundaries as they are connected to both earthly and divine affairs.

**The Birth of Medusa and Other Snakey Ladies in Greek Myth**

In all versions of her myth, it is made clear that Medusa is mortal which allows for her decapitation by Perseus. This is a divergence from the Minoan Snake Goddess, who was thought to be reborn each year and live eternally. This may be a way of lessening her strength as she enters the Greek pantheon. If Zeus became the supreme ruler, which he was not within Minoan religion, then all other deities must be made weaker. While Medusa is the child of Gaia she is on the same hereditary level as Zeus and as seen with other female deities like Aphrodite this is not allowed. Aphrodite too begins with a noble parentage, being born of Ouranos (Hesiod 190-195), but in later traditions she becomes the daughter of Zeus and Dione (Powell 141). Medusa's parentage also changes later and she becomes the daughter of Keto and Phorkys, two sea deities which keep up her connection to Poseidon but also gives her a more obscure origin.

The relationship of dangerous women and metis is evident in other Greek myths. One example is the Sphinx, an animal-human hybrid like Medusa, who combines the wings of a bird, the body of a lioness and sometimes the tail of a snake with a human head. She is known for her
cleverness and poses a riddle to the humans she encounters, if they answer correctly they are allowed to live, if not than she eats them. The Sphinx is often cited as the daughter of Echidna, another woman-animal hybrid who has a woman's head and torso and the tail of a snake instead of legs. Echidna survives, according to Hesiod, by “eating raw flesh beneath the secret parts of the holy earth” of which she has secret knowledge (300-305).

Unlike the snakey ladies mentioned before, however, Medusa was not born with a hybrid body in many versions of her myth. Rather it is her punishment, sent from Athena for being raped in the goddess' temple by Poseidon (Ovid 886-890). Poseidon is Athena's uncle and rival, and it seems unfair that she would punish the victim rather than the perpetrator, but destroying the beauty of his favourite was her real revenge. It is not until the late first century BCE that there is a surviving account of how Medusa came to have such a monstrous body.

In literary sources, Medusa is at first introduced in a summary way, she is a gorgon, “a thing of fear and horror” that is mounted onto Athena's aegis (Homer 5.742). In the second century BCE, Apollodorus describes gorgons as having scaly heads, the tusks of swine and wings (2.4). At the end of the Perseus myth, however, Apollodorus admits that Medusa may have once rivalled Athena for beauty and this is why Perseus was ordered to decapitate her. Neither of these accounts explains why she is the only mortal sister born of immortal parents. Ovid relates the story of Medusa's punishment and that she bore two children upon her death, Pegasus and Chrysaor. It is unclear why she did not give birth to them in the normal way, as she is almost always depicted with a human torso. Instead, once Perseus cuts off her head her children spring forth. Pegasus is a winged horse and Chrysaor a great warrior. These children were conceived by Poseidon's violation, so perhaps out of shame or anger at him, Medusa would not allow them to be born.

**Medusa in Temple Architecture**

Through a careful examination of the Medusa pediment (fig. 2) at Temple of Artemis at Corfu (590-580 BCE) much can be ascertained about the myth of Medusa and its use and reception in Greek architecture. In this pedimental sculpture, Medusa presents a grotesque face with large, round eyes and a flat boar snout. Her hair hangs down in four fat locks, with a snake poking out from underneath her ears. Her fringe is made of thick, stylized curls which lay flat on her forehead with a centre part.

Medusa wears a simple tunic that ends short of her knees and sandals with a decoration which comes up her shin or perhaps she is wearing greaves. If the latter is true, it is particularly interesting that she wears a piece of military costume, as there are no stories of Medusa involving battle. Medusa does not wear any other armour so perhaps these greaves are more
symbolic than functional, and inform the viewer that she is capable of
destruction like any warrior.

Medusa's belt is formed by two snakes intertwined. These snakes
are shown facing each other with their necks wound together. They loop
around her waist and twist their tails together as well to create a belt with
three strands. Their union, so complete and strong looking, binds her waist
and gives her a feminine figure, something otherwise left out of her depiction
which includes almost no definition of breasts or other identifying feminine
features. Even Medusa's hair, although long, does not definitely identify her
as female. Males in this period were also depicted with long tresses in thick
locks similar to hers. The snakey belt around her waist serves to create an
hour glass figure and is one of the only indications of her femininity.

Flanking Medusa are her children Chrysaor and Pegasus, although
they could not have been born yet as according to their myth. Their inclusion
in the pedimental group emphasizes Medusa's powers of creation, although
the prerequisite of their birth, her death, is not included.

Pedley suggests that this group, along with the two in the corners of
the pediment, are meant to be metaphors for the triumph of Greek gods and
heroes over barbaric enemies (158). Although it seems odd that Medusa
would be featured so largely, and alive, as she normally is a symbol of the
barbaric, non-Greek. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod states that Medusa and her
sisters live beyond the Ocean at the ends of the earth (278). Also Perseus, a
Greek hero from Argos and the legendary founder of Mycenae, is the slayer
of Medusa and seems to epitomize 'Greekness' emphasizing Medusa's
foreignness. Here Medusa is reborn into a Greek defender, the fact that she
can do so, indicates the ambiguity of her meaning in Greek culture.

**Medusa as Apotropaic decoration**

Medusa as an apotropaic entity is the oldest artistic manifestation of
the gorgon. She is featured on architecture as well as bowls, cups, jugs and
shields. In these depictions Medusa commonly has the tusks and nose of a
boar, the talons and wings of a bird, and a snakey tail. She also has wide
eyes, and an open mouth with a lolling tongue. She is represented facing
straight-on to the viewer which is uncommon in Greek art (Wilk 32). By
having her face the viewer so directly the power of her gaze is evident, but it
also allows for her more beastly features to be clear. It is easiest and
certainly the most clear to show her sharp teeth, snout and snakes, either in
her hair or near it, by outlining them in a frontal depiction. The frank address
of the viewer is also meant to startle and frighten away those who would do
harm by the power of her look.

Suhr states that the element of fright in architectural decorative
representations of Medusa is maintained only until the fifth century BCE
when a combination of horror and comedy is presented in their features (90).
These decorations have a dual nature which is reinforced by their position over liminal spaces, doorways and windows, which are both interior and exterior. As a space of transition, elements of both opposing spaces come together, just as the grotesque combines with the comic in these sculptures with her protruding tongue and crazy smile. This paradox is just one of many that Medusa represents.

The most visible paradox is found in her body which is neither human nor bestial, but somewhere in between. This balance changes over time but there is always an element of both present in her body. In the earliest sculptural representations, Medusa appears with only a human torso and legs, and as time goes on she becomes fully human except for her snakey hair. Medusa also combines a mortal body with the divine attributes of fantastic appendages. Most hybrid creatures are immortal or born of immortal parents in Greek myth. One final paradox is in her role as both murderer and protector. Medusa is slain because of her murderous tendencies but she is then reclaimed as a weapon for the protection of the Greek people.

Perhaps this last paradox can be somewhat resolved by further examining the series of events that bring Medusa from the edge of the world to mainland Greece. In order to join civilization she must be decapitated, effectively severing all of her control over her petrifying power. Once her control has been given over to a Greek male, she is allowed to have a place of honour on the Greek temple and to find a benevolent vocation as the protector of the Greeks.

Not only in her placement over doorways but also in the combination of the divine and mortal, human and beast, murderer and protector, Medusa is a paradox in her both her function and her body. The next sections will investigate some of Medusa's role within Greek myth and society in order to find her connections with other divinities and explore how her myth changes over time.

**Medusa: Protector of the City**

The Minoan Snake Goddess, or one closely related to her, is shown on many seals as a protector of the city. She is often shown towering over the city, as seen on the so-called *Mother of the Mountains seal*, where the goddess stands on a mountain top or a conglomeration of buildings meant to represent the city. Medusa also fulfills the role of city protector through her apotropaic role on temple architectural decoration. In these sculptures she watches over the people and city by scaring off those who would do harm to the Greeks with her grotesque appearance. It is interesting that a creature who lived at the end of the earth and supported 'uncivilized' society by exerting control over men, a very unpatriarchal thing to do, has now become an appreciated and useful member of the Greek civic order.
It is clear through examination of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that the dichotomy of us vs them was very clear within the Greek mindset. Therefore it is interesting that Medusa, originally an outsider, becomes reappropriated within Greek culture and becomes a great protector of the city.

**Medusa: Model Mother**

On the Corcyra pediment, Medusa is not yet beheaded but she still appears as a mother. She is seen with her children Pegasus, a winged horse, and Chrysaor, a future king. The snakes around her waist emphasize the femininity of her shape by defining her waist. The fact that the snakes appear as a belt or girdle may also point to her function as a creator of life. Medusa can be seen as an example to all women, as she literally gives up her life so that her children can be born. Although it can be argued that she did not have a choice in the matter, the fact remains that she needed to be decapitated in order for her children to be born. In this act, Medusa commits the absolute sacrifice of a mother, to die for her children. In the world of ancient Greece, childbirth was extremely dangerous and many women died while giving birth (Osborne 64). Perhaps in this aspect, Medusa becomes something of a role model to mothers in Corcyra and that is why she is shown alive with her offspring around her. By depicting Medusa in this manner, their mother-child relationship is emphasized while the rest of her sordid history is downplayed.

**Metis, Liminal Spaces and the Ambiguous Medusa**

On the Corcyra pediment, the snakes around Medusa's waist are double linked, both by their necks and their tails. This seems to indicate strength, both in their bond and their attachment to her body. The two snakes that poke out from underneath her ears are the closest that this sculpture gets to the characteristic snake for hair seen in later years. The placement of snakes here seems odd; however, if the artist had intended to make the viewer believe that she had snakes for hair, why not transform her already stylized locks into serpentine creatures? Instead the snakes fill the gap between her shoulders and her ears and emphasize her head in general. Perhaps this is used to draw attention to her mind which, as a woman, is filled with metis and can be dangerous for men.

In the ancient world, snakes were thought to possess a special type of secret knowledge. This was due to their duality of nature, as they live both under and above the ground. They were thought to know how seeds grew into plants and other secrets about fertility and the natural world (Harris & Platzner 149). When one takes into consideration that the Underworld was thought to literally be underneath the earth, with its gates often being cited as dark caves descending under the earth, and it is not such a stretch to believe to believe that snakes have special knowledge of death as well. Snakes were
thought to have special powers of rebirth, as they shed their skins in the spring and are renewed (Harris & Platzner 149). With such a unique attribute, snakes are often attached to ideas of rebirth and life after death.

Although Medusa does reappear on earth after her decapitation by Perseus, she does find renewed life in the Underworld as a guardian to the gate of the inner city in Dante's *Inferno*. Besides this later literary incident, Medusa also manages to give birth after death to Pegasus and Chrysaor. In this way Medusa again operates within a liminal space, she merges birth and death together, two events which are normally oppositional.

Finally, the idea of the snake in the grass, or unseen danger, is exactly what the addition of snakes to Medusa warns of. Her gaze may seem ordinary but its results are disastrous. Perhaps the idea of unforeseen danger can be related to female genitalia and reproduction. Metis, in the narrow definition of the word, refers to the secret knowledge that women have over their male partners, that of the paternity of their children. This is the result of the reproductive processes being hidden within the woman's body and the fact that only a mother could know for sure who the father of her child was before modern tests.

The snake can also be a phallic symbol, as Freud suggests in his essay *Medusa's Head*. Perhaps in this case, the presence of the phallus makes Medusa's power over men physically evident. Beyond the fear of castration, if snakes are akin to the phallus and the manly body which it normally accompanies, than Medusa towers over all men as she has not only one snake, or phallus personified, in her control but many. If a manly body is what gives men the right to control women, as it was thought in the ancient world, than Medusa is undeniably more powerful than any man. That is, until she is decapitated and separated from the source of her power.

Perhaps it is Medusa's excess in hybridity, originally with the combined boar, bird, and snake parts which make her monstrous instead of her divine powers to petrify. Further than this, perhaps it is the fact that Medusa is thought to enjoy her excessive hybridity that makes her monstrous. Once the other animal parts are dropped by authors and artists, emphasis is instead placed on the multiplicity of her snakes and they begin to take on a more sensual nature. The author Lucan writes that “Medusa loved to feel the serpents which served for hair curled close to her neck and dangling down her back (9.633-335).” In this description, Medusa not only has many snakes attached to her body but she also enjoys their company, embracing her monstrosity and this embrace makes her all the more monstrous.
Figure 1.
Alan LeQuire *Replica of Athena Parthenos*, 1990, gypsum cement with gold gild, 12.8 m
After *Athena Parthenos*, Phidias c. 480 BCE, now lost.
Figure 2. Pediment from Temple of Artemis, Corecyra, c. 580 BCE, limestone, 2.85 m. Archaeological Museum of Corfu, Corfu.
Works Cited


Medusa is a deadly and cryptic other, but she is also ubiquitous, with an undeniable energy that inspired artists to repeat her semblance and story in diverse ways across literature, lore, and art through ancient Greece, Rome, and beyond. The snake-haired Medusa does not become widespread until the first century B.C. The Roman author Ovid describes the mortal Medusa as a beautiful maiden seduced by Poseidon in a temple of Athena. Such a sacrilege attracted the goddess’s wrath, and she punished Medusa by turning her hair to snakes. While these stories sound fantastical today, to the ancient Greeks they were quasi-historical. Milne, Marjorie J. *Perseus and Medusa on an Attic Vase.* Bulletin of The Metropolitan Museum of Art 4, no. 5 (1946), pp. 126–30. The Medusa story and the tale of Perseus. Learn who Perseus was and how he came to slice off the Gorgon’s head with a sword. Perseus quickly reclaimed the kingdom and went in search of Acrisius. He found him on an island in the midst of sporting games and decided to win his grandfather’s affection by showing his agility, speed, and strength. Acrisius sat on the dais with the island’s king and marveled along with everyone else at the sporting prowess of this stranger. When Perseus threw the javelin farther than anyone else, all the spectators shouted for him to throw it even farther. three-headed dog with serpent’s tail, a mane of snakes, and lion’s claws; guarded the gate of Hades Came from Typhoeus and Echidna or Echidna Connected to Herakles (with Persephone). Charybdis. winged demons (Medusa, Sthenno, and Euryale); winged women with serpentine locks of hair, large staring eyes, wide mouths, tusks of swine, lolling tongues, flared nostrils, and sometimes short beards Came from Phorcys and Keto or Phorcys or Gorgon and Keto Connected to Perseus, Pegasus, Khrysaor, and Athena Hesiod presents them as daughters of dangerous sea-gods. monster with human body and bull’s head Came from Queen Pasiphae and Cretan bull Connected to Theseus. Nemean Lion. Depicted as a monstrous snake-haired woman, she was killed by Perseus. In the principle myth, Medusa is killed by the Greek hero Perseus, the son of Danae and Zeus. Danae is the object of desire of Polydectes, the king of the Cycladic island of Seriphos. The king, sensing that Perseus was an obstacle to pursuing Danae, sends him on the impossible mission to bring back the head of Medusa. Perseus beheading the sleeping Medusa. Terracotta pilike (jar), Attic period, ca. 5th century B.C. Medusa: the snake-haired quarry of Herakles Perseus, the horror with the petrifying gaze. In the fifth-edition Monster Manual, this unnatural being is explained as one who made an infernal bargain for immortality and beauty, then paid the price when the latter wore off but the former didn’t. There’s no satisfactory natural explanation for the medusa, so in this case, evolutionary imperatives don’t necessarily apply; the medusa seems more like a being driven by compulsion, as undead creatures are.