

3

MEDUSA AND THE GORGONS

THE ORIGINS OF THE GORGON-HEAD AND OF THE MEDUSA STORY

The earliest evidence for Gorgon-heads and the Medusa story falls into four groups which can not be ranked in any uncontroversial chronological order:

1. The Homeric poems, which mention both Perseus (*Iliad* 14.319–20) and Gorgon-heads, but do not bring the two together, and make no mention of full-bodied Gorgons or Medusa. The *Iliad* gives us a gorgoneion (a full-face Gorgon image) on the shield of Agamemnon: ‘and on it had been placed in a central circle a horrible-faced Gorgon with a terrible look, and around it were Terror and Fear’ (11.36–7). It also gives us a Gorgon-head, again apparently an image, on the aegis worn by Athena but said to belong to Zeus (5.741–2). The poem further implies that the Gorgon’s eyes were already particularly terrible, in describing Hector’s eyes akin to those of a Gorgon (8.348–9). The *Odyssey*, however, seems to have the notion of a terrible disembodied head of an actual Gorgon. When Odysseus finally loses his nerve after calling up the ghosts of the dead, he scuttles off with the observation that ‘Pale fear seized me, lest dread Persephone should send the Gorgon-head of a terrible monster from Hades for me’ (11.633–5). These poems are the products of long oral tradition, but

according to the current consensus moved towards their final form *ca.* 700–650 BC.¹

2. Hesiod’s *Theogony*, also traditionally dated to the period *ca.* 700–650 BC, in which the Medusa story is fully developed in the form that was to become canonical:

Ceto bore to Phorcys the beautiful-cheeked Graeae, grey from birth. Both the immortal gods and men who walk on the earth call them Graeae, Pemphredo, fair of dress, and Enyo, yellow of dress. She also bore him the Gorgons who live beyond glorious Ocean at the edge of the world near Night, where the shrill-voiced Hesperides dwell, Sthenno and Euryale and Medusa, who suffered balefully. She was mortal, but the other two were immortal and unaging. But with her alone lay he of the dark hair [i.e. Poseidon] in a soft meadow and amid spring flowers. When Perseus decapitated her, out jumped great Chrysaor and Pegasus the horse. The latter took his name from the fact that he was born beside springs (*pēgai*), but the former from the fact that he held a golden sword in his dear hands.

(Hesiod *Theogony* 270–83)²

3. The earliest varieties of gorgoneia in art, found from *ca.* 675 BC (*LIMC* Gorgo nos. 1–79). Early gorgoneia (representations of a gorgon’s head) soon evolve into a canonical ‘lion mask type’, and Corinth may have played a central role in this development. These are full-face images, and they typically have bulging, staring eyes. Their mouths form rictus grins with fangs and tusks projecting up and down, and a lolling tongue protrudes from them. Their hair forms serpentine curls, with actual snakes becoming apparent by the end of the seventh century. And they are often bearded. The direct, frontal stare, seemingly looking out from its own iconographical context and directly challenging the viewer, is a shocking and highly exceptional thing in the context of Greek two-dimensional imagery.³
4. The two earliest extant images of Perseus decapitating a Medusa and fleeing from her sisters, *ca.* 675–50 BC. In these images the faces of Medusa and the Gorgons are shown frontally, which in itself strongly identifies them with gorgoneia. In the first, on a Boeotian relief *pithos*, we find Perseus, equipped with wingless

cap, *kibisis* and sword, decapitating Medusa in the form of a female centaur, a fitting lover for Poseidon, patron of horses, and mother to Pegasus (*LIMC* Perseus no. 117 = Fig. 3.1). The fact that Perseus is turning away as he does this tells us that it is already established that to look at her face brings death. In the second, on a Proto-Attic amphora, Perseus flees two striding, wasp-bodied, cauldron-headed Gorgon sisters, leaving behind the strangely rotund decapitated corpse of Medusa, whilst Athena interposes herself to protect him (*LIMC* Perseus no. 151). Perseus' accoutrements as found on the centaur vase first manifest themselves in the extant literary tradition a century or so later, alongside his winged boots, in the Hesiodic *Shield of Heracles*, an ephrastic poem composed perhaps *ca.* 580–70 BC. Hephaestus has decorated Heracles' shield with a marvellous golden figure of Perseus in flight from the Gorgons that contrives to hover above its surface (216–37). Here we learn that his cap is none other than the Cap of Hades, which brings with it 'the darkness of night'.

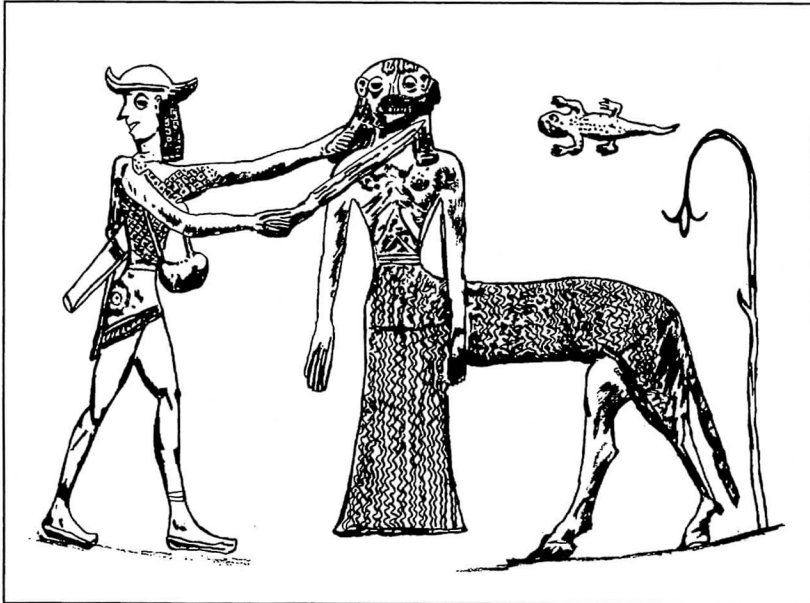


Figure 3.1 Perseus decapitates a centaur-bodied Medusa.

Thereafter, and into the fifth century BC, representations of full-body Gorgons typically give them 'lion-mask' gorgoneion-style faces, and they are often winged.⁴

This pattern of evidence can sustain a number of hypothetical schemes of development. The Medusa tale may have come first and inspired the development of gorgoneia as a spin-off. Gorgoneia may have come first and inspired the development of the Medusa tale as an explanatory back-formation. Or gorgoneia and the Medusa tale may have had separate origins but converged with each other, Medusa's decapitated head becoming identified with bodiless gorgoneia.⁵

If gorgoneia had an origin separate from the Medusa story, then any meaning or mythical context they may have had prior to it is irrecoverable. But we can in any case say something of their function, and function may in fact have been everything. It is clear from the *Iliad* gorgoneion-shield that gives rise to a miasma of Terror or Fear that gorgoneia served as apotropaic shield devices, devices to inflict terror on the enemy. It has been proposed that gorgoneion-shields, with their compelling eyes, may in practical terms have served to distract the closing enemy for a critical split-second. In the archaic age gorgoneia were also deployed in other apotropaic contexts, such as on temple acroteria (pediment plinths) and antefixes (tile-guards), houses, ships, chimneys, ovens and coins, and these gorgoneia, too, are often distinctively round, which may suggest that they are derivative of shield designs.⁶

Beyond this, there are two further complicating issues. The first is whether various groups of terracotta masks, dating from the seventh century BC, have any significant connection with Gorgons or gorgoneia. The most important group derives from Perseus' own Tiryns. These are helmet-like, wearable masks. They do not completely resemble the earliest gorgoneia or full-body Gorgons, but they do share with them bulging round eyes and a wide, open mouth, displaying fangs. They seem partly animalian, but have prominent, strongly humanoid noses. Another group of terracotta masks, these ones not wearable, but made for the purposes of dedication, were given to the Spartan sanctuary of Orthia. These masks, with heavily

lined faces, resemble Gorgons or gorgoneia even less. If these masks are related to Gorgons and gorgoneia, then they presumably testify that Gorgons featured in some sort of dramatic or ritual performances in the early archaic period, but of these we can say no more without speculation.⁷

The second complicating issue is whether gorgoneia or the Medusa tale were influenced by Mesopotamian and other Near-Eastern material. Various 'Mistresses of Animals', Lamashtu and Humbaba present cases to answer, at least at the level of iconography. On the famous pediment of the temple of Artemis in Corfu of ca. 590 BC (*LIMC* Gorgo no. 289) Medusa is depicted with her legs in the distinctive kneeling-running configuration, she has a belt formed from a pair of intertwining snakes (cf. the belts of Stheno and Euryale in the Hesiodic *Shield*, 233–7), and a further pair of snakes project from her neck. She is flanked by her children Pegasus and Chrysaor, the former rearing up, the latter reaching up towards her, and beyond these, on either side, sit magnificent lions. This Medusa bears a striking general resemblance to Near-Eastern 'Mistress of Animals' images and also, more particularly, to Mesopotamian images of the child-attacking demoness Lamashtu, who was otherwise brought into Greek culture in her own right as Lamia. Lamashtu can be portrayed as lion-headed, clutching a snake in each hand, with an animal rearing up on either side of her in the Mistress-of-Animals configuration, and riding on an ass (whose function is to carry her away to where she can do no harm). One such image in particular from Carchemish bears a striking resemblance in its overall arrangement to the Corfu pediment.

In a Perseus scene-type found from ca. 550 BC, we find a front-facing, round-headed, grinning-grimacing Medusa, her legs again in the distinctive kneeling-running configuration, flanked by Perseus and Athena, with Perseus decapitating her as he turns his head away (*LIMC* Perseus nos. 113 [= Fig. 3.2], 120–2). This scene-type seemingly owes something to Mesopotamian depictions of the very different tale of Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying the wild man Humbaba. In these the hero can turn away to look for a goddess to pass him a weapon. It has been contended that this gesture was misread by Greek viewers to give us Perseus avoiding Medusa's petrifying gaze.



Figure 3.2 Perseus beheads Medusa with her head in the form of an archaic gorgoneion. Hermes attends.

Humbaba's lined and grinning face can also be represented in round terracotta plaques, and these bear a resemblance to the terracotta masks from Sparta mentioned above. If we accept that the connection between the two sets of scenes is more than coincidental, then we are invited to wonder whether the core of the Medusa myth, consisting of her petrifying gaze and her slaughter, originated precisely in the reception and reinterpretation of the oriental vignette.⁸

It is commonly contended that Perseus' name is a speaking one derived from *persas*, the aorist participle of *perthō*, and meaning 'Slayer'. If so, then he might have been invented precisely to be a Gorgon-slayer. But the derivation is highly precarious, and the primary meanings of *perthō* are rather 'sack' and 'plunder'.⁹

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUEST NARRATIVE: AESCHYLUS AND PHERECYDES

By the time Aeschylus wrote his *Phorcides*, the quest narrative surrounding Perseus' decapitation of Medusa was evidently well developed. Perseus had acquired his divine help early. Athena, already associated with a Gorgon-head in the *Iliad*, interposes herself between Perseus and the pursuing Gorgon sisters on one of the earliest images of the hero, the Proto-Attic neck-amphora with the wasp-bodied Gorgons (*LIMC* no. 151, ca. 675–50 BC). She is joined by Hermes in the aftermath of the decapitation on the Gorgon painter *dinos* of ca. 600–590 BC (*LIMC* Gorgo no. 314).¹⁰

Towards the end of the sixth century BC a pair of vases shows us Perseus visiting a triad of Nymphs and being supplied by them with his winged boots, *petasos*-cap and *kibisis*, with each Nymph bearing one of the gifts (*LIMC* Perseus nos. 87–8). On the second of these they are given the legend 'Neides', i.e. 'Naeads' or 'Water Nymphs'. Pausanias tells that amongst the decorations on the Spartan temple of Athena Chalkioikos, built in ca. 500 BC, was an image of the Nymphs giving Perseus a cap and winged boots only, which may imply that only two Nymphs were shown here (3.17.3).¹¹

With Pindar we are able to get a sense of a more rounded quest

narrative. He confirms Athena in the role of Perseus' helper, and refers to Perseus either hijacking or throwing away the eye of the Graeae ('he blinded the divine family of Phorcus'). He is also the earliest source to integrate the Gorgon mission into Perseus' family saga by telling us that he used the head against the people of Seriphos (*Pythians* 10.29–48, 12.6–26, of 498 and 490 BC).

Danae and Andromeda were favourite themes for dramatists of all sorts, but the Gorgon episode, surprisingly, seems to have been less favoured. Aeschylus' *Phorcides* (*frs* 261–2 *TrGF*), perhaps written in the 490s or 460s, is the only tragedy we know of to have focused on any aspect of the episode. Perhaps it was neglected by tragedians because it offered little opportunity for tragic conflict. As to other genres of drama, we can point only to a single satyr-play and single comedy. Aristias took second prize in 467 BC with a satyr-play named *Perseus* written by his father Pratinas (Aristias 8 T2 *TrGF*). An Attic lekythos dated to ca. 460 shows a satyr running with *kibisis* in one hand and *harpē* in the other (*LIMC* Perseus no. 31). Does this illustrate Aristias' play? In the fourth century Heniochus wrote a Middle Comedy entitled *Gorgons*, but the sole surviving fragment of this play is uninformative (*fr.* 1 *K-A*).¹²

The ancient summaries of the *Phorcides* (*fr.* 262 i–vi *TrGF*) tell that Perseus was sent against Medusa by Polydectes. Hermes supplied Perseus with the Cap of Hades and the winged boots, whilst Hephaestus supplied him with his adamantine *harpē*. The Graeae, here just two, served as advanced guards to the Gorgons, to whom they evidently lived adjacently. Perseus watched for the hand-over of the eye between them, snatched it and threw it in the Tritonian lake, and so was able then to approach the Gorgons directly and attack them as they slept. He took off Medusa's head and gave it to Athena for her breast, whilst she put Perseus amongst the stars holding the head. The sole directly quoted phrase to survive from the play, 'Perseus dove into the cave like a wild boar . . .' (*fr.* 261 *TrGF*), seems to have derived from a messenger speech describing Perseus' penetration of the Gorgons' cave to attack Medusa, since we hear elsewhere in the tradition that the Gorgons lived in a cave (Nonnus *Dionysiaca* 25.59, 31.8–25). Hermes would have been very comfortable in the role he plays here, for he provides Perseus with

equipment to which he himself has easy access. He flies with a pair of winged boots. He is a frequent visitor to the underworld as the escort of souls, and indeed he had worn the Cap of Hades himself in the battle against the giants (Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.6.). Clearly the Nymphs can have had no role in the drama, since Perseus had no need of them for his equipment.¹³

The Pherecydean version of the Medusa episode returns to the notion that Perseus was armed by the Nymphs rather than by Hermes, but Perseus' visit to the Nymphs is awkwardly thrust between his encounters with the Graeae and their sister Gorgons (FGH 3 fr. 26 = fr. 11, Fowler; see chapter 1 for the text; cf. Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.4.2, Zenobius *Centuriae* 1.41). The purpose of Perseus' meeting with the Graeae is now, in consequence, no longer to disarm the Gorgons' watchdogs, but to find directions to the extraneous Nymphs. Yet Hermes is still very much present as divine helper, and indeed seems to jostle rather awkwardly with Athena in this role, for all that they had been sharing the task for around a century and a half. This is particularly apparent in the directing of Perseus to the Graeae. Pherecydes evidently attempted to combine together a series of established variants in his crowded narrative.

A further indication of this is the fact that the Pherecydean narrative as it stands seems to be preparing Hermes for the role of direct armourer. When Hermes meets Perseus on the island of Seriphos en route to face the Gorgon, and gives him a pep talk, we are reminded of a thematically similar scene in the *Odyssey* (10.277–07). Here the hero Odysseus is en route across the island of Aeaëa to accost another dangerous woman with terrible powers, the witch Circe, who transforms men not into stone with her gaze but into animals with a magic potion. Hermes meets him as he goes, gives him the pep talk, and then directly arms him with a special plant, *mōly*, which (it remains unclear) is either to be consumed as an antidote against the potion, or worn as an amulet against Circe's magic more generally.¹⁴

What of Aeschylus' Hephaestus, who otherwise has no part to play in Perseus' myth cycle? Perhaps Aeschylus accepted from the Nymphs' variant the notion that Perseus should receive three gifts, whilst Hermes had traditionally been giving him just the relevant

two. In this case, Hephaestus will have been brought in as a stop-gap to supply a third item. Who worthier to supply Perseus with his famous sickle than the metal-working god himself?

PERSEUS' EQUIPMENT

Perseus acquired his winged boots by *ca.* 600 BC, from which point they are found on vases (*LIMC* Perseus no. 152), and then soon afterwards mentioned in the Hesiodic *Shield* (216–37). In later sources the notion that Perseus got them from Hermes hardened: Lucan (65 AD) is emphatic that Hermes gave Perseus his own boots (9.659–70), and the later second-century AD Artemidorus makes the point even more graphically by asserting that Hermes gave Perseus just one of his boots whilst keeping the other one himself (*Oneirocriticon* 4.63). In making the loan Hermes assimilates Perseus to himself. And indeed in much of his iconography Perseus, as a youthful, beardless hero with winged shoes or winged cap, or both, often strongly resembles Hermes in his, and it can sometimes be difficult to decide whether portrait images are to be assigned to our hero or to his divine patron. Why does Perseus need his winged shoes? Although they enjoy their most dramatic use after the deed when Perseus must fly to safety before the pursuing Gorgons, also on wings, they may also have been needed as the only means of reaching the otherworldly land of the Gorgons in the first place (see below).¹⁵

The *kibisis*, the bag in which Perseus carries the Gorgon's head once removed, is found already in the *ca.* 675–50 BC centaur-Medusa image (*LIMC* Perseus no. 117 = Fig. 3.1). Mention of it may be found in a papyrus scrap of the *ca.* 600 BC Alcaeus (fr. 255 Campbell = *Incerti Auctoris* fr. 30 Voigt), but otherwise it first enters the literary record in the Hesiodic *Shield* (224). Here it is said, in its artistic representation, to be made of silver and fringed with gold. Perseus receives the *kibisis* from the Nymphs in the Pherecydean version of the Gorgon mission, but we are not told whence he obtains it in versions without the Nymphs. In art it most commonly resembles a ladies' shoulder bag (*LIMC* Perseus nos. 29, 48a, 100,

104, 112, 113, 137, 141, 145, 161 [= Fig. 3.3], 170, 171, 192), more occasionally a sort of sash or hammock hanging from Perseus' arm (nos. 31, 159).

The special quality of the *kibisis* was evidently that it was able to serve as a secure toxic container for the head. Not only did the head have to be kept covered, but, in later sources at any rate, it could petrify simply through contact, as in the case of the creation of coral, and it could petrify inanimate material. A magical container was needed, therefore, if it was not itself to turn to stone, and was to hold back the contagion of petrification.

Perseus already has the Cap of Hades in the Hesiodic *Shield* (216–37), where it is said to bring 'the darkness of night' as he flees before the Gorgon sisters. Apollodorus later explains, more prosaically, 'With this he himself could see the people he wished, but he could not be seen by others' (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.2). In the Aeschylean version of the myth Perseus receives the cap from Hermes, in the Pherecydean from the Nymphs. Its early associations with darkness



Figure 3.3 Perseus absconds with the head of a fair Medusa in his *kibisis*. Athena attends.

and with Hermes give substance to its underworld origin, but its invisibility function was evidently determined from the first by an obvious pun: *Aïdos kuneē* could be construed equally as 'Cap of Hades' and 'cap of the unseen/invisible', as Hyginus realised (*On astronomy* 2.12). The literary tradition, after the *Shield*, tends to focus on the cap's role in concealing Perseus from the pursuing Gorgon sisters after the deed. But it surely entered Perseus' myth as a device to allow him to approach Medusa without her being able to fix her gaze on him. And as such, it provides us with early evidence for the notion that petrification was caused by the Gorgon's gaze, as opposed to by seeing the Gorgon's face. In the iconographic record Perseus sports a dizzying range of headgear, and sometimes none at all. Already on the centaur-Medusa he wears a wingless cap. Subsequently we find him also in a wingless *petasos*, a broad-brimmed hat (from ca. 550, e.g. no. 113); with head uncovered (from ca. 525, e.g. no. 124); in a winged cap (from ca. 500, e.g. no. 101); in a winged *petasos* (from ca. 450, e.g. no. 9); in a winged cap of the elaborate Phrygian style (from ca. 400, e.g. no. 69); in a winged griffin helmet (from ca. 350, e.g. no. 189); in a wolf-head hat, with or without wings (from ca. 350, e.g. no. 95); and in a wingless helmet (from ca. 300, e.g. no. 48). Perhaps we are meant to interpret anything Perseus is shown wearing on his head as the Cap of Hades, but the only images that can certainly be taken to represent it are the two in which the Nymphs present him with their gifts (nos. 87–8). In the second of these the Cap of Hades is shown as a wingless *petasos*. For all the prominence of winged headgear in his iconography, Perseus is never explicitly attributed with it in the literary sources. Wings may, perhaps, be an artistic device for conveying the evanescence of the Cap of Hades, but his headgear probably acquired wings initially as a convenient means of conveying the notion that he was wearing winged boots in head-only portraits (of the sort found in, e.g. nos. 16, 9–10, 68). But we do then find full-body portraits in which he nonetheless retains the winged cap, either with (e.g. nos. 91, 171) or without the winged boots (e.g. nos. 7, 8).¹⁶

In the centaur-Medusa image Perseus uses a sword to decapitate. It is in the art of the late sixth century that we first find him equipped with a *harpē* or sickle (*LIMC* Perseus nos. 114, 124 and 188). The

harpē first appears in literature in Aeschylus' *Phorcides*, where it is said to be the 'adamantine' gift of Hephaestus. It takes two principal forms in the iconographic tradition. In the earlier images it is a simple short sickle (e.g. *LIMC* Perseus no. 91). In later images, first found in the early fourth century BC, it can become a complex combination of sword and sickle, with both blades sprouting, often somewhat awkwardly and uselessly, from a single stem (e.g. no. 68; cf. the description at Achilles Tatius 3.6–7). The *harpē* is first heard of as an offensive weapon in Cronus' use of one to castrate Uranus (Hesiod *Theogony* 179, etc.), but it soon came to be an instrument associated particularly with the amputation of anguiform monsters: long thin snakes lend themselves to being 'reaped' like a crop. The analogy becomes particularly clear in images of Heracles confronting the Hydra with his *harpē*: its multiple upright snake-necks strongly resemble a crop (*LIMC* Herakles nos. 2003–4, 2012, 2016). Similarly, it was with a *harpē* that Zeus struck down the serpentine Typhon, who had a hundred snake heads, and whose legs consisted of coiling vipers (Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.6.3). And it was with a sickle that Hermes killed the 100-eyed (or 10,000-eyed) Argos, a humanoid monster in the extant tradition, but almost certainly a dragon in origin (Bacchylides 19.15–36, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.623–41, 664–88, 714–27, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.1.2–3). According to Lucan, Hermes used for this the very same sickle he later passed on to Perseus (9.659–70). The imagery of the reaping and harvesting of snakes is explicitly and repeatedly deployed by Nonnus in his references to Perseus' killing of Medusa (*Dionysiaca* 30.277 and 47.608, 'the reaper of Medusa', and, more elaborately, 25.40–4, 31.17–21). Evidently, the sickle remained an appropriate device to use against anguiform monsters even when it was not a question simply of reaping off their snakey bits. Perseus does not give Medusa a haircut, but severs her neck, although we should note that a pair of snakes often grows from Medusa's neck itself in iconography, as on the Corfu pediment (*LIMC* Gorgo no. 289; cf. also Perseus nos. 69, 113). So too Perseus deploys his sickle against the serpentine sea-monster, the *kētōs*, but he could hardly have aspired to amputate any (external) part of this massive creature with it (chapter 4).¹⁷

Perseus' shield was the last item of his canonical equipment to be elaborated by the tradition. In Pherecydes' account Athena and Hermes together hold up a mirror for Perseus as he attacks Medusa, but there is no indication that the mirror is a shield or that it is part of Perseus' own kit. From ca. 400 BC we find several pots depicting a moment of calmness after the decapitation in which Perseus uses either a polished shield or a round mirror or a pool of water to enjoy a reflected view of the Gorgon's face (*LIMC* Perseus nos. 66–80). Some of these may suggest that the vignette is to be viewed as an aetiology for Gorgon shield blazons. It is only with Ovid that we find Perseus specifically using his own polished bronze shield to effect the decapitation, though we are not told how he came by it (*Metamorphoses* 4.782–5). Subsequently we learn from Lucan that it was given to him by Athena (9.669–70; cf. Servius on *Aeneid* 6.289). Late Latin sources preserve an interesting twist, of uncertain antiquity. They tell that Athena gave Perseus a shield made of crystal or glass, through which he was able to look, but through which he could not be seen (Vatican Mythographers, First 130 Bode = 2.28 Zorzetti, Second 112 Bode, Scholiast Germanicus *Aratus* 147). The shield is thus partly assimilated to the Cap of Hades. The artists pay little attention to the use of a mirror or shield in the act of decapitation, though mention should be made of a fine second-century AD Roman relief from Hungary in which Athena holds up the shield for Perseus as he beheads a voluptuous Medusa (*LIMC* Perseus no. 132).¹⁸

WHERE DID THE GORGONS LIVE?

In the *Theogony* the Gorgons live beyond Ocean, the ring of water that surrounded the known world, near Night, i.e. where the sun sets, and where the Hesperides dwell, i.e. in the extreme west. Compatibly, the later sixth-century BC epic *Cypria* located the Gorgons on a rocky island called 'Sarpedon' in Ocean (*fr.* 30.1 West; cf. Pherecydes *FGH* 3 *fr.* 11, Palaephatus *On unbelievable things*, *FGH* 44 *fr.* 31, *Suda* s.v. *Sarpēdonia aktē*). Had it been turned rocky, like the island of Seriphos, by Medusa's gaze?

Pindar, however, implies that the Gorgons lived adjacently to the Hyperboreans, the mythical people who lived 'Beyond the North', whom Perseus also visited (*Pythians* 10.29–48, of 498 BC; cf. Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.5.11). He explains that their land was not reachable by normal means: 'Neither traveling by ship nor on foot could you find the amazing road to the Hyperborean gathering.' We appreciate the importance of Perseus' winged boots. The pseudo-Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* locates Graeae and Gorgons alike on the fantastical 'plains of Cisthene' and makes them neighbours of the marvellous Arimaspians (790–809; cf. Cratinus *Seriphians fr.* 309 K–A). Herodotus makes the Arimaspians in turn neighbours of the Hyperboreans and tells us that they are one-eyed, which makes them highly suitable neighbours for the Graeae. He also tells us that they were visited, exceptionally, by the flying soul of Aristaeus of Proconnesus, which evokes the means Perseus used to arrive in this impossible area (4.13). But the *Prometheus Bound* also contrives to locate Gorgons and Graeae in the far east and the far south too: they live beyond the eastern bound of Ocean, whilst the neighbouring Arimaspians are linked with the 'black' Ethiopians. The neglect of the one point of the compass, the west, in which Hesiod had placed them, is ostentatious, but such directional confusion serves well further to convey the otherworldly location of the Gorgons' home.¹⁹

But it was specifically Libya, i.e. northwest Africa, that was to become the Gorgons' canonical home (e.g. Herodotus 2.91). Pausanias tells us that the ca. 500 BC bronze reliefs on the Spartan temple of Athena Chalkioikos showed Perseus setting out for Libya, although it is hard to imagine how the destination was indicated (3.17.3). However, Libya was certainly the home of the Graeae, and presumably therefore too the Gorgons, in Aeschylus' *Phorcydes*, since Perseus threw the eye of the Graeae into Libya's Tritonian lake.²⁰

In due course, as the Libyan location of the Gorgons became established, it gave rise to two ancillary tales firmly grounded in the region. The first is the tale of Perseus' petrification of Atlas, who then gave his name to the mountain range in modern Morocco. Atlas had been associated with the Hesperides since Hesiod's *Theogony* (517–18). Our earliest trace, probably, of Perseus' encounter with

him is the image on a Attic vase of ca. 450 BC, in which we seem to have a surprised Atlas watching Perseus decapitate Medusa (*LIMC* Atlas no. 20). If the scene is correctly construed, this is in fact the only ancient image in which Perseus and Atlas are found together. Our earliest literary trace of the encounter is found in the sole fragment to survive of the dithyrambic poet Polyidus, whose floruit was ca. 398 BC (Polyidus *fr.* 837 *PMG/Campbell*). He told that Atlas was merely a shepherd petrified by Perseus because he would not accept his identity. The mountain took its name from him, but evidently it was not created in its entirety by the act of petrification in this version. We thank Ovid for our most detailed account of the episode (*Metamorphoses* 4.621–62; cf. also Second Vatican Mythographer 114 Bode). Here the giant Atlas is king of the extreme western edge of the world, and Perseus comes to him looking for shelter and rest, declaring himself to be a son of Zeus. Atlas fears that he may be the son of Zeus, Heracles, that is destined to steal his golden apples. These, the apples of the Hesperides, he has enclosed in an orchard guarded by a huge dragon-snake (*drakōn*). When he tries to drive Perseus off with violence, he is shown the Gorgon-head. This time the mountain in its entirety does indeed derive from the suitably vast victim: Atlas' head becomes the peak, his shoulders ridges, his hair woods.²¹

The second is the tale that drops of blood fell from Medusa's head as Perseus flew away with it, and upon falling to the earth below gave rise to the terrible snakes of Libya. The tale is first found in Apollonius (*Argonautica* 4.1513–17), but it is developed with particular relish by Lucan, who prefaces an extended treatment of these snakes with an account of their genesis (9.619–99). We then learn what they can do. When Aulus is bitten by the parching dipsad, he attempts to drink the sea dry, and in despair opens his veins so as to be able to drink his own blood (9.737–60). When Sabellus is bitten by a tiny seps, his body dissolves into the ground (9.762–88). A jactus shoots straight through Paulus' temples and out the other side (9.822–7). When Murrus drives his spear into a basilisk, its poison shoots straight up the shaft and into his arm, and he has to lop off the arm at the shoulder with his other hand to stop the galloping mortification (9.828–39).

The great heroes of Greek myth are often attributed with a *katabasis*, a descent to the underworld from which they return in triumph: so it is with Heracles, Theseus and Odysseus. Perseus is not explicitly associated with any such a *katabasis*, but some have read the Gorgon mission as one. The case is not strong, but might best be argued in the following terms. The Gorgons' extreme western location near the realm of Night in the *Theogony* (274–5) evokes the location of Odysseus' necromancy-*katabasis* (Homer *Odyssey* 11.12–23). A series of indications, beginning with the *Odyssey's* reference to Persephone sending up the Gorgon-head, might be taken to associate Medusa loosely with the underworld (see also Euripides *Ion* 989, 1053–4, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.5.12). Wilk has recently contended that the main features of the 'lion-mask' gorgoneion are typical of a corpse bloated after a few days' putrefaction. In such circumstances the eyes bulge, the tongue protrudes, the lips draw back and the hair separates from the scalp in supposedly snake-like curls. The Gorgon is thus rendered a simple emblem of death, and Perseus' slaughter of Medusa a triumph over death.²²

Underworlds have been found in other parts of the Perseus cycle too. Some have thought that Seriphos, with its lord Polydectes, 'Receiver of many', should be seen as one. But the name is more plausibly read as 'Receiver of much', and to refer to the contribution feast by which he compels Perseus to the Gorgon mission. It has also been contended that being swallowed by a whale or a sea-monster, as Perseus is in one version of the Andromeda tale, should be considered as akin to an underworld journey, but the case is a desperately tenuous one.²³

GORGON WEAPONRY

No victims of the living Medusa or the other Gorgons are ever named, but if all variants are taken into account, the tally of victims Perseus petrified with her decapitated head is extensive: Atlas (Polyidus *fr.* 837 *PMG*/Campbell, etc.); Phineus (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 5.1–235, etc.); the *kētōs* (Antiphilus at *Greek Anthology* 16.147, etc.); seaweed, to make coral (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 4.735–52,

etc.); Polydectes and the Seriphians (Pindar *Pythians* 10.46–8, 12.6–26, etc.) and indeed the island itself (Eustathius on Dionysius Periegetes 525); Acrisius (Lactantius Placidus *Commentary on Statius' Thebaid* 1.25.5, First Vatican Mythographer 137 Bode = 2.55 Zorzetti, Second 110 Bode); Cepheus (Hyginus *Fabulae* 64), Ariadne (Nonnus *Dionysiaca* 47.664–74) . . . and even himself (Malalas p. 39 Dindorf). How does the head do its work of petrification? Does the victim have to look at the Gorgon, or does the Gorgon have to look at the victim? The ancient tradition at first was not able to decide, but in due course, it seems, positively chose not to do so. One might seek to resolve this conundrum by hypothesising that petrification occurs when eyes of Gorgon and victim meet, when each gazes at the other, but such a hypothesis will hardly satisfy all the literary cases, e.g. that of the creation of coral.²⁴

Perseus' success depends upon his somehow being able to break the line gaze between himself and the Gorgon (whichever direction is significant), and the canonical accounts offer us no less than four different explanations as to how he was able to do this. (1.) Perseus beheaded her whilst turning his head away so that he could not look at her (first in the centaur-Medusa image). (2.) Perseus wore a cap of invisibility so that Medusa could not look at him as he tried to kill her (first in the Hesiodic *Shield*). (3.) Perseus attacked Medusa whilst she was asleep, so that she could not look at him (first in Aeschylus' *Phorcydes*). (4.) Perseus attacked Medusa using a mirror or reflecting shield, so that he did not look directly at her (first in Pherecydes).²⁵ Methods (1) and (4) assume that petrification occurs when a person looks at the Gorgon. Methods (2) and (3) assume that it occurs when the Gorgon looks at a person. For the remainder of the ancient tradition it was the former analysis that remained, by a shade, the more popular. It becomes pivotal in Malalas' account of Perseus' self-petrification, where the head signally fails to petrify Cepheus because of his blindness.

Lucan gives contradictory indications about the mechanism of petrification. On the one hand, he is emphatic that it is looking at the Gorgons that petrifies (9.636–41, 652–3). Indeed, it is for this reason that Athena advises Perseus to fly backwards over Africa towards the home of the Gorgons, to avoid accidentally catching sight of them

(9.666–8), and gives him the shiny bronze shield with which to find Medusa (9.669–70). On the other, Lucan asserts that the living Medusa had the power to draw stone over even inanimate things, such as land and sea, which implies that the power lies rather in her gaze (9.646–7). He notes too (following Ovid) that she can petrify animals, even specifying that she can drop birds out of the sky (9.649–53). But this observation may serve poetic wit more than natural history. For he makes the nice point that even Medusa's snakes themselves must avoid looking her in the face or be petrified. And for this reason those above her forehead are 'back-combed' into a hairstyle that would have been strikingly fashionable for the good Roman matrons of Lucan's day: 'They would lash Medusa's neck and she was delighted by this. In the fashion of female coiffure, the snakes hung loose over her back, but rose up straight over her forehead. Viperous poison flowed when she combed her hair' (9.633–9, 652–3). Lucan takes the conceit that Medusa's snakes have their own separate identity and consciousness further, when he represents them as standing alert and on guard as she herself sleeps (9.671–4).

A more complex handling of the ambiguity is found in Lucian's ephrastic description of Perseus' battle against the sea-monster in *The Hall*: 'That part of the *kētos* that had seen Medusa is already stone, but the part that remains alive is being hacked at with the sickle (*harpē*)' (22; see chapter 4). Here the fact that the *kētos* is only petrified in part in itself suggests that the effect is caused by the beam of the Gorgon's gaze. On the other hand, Lucian speaks – quite illogically – of the petrified parts of the body themselves 'seeing' the Gorgon.

As a monster with terrible glance, Medusa is appropriately adorned with snakes. Terrible serpents, whether large snakes or mythical dragons, were known by the term *drakōn*, which is usually regarded as cognate with *derkomai*, 'look.' The rich snake lore of antiquity includes the knowledge that Ethiopian snakes could flash fire from their eyes like lightning (Diodorus 3.36–7) and that basilisks could kill a man with a glance alone (Pliny *Natural History* 29.66). And indeed snakes could themselves be said to have the look of the Gorgon (Euripides *Heracles* 1266).²⁶

How does the actual process of petrification run, once initiated?

One might have expected it to begin from the victim's eyes or face, but the Greeks initially seem to have conceptualised the process rather as beginning from the ground. Two mid-fifth-century BC images of the petrification of Polydectes show him becoming encased in rough rock from the feet upwards (*LIMC* Polydectes nos. 7–8). The second-century BC Lycophronian *Alexandra* also understands the petrification process to begin from the ground, and to consist of an encasing in stone, but it sees the process as a more subtle one that produces not a mere boulder but an actual statue in which the original living detail is preserved (834–46; cf. Tzetzes on 844). The notion that the Gorgon-head should transform men into statues is taken up vigorously by Ovid. His Gorgons' lair is decorated with statues of men and beasts, their former victims (*Metamorphoses* 4.780–91). The conceit of statue-making pervades his elaborate account of the battle between Perseus and Phineus (5.117–235), and Perseus finally jokes that he will turn Phineus into a monument for Cepheus to keep. The account of the transformation suggests that Ovid sees the process as one of a gradual and uniform freezing into stone, and there is no indication that it begins from the ground (5.224–35). At the end of antiquity Nonnus follows a similar line: in battling against Dionysus his Perseus is urged to 'Change the mortal faces of the Bassarids with the eye of the Gorgon into images spontaneously. Decorate your streets with copied stone beauty, making finely wrought statues for Inachian [i.e. Argive] marketplaces' (*Dionysiaca* 47.560–3).²⁷

Nonnus alone offers a form of defence against the Gorgon's power. It is a diamond amulet that Dionysus lifts before his face as Perseus brandishes Medusa's head (*Dionysiaca* 47.590–606). As often, Nonnus here points up a parallelism between Dionysus and Perseus (see chapter 2): Dionysus' amulet is born 'in the rain of Zeus', just as Perseus himself had been born in Zeus' golden rain. No wonder, then, that Perseus himself had been able to withstand the living Gorgon.

What of the weaponry of the other Gorgons, the immortal Stheno and Euryale? Their only role in the myth is to pursue Perseus after the deed, and their names equip them well for it. 'Stheno' signifies 'Strength', whilst 'Euryale' signifies 'Wide Jump', a name

particularly appropriate to the kneeling-running posture in which the Gorgons were commonly portrayed in the archaic period (e.g. *LIMC* Perseus no. 154). Our sources seldom specify whether they too had the power to petrify, but the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* first suggests so in stating of all the Gorgons that ‘no man that has seen them will continue to draw breath’ (800). Such might also be implied by the fact that Perseus flees Stheno and Euryale wearing his cap of invisibility ([Hesiod] *Shield* 226–7, etc.), but then it is curious that in the pursuit scenes of art Perseus is often depicted as seemingly looking back into the eyes of the pursuing sisters. And, for what it is worth, the pursuing Gorgons, too, have their snakes (e.g. [Hesiod] *Shield* 233; *LIMC* Perseus no. 151).²⁸

There are indications that the two sisters, perhaps Euryale in particular, possessed a terrible weapon in their voices, a sort of aural equivalent to Medusa’s gaze, and this makes sense in view of the terrible open mouths and lolling tongues of the archaic gorgoneia. In the Hesiodic *Shield* the pursuing Gorgon sisters not only give out wild stares but, for all that a supposedly still and silent image is being described, gnash their teeth and create ‘a great ringing, sharp and shrill’ as they fly (231–5). Apollodorus’ description of the Gorgons as heavily metallic creatures, with golden wings and bronze hands, may explain the latter sound (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.2). Pindar speaks of ‘the destructive lamentation’ of the pursuing sisters, after hearing which Athena ‘made a tune for *auloi* [double oboes] that consisted of all sounds, so that she might imitate with her tools the noisy grief emanating from the swift jaws of Euryale’ (*Pythian* 12.6–26; cf. Tzetzes on [Lycophron] *Alexandra* 838). In his undatable *Perseis* epic Ctesias of Ephesus told that Mycenae was founded on the hill upon which the pursuing Gorgons finally came to rest after giving up their pursuit of Perseus as in vain. It was named *Mukēnai* after the bellow (*mukēma*) that the Gorgons gave forth there because of their misery ([Plutarch] *On rivers* 18.6). And Nonnus’ Athena challenges Dionysus with the words, ‘Did you face the competition that Perseus did? Did you see the stone-transforming eye of Stheno or the invincible bellowing throat of Euryale herself?’ (*Dionysiaca* 30.264–7; cf. 25.58, ‘Euryale’s bellow’). However, the frequently advanced notion that *Gorgōn* originally

signified ‘howl’, on the basis of its supposed connections with Greek *gargaris*, Latin *garrio* and Sanskrit *garḡ*, is erroneous, and not even countenanced in the technical linguistic literature.²⁹

THE CORRUPTION AND PUNISHMENT OF MEDUSA

For Pindar, writing in 490 BC, Medusa’s face was no longer monstrous but beautiful: ‘the head of the fair-cheeked Medusa’ (*Pythians* 12.6–26). From this point, too, the Gorgons of Perseus scenes in art are often represented essentially as beautiful young women, and no longer shown in ugly full-face. By the fourth century this has become the normal mode of their representation. It is unclear whether detached gorgoneia began to acquire beautiful faces from as early as the mid-fifth century, or only in the early Hellenistic period. All depends on the disputed date of the ‘Medusa Rondanini’ (*LIMC* Gorgones Romanae no. 25).³⁰

It is implicit in the *Theogony* and the bulk of the literary tradition that the Gorgons were born monstrous from the first. However, a back-story, which curiously left Stheno and Euryale out of account, was developed to explain how Medusa alone was transformed into a monster from an initial state of beauty. It is found first in Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 4.794–803, 6.119–20). Medusa had been a normal girl with beautiful hair. Her locks had attracted the attention of Poseidon, who, in the form of a bird, had seduced or raped her in a temple of Athena. The goddess punished the girl for the violation of her temple by turning her hair to snakes. That the patron god of horses should have raped Medusa in the form of a bird sufficiently accounts for the winged horse Pegasus as fruit of the union. This back-story is obviously congruent with the tradition of the ‘beautiful Medusa’ in art and it is possible that it was merely developed in the Hellenistic period or even by Ovid in response to it. But it seems to borrow the motif of the violation of Athena’s temple from the Auge–Telephus myth (discussed in chapter 2).

A later Latin source, Servius’ commentary on the *Aeneid*, also associates Medusa’s transformation from beautiful woman with her affair with Poseidon and the anger of Athena, but the logic is

different. Medusa, buoyed up by the admiration of Poseidon, boasts that her hair is fairer than that of Athena. Outraged by this, the goddess turns her hair into snakes (on 6.289; cf. Second Vatican Mythographer 112 Bode, Tzetzes on [Lycophron] *Alexandra* 838). This variant even more strikingly recalls another established episode in Perseus' story: Cassiopeia's boast that she herself was more beautiful than the Nereids, which brings the Nereids' anger down upon her, with the result that they ask Poseidon, in the opposite role, to punish her. The two punishments share a serpentine aspect.

THE FEMALE GROUPS: GORGONS, GRAEAE, NYMPHS, HESPERIDES AND NEREIDS

Strong thematic similarities obtain between the groups of female powers encountered in turn by Perseus in the course of his Gorgon mission. They all appear, on occasion, in triad form, and they may all be seen as offering a terrible threat, typically of a serpentine nature.

The Graeae, whose name signifies 'old women', first appear in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where they are two. They are not described as monstrous, but as 'beautiful-cheeked' and 'grey from birth', which seemingly implies that they were whole and otherwise youthful girls. We might even imagine them as blonde. In Aeschylus' *Phorcides*, perhaps of the 490s or 460s, where they are two again, they seem to have achieved their canonical form of old women sharing a single tooth and eye. In the Pherecydean account of ca. 456 BC they exhibit the same form, but have become three. The mid-fifth-century *Prometheus Bound*, which may or may not have been written by Aeschylus, perhaps melds all these traditions and gives us more in describing the Graeae as 'long-lived girls, three, *swan-shaped*, with a common eye and a single tooth' (794–6). Representations of the Graeae in ancient art are few, no more than six, all on vases made between ca. 460 BC and the Hellenistic period. We find no swans here, just disappointingly ordinary women, their blindness vestigially indicated by closed eyes.³¹

The Graeae are certainly a curious type of monster, but they are not unique in Greek myth. We hear also of Lamia (mentioned above), a beautiful Libyan woman loved by Zeus and so punished by Hera. Hera killed Lamia's children, the shock of which transformed Lamia herself into a child killer. Hera also turned her into a beast and deprived her of the ability to sleep. Zeus then mitigated this punishment by giving her the power to remove her eyes and keep them in a cup while she rested. According to Dio Chrysostom, the beast into which she was turned was serpentine. She remained a beautiful woman down to the waist, but became a serpent below, her nether part culminating in a serpent head. The Libyan context, the beautiful mortal woman punished by a goddess for her seduction by Zeus with a serpentine disfiguration, and the removable eyes all have a resonance for the Gorgon–Graeae myth (Heraclitus *De Incredibilibus* 34, Dio Chrysostom *Oration* 5, Scholiast Aristophanes *Peace* 758).³²

The Graeae possessed speaking names of some interest. The first two (from Hesiod) were Pemphredo, 'Wasp' (cf. *pemphrēdōn*) and Enyo, 'War'. The former puts us in mind of the wasp-like bodies of the Gorgons in one of their earliest depictions (*LIMC* Perseus no. 151). The name of the third was unstable. Apollodorus offers Deino, 'Terror', another highly appropriate name for the sister of a Gorgon (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.2; the corresponding fragment of Pherecydes, *FGH* 3 fr. 26 = fr. 11, Fowler, offers instead Iaino, 'Healer', probably a corrupt reading). On a fragmentary Hellenistic bowl we find the third Graea named Perso (*LIMC* Graiai no. 4; cf. Heraclitus *De Incredibilibus* 13, where 'Perso' may be an interpolation), then in Hyginus Persis (*Fabulae* preface 9, *On astronomy* 2.12). Less striking than the significance of these names, 'Destruction', appropriately, is their similarity to that of our hero himself, of which more anon.³³

The three Gorgons and the Graeae, also eventually three, were all alike daughters of Phorcys and Ceto, and therefore full sisters of each other. Both groups of sisters offered threats based upon vision and biting. The Gorgons were not only fringed with biting snakes, but also often displayed a full range of jagged teeth and indeed tusks in their grimacing mouths. Admittedly, it is hard to imagine how the

Gorgons or their snakes ever got close enough to a victim to bite him before petrification. The latent threat of the Graeae, we presume, is that they will bite their victim with their tooth, once identified with their watchful eye. We may imagine that such a bite was rather more deadly than that offered by the single crumbling molar of an ordinary old lady, and bear in mind again the affinities of the Graeae with the child-devouring Lamia. Both groups had to be outwitted by Perseus, and in both cases he took something away from them, a head and an eye. It is hardly surprising then that Palaephatus and the rationalising tradition after him should radically (re-)conflate the two groups (Palaephatus *On unbelievable things*, FGH 44 fr. 31, Servius on Virgil *Aeneid* 6.289; Vatican Mythographers, First 130 Bode = 2.28 Zorzetti, Second 112 Bode, Third 14.1 Bode, Scholiast Germanicus *Aratea* 82, 147 Bresyig).

We remain underinformed about the Nymphs or Naeads episode in the Medusa tale. In extant art they are three, but, as we have seen, they may also, like the Graeae, have been conceptualised as a pair. The vases portray them as beautiful young women and we hear of no monstrous features. Nor are we told that Perseus had somehow to get the better of them to secure their gifts. Even so, we may hypothesise that they possessed a sinister edge. If we look across to the Jason cycle, which has much in common with Perseus', as we shall see, we note that Jason's Argonaut Hylas encounters beautiful Naead-Nymphs whilst drawing water. They fall in love with him, and drag him into their spring to be with them for ever. Theocritus tells that these Nymphs were three in number, and names them as Eunice, Malis and Nycheia (Theocritus *Idylls* 13; cf. Apollonius *Argonautica* 1207–39).

Another group of female powers inhabits the fringe of the Medusa tale: the Hesperides. This group, too, seems to have exhibited some instability in number: Apollonius gives us three and names them as Hesperie, Erytheis and Aigle (*Argonautica* 4.1396–1449), but Apollodorus gives us four (*Bibliotheca* 2.5.11). Hesiod already associates the Hesperides with the Gorgons and Graeae in telling us that these two groups live 'beyond glorious Ocean at the edge of the world near Night, where the shrill-voiced Hesperides dwell' (*Theogony* 275). The rationalising Heraclitus goes so far as to

identify the Hesperides with the Graeae (*De Incredibilibus* 13, perhaps an interpolation). In the literary sources the Hesperides never directly enter the action of the Medusa story, and the closest connection they have with Perseus is through their brother Atlas, who guarded their apples (Tzetzes on [Lycophron] *Alexandra* 879). However, we seem to find Perseus pictured with the Hesperides, their tree and their apples on a fourth-century red-figure vase (*LIMC* Hesperides no. 62). In art the Hesperides are always humanoid, but their monstrous affinities with the Gorgons and the Graeae become apparent in the dragon-snake, named Ladon, whom they kept to guard their golden apples, and who, like the Gorgons and the Graeae, was a child of Ceto and Phorcys (Hesiod *Theogony* 333–6, Apollonius *Argonautica* 4.1396–8, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 4.647). He can be found winding around the Hesperides' tree on the red-figure vase. That the Hesperides could also be thought of as possessing a more internalised monstrous aspect may be suggested by the fact that Epimenides identified them with the Harpies (FGH 457 fr. 6b).³⁴

If we go further afield in the Perseus cycle, we find other comparanda again. The Nereids or 'Sea Nymphs' that Cassiopeia offended with her boasts constitute another group of female powers. Perseus does not encounter them directly, although he does have to deal with the – serpentine – *kētos* that Poseidon sent against Cepheus' land on their behalf (Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 2.4.3, etc.; chapter 4). The Nereids are never numbered for us, but Lucian devotes a dialogue to them in which two appear, named Iphianassa and Doris (*Dialogues in the Sea* 14).³⁵

These congruences may simply be a natural consequence of the long gestation and elaboration of the Perseus saga: such a process might invite the replication of motifs and assimilation between episodes. But they may in some cases provide clues to the presence of a distinctive folktale lurking in the prehistory of Perseus' saga, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Perseus is curiously linked by name with the female protagonists of his two principal adventures. In Hellenistic poetry at least Perseus himself is said to have borne the by-name *Eurymedōn*, 'Wide Ruler' (Apollonius *Argonautica* 4.1513, Euphorion fr. 18 Powell = *Supp. Hell.*

fr. 418). The *med*-element, which signifies 'Ruler', is found also in *Med-ousa* 'Female Ruler' and *Andro-med-a*, 'Man Ruler'. Similarly, his more familiar name strangely coincides with the variant names of the third Graea, Perso or Persis, as we have seen.³⁶

ATHENA, PERSEUS, BELLEROPHON AND THE DRAGONS

There is a basic parallelism also between Perseus' two monster fights. Both Gorgons and sea-monster or *kētōs* are anguiform or snake-formed creatures, against whom Perseus appropriately uses his sickle (see chapter 4 for more on the serpentine nature of the *kētōs*). Already in the *Theogony* the Gorgons are the children of Ceto (i.e. *Kētō*) whose name simply means 'Sea-Monster' and who seems to have been represented as one in art. Indeed Pliny ostensibly makes a full identification between Andromeda's *kētōs* and the mother of the Gorgons by applying the proper name 'Ceto' to it (*Natural History* 5.69). The general affinity between *kētē* (this is the plural form) and Gorgons was also sensed by artists at an early stage. Of three sixth-century images we find, in the first, a gorgoneion with a *kētōs* on its forehead (*LIMC* Ketos no. 12), in the second, a headless Gorgon whose arms consist of a pair of *kētē* (no. 19) and, in the third, the upper body of a Gorgon mounted on the neck of a *kētōs* (*LIMC* Gorgo no. 350).³⁷

The first individual with whom the Gorgon-head is associated in Greek myth is not Perseus, but the goddess Athena herself, who already wears it in battle in the *Iliad* (5.741–2). A less widespread tradition contrived to exclude Perseus completely from Athena's acquisition of the head. Euripides' *Ion*, written shortly before 412 BC, seems to speak of Athena having had a one-to-one combat with a single Gorgon monster born directly from the Earth, whose skin she then took to wear on her breast as the aegis (987–96). Later on Hyginus could cite Euhemerus for the notion that the Gorgon was killed directly by Athena (*Hyginus De astronomia* 2.12). At any rate, this parallel tradition serves to explain why Athena should be seen as Perseus' firm companion on his mission against Medusa.

Closely akin to this tale is that in which Athena took on and killed

another dragon-like, fire-breathing, earthborn monster actually called 'Aegis', and that too in Libya, although the creature had originated in Phrygia Catacecaumene, where it had 'burned up' the land. We know of it only from Diodorus' recycling (3.70.3–6) of the work of the second-century BC Dionysius Scytobrachion (*FGH* 32 fr. 8). We are not given a physical description of this monster, but its name (*Aigis*) implies that it bears some resemblance to a goat (*aix*), and its fire-breathing suggests that it contains a serpentine element, the ancients conceiving of snake-venom as distinctively fiery. As such, the Aegis seems to have borne a strong resemblance to the Lycian Chimaera killed by Bellerophon with Pegasus (Hesiod *Theogony* 319–25). It is described by the *Iliad* as a fire-breathing monster, a lion in front, a dragon-snake in the rear, and in the middle a goat or *chimaira* (6.179–83). In art the Chimaera is almost always represented as a lion with a goat's head growing up from the centre of its back and with its tail ending in a snake's head (*LIMC* Chimaira, Chimaira [in Etruria] *passim*, Pegasos nos. 152–235).³⁸

And Bellerophon brings us full-circle back to the Perseus cycle, both directly and indirectly. First, it was Bellerophon that benefited from Perseus' midwifery of Pegasus. It was he who, with Athena's help, tamed Pegasus and used him in his battle against the Chimaera (Pindar *Olympian* 13.63–6 and 84–90; cf. *Isthmian* 7.44–7). Secondly, Bellerophon's troubles and his own series of labours started when he became embroiled with Perseus' great uncle, Acrisius' brother Proetus, and his wife Anteia or Sthenoboea. When the young Bellerophon was staying with Proetus and Sthenoboea as a guestfriend, Sthenoboea fell in love with him. Her advances spurned, she lied to Proetus that Bellerophon had attempted to force her, whereupon Proetus sent him on to Iobates, king of Lycia, to be killed, since he himself did not want to be guilty of killing a guestfriend. Iobates attempted to accomplish the deed by sending Bellerophon against three terrible foes, including the Chimaera (Homer *Iliad* 6.152–202; Euripides *Sthenoboea* T iia Hypothesis *TrGF*). Of course it is an oddity of this story that Bellerophon should be associated with Proetus and Sthenoboea, co-evals of Acrisius, and yet have access to Pegasus, who was only created by the latter's grandson Perseus.³⁹

In the central vignette of Bellerophon's battle against the

Chimaera he attacks the creature from above astride the airborne winged horse Pegasus. This was a popular scene in art, and is found already from the early seventh century (*LIMC* Bellerophon no. 152 etc.). It was popular in literature too: 'And look at this man sitting on a winged horse: he slays the fire-breathing three-bodied force' (Euripides *Ion* 201–4; cf. *Stheneboea* fr. 665a TrGF; Hyginus *Fabulae* 57). Tzetzes supplies the most detail: 'Riding on Pegasus he slew the Chimaera by coating his spear with lead and throwing it into her fire-breathing mouth. The lead was melted by this fire and killed her' (on [Lycophron] *Alexandra* 17). This vignette is strongly evocative of the fashion in which Perseus attacks the *kētōs* from above, airborne with his winged boots (see chapter 4).

It is hardly surprising that a certain parallelism was detected between Perseus and Bellerophon in antiquity. Pausanias tells us that the deed of Bellerophon against the Chimaera was paired with that of his fellow Argive hero Perseus against the Gorgon in the decorations on Thraysmedes' throne of Asclepius at Epidaurus (2.27.2, ca. 375 BC). A pair of anomalous mid-fifth-century BC terracotta plaques from Melos shows Perseus riding a horse whilst lifting Medusa's severed head from her falling body as, in one plaque, a tiny Chrysaor springs out of her neck (*LIMC* Gorgo no. 310a, Perseus no. 166b). Wingless and fully grown though it be, the horse can only be Pegasus, and so Perseus is here strongly identified with Bellerophon. This becomes particularly clear when we compare another Melian plaque from the same period in which a very similar figure, again on a wingless horse, jabs his sword at the Chimaera below, occupying Medusa's position on the other plaque (*LIMC* Pegasos no. 160). Eventually the two heroes became confused to such an extent that the First Vatican Mythographer could devote a chapter of his mythological handbook to 'Bellerophon also known as Perseus' (71 Bode = 1.70 Zorzetti) and tell us that Perseus was sent against 'the Chimaera, the Gorgon and Medusa' (137 Bode = 2.55 Zorzetti).

PERSEUS AND JASON: QUEST NARRATIVES AND MYTHS OF MATURATION

There is a striking affinity between Perseus' quest narrative and that of Jason and his voyage with the Argo to fetch the golden fleece (Pindar *Pythian* 4, Apollonius *Argonautica*, with scholia, Diodorus 4.40–9, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 7.1–349, Valerius Flaccus *Argonautica*, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.9.16–28, Zenobius *Centuriae* 4.92, Hyginus *Fabulae* 12–23, *Orphic Argonautica*, Tzetzes on [Lycophron] *Alexandra* 175). The opening episode of Jason's story intriguingly maps onto both Acrisius' plight and Polydectes' trick. Pelias is the wicked king of Iolcus and half-brother to Jason's father Aeson, as Polydectes is half-brother to Perseus' adoptive father Dictys. He is warned by an oracle that he will be killed by a man with one shoe, the condition in which he encounters Jason, who has lost a shoe in crossing the river Anaurus. Pelias asks him what he would do if an oracle had foretold that someone was likely to kill him, and Jason replies that he would tell the person to fetch the golden fleece, the mission that Pelias then duly imposes upon him.

And so, like Perseus, Jason too is dispatched to the edge of the world, in his case in an easterly direction, to Colchis, to retrieve an impossible object. Like Perseus, Jason has divine help, from Athena, again, and also from Hera and Aphrodite. Like Perseus, he is aided by magical equipment, in this case his talking ship, the Argo, and the ointment of invincibility provided for him by Medea. Like Perseus' quest, Jason's is one of subordinate stages as he works his way towards his goal. These stages include encounters with a kaleidoscopic correspondence with Perseus'. As Perseus takes directions from the blind Graeae, so Jason takes directions from the blind seer Phineus (Odysseus too in his quest to reach home takes directions from another blind seer, Tiresias: Homer *Odyssey* 11.90–149). Phineus' name forges another sort of link with the Perseus cycle, the significance of which remains obscure.

Like Perseus, Jason and his Argonauts encounter groups of dangerous females. First, there is the community of murderous Lemnian women, who kill their partners after sleeping with them. Secondly, there are the three water-nymphs who snatch away the Argonaut

Hylas. Thirdly, there are the two Harpies, winged like the Gorgons, who snatch away or befoul Phineus' food, and who are then chased off by the Argonautic pair, the winged Boreads, in an inversion of the pursuit of the Perseus by the two surviving Gorgons. In Apollonius' version, further encounters with dangerous females are introduced on the model of the *Odyssey*: the witch Circe, the Sirens, and Scylla and Charybdis.

At the culmination of his quest Jason must do battle with a serpentine monster of his own, the unsleeping dragon-snake that guards the golden fleece, a monster therefore with affinities both to the Gorgons and to the *kētos*, but which in its gold-guarding role most closely resembles Ladon, the dragon-snake kept by the Hesperides to guard their golden apples. A famous vase painted by Douris in ca. 480 BC shows Jason being swallowed backwards by a magnificently drawn dragon, which suggests that in one version he may have attacked the creature from within, as the *Alexandra's* Perseus does Andromeda's sea-monster (*LIMC* Jason no. 32; cf. nos. 33–5). Indeed, like Perseus, Jason must also do battle with multiple dragon-related foes. He must deal also with the Spartoi, an army of men grown from the teeth of the Cadmean dragon-snake, and the terrible bulls that breathe fire in dragon-like fashion. Like Perseus, Jason acquires his bride, Medea, in the course of his adventures. Like Perseus, Jason secures the object he has been sent to retrieve, and returns with it to kill Pelias, with the help of Medea, an outcome reflecting Perseus' killing of both Polydectes and Acrisius. And also like Perseus in the Apollodoran account (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.4), Jason fails to take up the kingship of Iolcus, according to some, going into exile for the killing of Pelias.⁴⁰

The broad comparability between these two quest narratives suggests that, despite the superficially episodic nature of both, they exhibited a fundamental coherence for the ancient Greek mind.

'Single-shoed heroes' or *monokrēpides* like Jason (specifically at Pindar *Pythians* 4.75, Apollonius *Argonautica* 1.11, [Lycophron] *Alexandra* 1310, Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.9.16, Hyginus *Fabulae* 12) were typically boys on the verge of manhood who crossed significant boundaries to accomplish great feats. Jason at once crosses the great physical boundary of the river Anaurus into the territory he

intends to reclaim, and at the same time the metaphorical boundary between youth and manhood. Perseus too could be projected as a single-shoed hero. Herodotus tells that when he manifested himself in Egyptian Chemmis he often left behind a single boot (2.91.2–5). Later on, Artemidorus tells us that Hermes gave Perseus just one of his winged boots to wear (*Oneirocriticon* 4.63). Those who wish to see Perseus as a hero of *katabasis* or underworld descent may reflect that those being initiated into the mysteries of the underworld at Eleusis wore a single shoe for the experience.⁴¹

Indeed, for many, Perseus' Gorgon adventure represents a trial of initiation or maturation – a trial by which an adolescent proves himself worthy of incorporation into adult society – projected into myth. Its distinctive elements as such are the dispossession of a young prince, his acceptance of a dangerous mission as he reaches the threshold of adulthood, his journey, within this mission, to a marginal area where he acquires deadly weapons and overcomes a terrible foe. Much of this might also apply to the Andromeda episode, with the acquisition of a bride sealing the transition to adulthood. We have noted that one of the most satisfactory interpretations of Polydectes' obscure trick requires that Perseus should precisely be a boy desperate to prove himself a man. In art at any rate, Perseus is almost universally portrayed as a beardless adolescent (*LIMC* Perseus *passim*). Those who hold that Perseus' flight to the Gorgons or his battle with a sea-monster resembles a descent into the underworld may consider his return from them symbolic of his rebirth into a new life as a fully fledged adult.⁴²

OVERVIEW

We can not know whether a pre-existing Perseus added a Gorgon-slaying to his accomplishments, or whether Perseus was invented specifically to slay the Gorgon, a mysterious and evolving monster. The Medusa episode as a whole constitutes a tale of a classic quest type, with the various and varying stages by which Perseus makes his way to the Gorgons and accomplishes the deed all receiving their own elaboration. Long gestation in tradition generated a remarkable

set of correspondences between the female groups Perseus met in the course of his quest. The adventure may or may not represent, at some level, a paradigmatic trial of initiation or maturation. As the Medusa episode is framed by Perseus' Greece-based adventures, so this episode itself frames that of Perseus' encounter with Andromeda and the sea-monster, and it is to this that we turn next.

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