An archaeomythological investigation of the Gorgon

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Main content

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The figure of the Gorgon Medusa, slain by the Greek hero Perseus, has lived in the Western imagination for more than 2,500 years. Who is she, how and when did she appear, and why was she decapitated? This complex image that spread throughout the Greek world did not arise in a vacuum. Its roots reach deep into the Neolithic cultures of the ancient world. The beheading of Medusa by Perseus can be seen as the mythological expression of ideological and social patterns that are first evidenced in Greece during the Bronze Age. In this article I examine the polyvalent image of the Gorgon and related female imagery, coalesced from pre-Helladic elements, in relation to the cult of the hero that came to typify Greek society.

Historical Background

The Neolithic cultures that developed in Greece from the seventh to the fourth millennium B.C. produced rich sculptural and ceramic traditions that reflect aesthetic and ritual developments within mixed horticultural economies. The broad outlines of Neolithic beliefs are intrinsically tied to the seasonal activities of planting, harvesting, and working the soil. Central to the practice of horticulture is the observation that the decomposition of previously living matter nurtures the fertility of the earth. Within an agrarian context, concepts of the sacred are typically analogous to the cycles of the vegetable world. In mythic terms, the Sacred Source, imaged as female, is a metaphor for life giving birth to itself and absorbing itself in death. In other words, the goddess of death presides over the regeneration of life.

The overwhelming preponderance of female imagery surviving from the Neolithic period of southeast Europe indicates the centrality of women's domestic and ritual activities within the earliest cultural strata (see Hodder 1990, 61-63). Herodotus (1) referred to the indigenous people of Greece as Pelasgians who spoke a pre-Greek (pre-Indo-European) language.

Linguistic and archaeological evidence indicates that the “Greeks” developed from tribes of Indo-European speakers who began entering the Balkan peninsula during the Bronze Age and mixing with the indigenous non-Indo-European population (see Mallory 1989, 68-69). Gimbutas (1997, 312-13) sets the first arrival of Indo-Europeans into Greece no later than the Early Helladic II period between 2900 and 2600 B.C.

Over the centuries, an amalgamation took place between two contrasting social and ideological systems: the indigenous Old European horticulturalists who were primarily egalitarian and matrilineal and venerated deities of the earth, and the newcomers who are associated with a pastoral economy, an androcratic social structure, warfare, and the worship of sky gods (see Gimbutas 1991, 352-401).

It is generally believed that the Achaeans who came to occupy the Peloponnese developed, by the sixteenth century B.C., into the rich and powerful Mycenaean culture that dominated mainland Greece and the Minoan culture on Crete. A so-called Dark Age (early Iron Age) followed the wholesale destruction and collapse of the Mycenaean empire around 1200 B.C. Between the eleventh and ninth centuries B.C., a pastoral economy prevailed, headed by chiefly warriors. The old aristocratic order was eventually replaced by a class of...

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An Archaeomythological Investigation of the Gorgon. The figure of the Gorgon Medusa, slain by the Greek hero Perseus, has lived in the Western imagination for more than 2500 years. Who is she, and how and when did she appear, and why was she decapitated? This complex image that spread more. The figure of the Gorgon Medusa, slain by the Greek hero Perseus, has lived in the Western imagination for more than 2500 years. Who is she, and how and when did she appear, and why was she decapitated? This article examines the polyvalent image of the Gorgon and related female imagery, coalesced from pre-Helladic elements, in relation to the cult of the hero that came to typify Greek society. Save to Library. Download. In Greek mythology, a Gorgon is a mythical creature portrayed in ancient literature. While descriptions of Gorgons vary and occur in the earliest examples of Greek literature, the term commonly refers to any of three sisters who had hair made of living, venomous snakes, as well as a horrifying visage that turned those who beheld her to stone. Traditionally, two of the Gorgons, Stheno and Euryale, were immortal, but their sister Medusa was not and was slain by the demigod and hero Perseus.