

## The Gorgoneion and the Evil Eye: Cultural Importance and Acceptance of Apotropaic Iconography in the Ancient Greco-Roman World

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*The use of apotropaic iconography, such as the gorgoneion and “evil eye”, was not isolated solely within the taboo field of witchcraft but rather was more commonplace and widely accepted as an appropriate religious practice that thrived in the Greco-Roman World. Understanding the apotropaic nature of specific imagery from the ancient world is key to understanding the reasons behind why these typically fringe magical practices were often routine within this context. The ubiquity of these motifs can be attributed to their power as apotropaic figures, which, in part, comes from the imagery’s association with powerful authority figures. The figures that are often associated with the gorgoneion specifically provide further credence to the iconography’s cultural acceptability. This acceptability is supported through the associated individual’s nature as popular and well-respected mythological or historical leaders, such as Athena and Marcus Aurelius, amongst others. The diverse use in many spheres of life both the gorgoneion and the apotropaic eye display in ancient Greek material culture provides further evidence toward their acceptance and religious recognition. Additionally, their use around spaces that one desires to protect- the home, temple, graves- implies a level of trust and respect for the icon’s apotropaic power. This iconography also persisted in popularity into the Roman era as many Roman era artifacts are found that seem to serve the same purpose as their Greek counterparts.*

### Introduction

In the Ancient Greek and Roman worlds there was much to fear- monsters, plagues, wars, and angry gods. The world had many dangers, and there was little they could do to feel safe, so oftentimes ancient people developed ways to find security and comfort. Apotropaic objects and images are those that would contain and employ a protective magic that gives the object or image the ability to shield the user from evil.<sup>1</sup> Apotropaic objects and imagery were used all throughout the ancient world in various forms. Often these objects and the iconography associated with them were labeled as subcultural *superstitio* in scholarship and separated from their religious practices by labeling them as magic, which was always seen as *superstitio* by the ancients.<sup>2</sup> *Superstitio* is the Latin term to describe what is essentially the antithesis of *religio*, or the concept of accepted religious practice. A Greek term that denotes a somewhat similar concept is *δεισιδαιμονία*, which literally means “fear of the gods”.

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<sup>1</sup>Reema Raihana Habib, "Protective Magic in Ancient Greece: Patterns in the Material Culture of Apotropaia from the Archaic to Hellenistic Periods," (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2017), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 147.

*Δεισιδαιμονία* differs from *superstitio* in that, until the end of the fourth century BCE, the term was more respectful and had less of the negative connotations that are aligned with modern superstition.<sup>3</sup> *Δεισιδαιμονία* and *superstitio* are considered against the norm, or part of the sub-cultural space, and more often than not were considered taboo.

Despite the negative connotations of typical apotropaic practice, using iconography such as the gorgoneion and the evil eye was a widespread and socially acceptable practice, far beyond what would be normal for imagery labeled as *superstitio*. The gorgoneion has power and cultural ubiquity due to its connection to many Greek mythic, divine, and historical figures. Furthermore, the imagery of gorgoneion and apotropaic “evil” eye appear all throughout the ancient Greek world, from jewelry and pottery to weaponry and architectural features. This frequency of use and the trust in this iconography’s apotropaic power was so culturally consistent that this imagery continued to appear through into Roman times. This show that these two forms of apotropaic iconography went beyond the narrow practice of *superstitio* and was instead widely accepted cultural imagery that was a central religious feature of the Greco-Roman world.

## Literature Review

Current scholarship on the gorgoneion and evil eye’s apotropaic nature emphasizes their use to ward against bad luck and misfortune. This research aims to achieve a thorough examination of these figures’ place in the wider world, beyond simply what they do. To show that this imagery was used consistently throughout the Greco-Roman Periods as a form of accepted cultural and religious practice.

Derek Collins’ “Magic in the Ancient Greek World” will provide background on the nature of *superstitio*. “Apotropaia and Phylakteria: Confronting Evil in Ancient Greece”, written by several authors and edited by Maria Spathi, Maria Chidioglou, and Jenny Wallensten helps to put the use of apotropaic items into context. The book by Frederick Thomas Elworthy, “The Evil Eye: An Account of This Ancient and Widespread Superstition” alongside John H. Elliott’s “Beware the Evil Eye: The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World, Volume 2- Greece and Rome” provide background information on the apotropaic and evil eyes and their use in ancient Greece and Rome. More information from Sheramy D. Bundrick’s “Athenian Eye Cups in Context”, W. L. Hildburgh’s “Apotropaism in Greek Vase-Paintings”, and Andrew Prentice’s “Athenian Eyecups of the Late Archaic Period” is provided to help explain the apotropaic eye’s use in pottery and the cultural context of said pottery. This research will be used to further the assertion that these representations of the apotropaic eye are commonly accepted in Greek and Roman society and was used within their practices.

Madeleine Glennon’s article “Medusa in Ancient Greek Art” provides detailed information about the history of Medusa’s image appearing within art. While Lesley A. Beaumont’s “Childhood in Ancient Athens: Iconography and Social History”

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<sup>3</sup>Hugh Bowden, “Before Superstition and After: Theophrastus and Plutarch on Deisidaimonia,” *Past & Present* 199, no.3 (2008): 56–71. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtm059>.

gives information about the use of apotropaic amulets. Reema Raihana Habib's "Protective Magic in Ancient Greece: Patterns in the Material Culture of Apotropaia from the Archaic to Hellenistic Periods" and Anna Lazarou's "Metamorphoses of the Gorgo-Medusa from Archaic Greece to Late Antiquity" will also be used to provide background information on the apotropaic figures of the eye and the gorgoneion. The power of the gorgoneion will then be expanded on in Bebina Milovanovic and Jelena Andjelkovic-Grasar's "Female Power That Protects: Examples of the Apotropaic and Decorative Functions of the Medusa in Roman Visual Culture from the Territory of the Central Balkans" as we look at more material examples of the gorgoneion in the Roman era. Specifically, those mentioned in another of Anna Lazarou's works titled "Golden Gorgon-Medousa Artwork in Ancient Hellenic World" which focuses on the material evidence of depictions of the gorgoneion in gold. Examining the material record is common in the research drawn from Stephen Scully's "Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight." Which examines shields from ancient Greece and their adornments. This research, however, combines these sources alongside a number of primary sources to expand upon the nature of these iconographic depictions. Using them to show not just that this imagery is apotropaic, but to explain why it is apotropaic and why this apotropaic imagery goes beyond the simple *superstitio* and into the realm of religious practice.

## Methodology

The primary focus will be on a study of material culture through material and contextual analysis of artifacts such as pottery, statuary, jewelry, architecture, and weaponry to provide evidence towards the cultural acceptance of this apotropaic iconography. There will be discussions not only about the abundance of the material that is found, but also the significance of where it has been found, what it is made of, who likely owned it, and how long these images were popular. Examining the evidence the artifacts themselves provide about the world they were created in. Support will be provided by the primary material evidence along with primary written sources from contemporary authors such as Homer and Plutarch. These sources will be used to provide background information on the imagery itself from contemporary sources. This is to make the importance and acceptance of this iconography clear by providing ancient context to the modern examinations of the apotropaic nature of these artifacts.

## Background

The gorgoneion is the name used when referring to the visage of the monster called the gorgon, typically the most well-known of the three, Medusa. Medusa is the winged, snake haired monster known for her ability to turn men to stone with her gaze along with her headless demise at Perseus's hand. There are many variations on the myth, from the ancient Greek versions by author's Homer, Hesiod, and the poet Pindar; to the Roman reinterpretation presented by Ovid. Sometimes this apotropaic

image of the gorgon appears as a full-bodied monster, and sometimes the image of her ferocious face is all that is displayed. The apotropaic nature of this image comes, in part, from the power of the mythic monster herself. Her grotesque and deadly gaze towards her enemies is symbolically utilized on behalf of those using her image.<sup>4</sup>

The apotropaic eye has its own origins behind its use as a ward against evil. The evil eye is well known; it existed within many cultures throughout the ancient world and has persisted into the modern one. The earliest representations and beliefs surrounding the evil eye come from Mesopotamia and Egypt, and as with many things from those two cultures, those beliefs were absorbed into Greek culture and from there into Roman practices.<sup>5</sup> This image of the malevolent eye that brings harm to those around them was common in the ancient world.

The evil eye is also known as the ὀφθαλμὸς βάσκανος, which translates roughly to 'evil eye' as βάσκανος translated to slanderous or malicious and ὀφθαλμὸς translates to eye.<sup>6</sup> The evil eye was not exactly based in mythology like the gorgoneion, rather the evil eye is more of a belief in the malevolent power or curse of the eye itself.<sup>7</sup> This belief in the power of an envious look or the depiction of a malicious eye is written about by many Greek and Roman authors, one of the earliest being Plutarch in his *Quaestiones Convivales* - "Now, when men thus perverted by envy fix their eyes upon another, and these, being nearest to the soul, easily draw the venom from it, and send out as it were poisoned darts, it is no wonder, in my mind, if he that is looked upon is hurt."<sup>8</sup> The implication is that the envy, anger, or ill-intent behind the eye is what give the eye its power. The idea behind then using the likeness of an eye in an apotropaic nature is to then ward off the evil eye using its own image. The apotropaic, or "anti", evil eye developed from the sympathetic "like affects like" magic and depictions of damage being done to the evil eye.<sup>9</sup> Thus, one was using the iconography of the evil eye to defend against the literal evil eye.

## Mythic Origins of the Gorgoneion

The regular use of these figures will be expanded upon later but let us first touch further on the origins of these apotropaic images, starting with the gorgoneion and its impressive power. The gorgoneion was considered a powerful apotropaic object, in part, due to its link with powerful figures- mythic, divine, and historical. The gorgoneion was originally used by Perseus after he killed the gorgon Medusa and cut off her head. After beheading the gorgon, he uses her head against a large sea monster as he saves Princess Andromeda. This was the beginning of this figure's

<sup>4</sup>Madeleine Glennon, "Medusa in Ancient Greek Art," Met Museum, last modified March 2017, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/medu/hd\\_medu.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/medu/hd_medu.htm).

<sup>5</sup>John H. Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye (Volume 2): The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World: Greece and Rome* (Eugene: The Lutterworth Press, 2016), 30.

<sup>6</sup>Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, "βάσκανω" In *A Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 310.

<sup>7</sup>Nigel Wilson, "Evil Eye" In *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece*. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 284-285.

<sup>8</sup>Plutarch, *Quaestiones Convivales* 5.7.3.

<sup>9</sup>Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye*, 366.

mythic power, as Medusa's visage was still powerful even after her death. Additionally, its power was now used to aid a hero rather than as the tool of a monster. Perseus later gave the head of the Gorgon to the goddess Athena, and she bore it upon Zeus' shield, the Aegis.<sup>10</sup> This then leads to the next phase of the gorgoneion's mythic story, as the terrifying embellishment worn by Athena and Zeus as the central image of the Aegis shield. Although, there are many artistic representations of the goddess Athena bearing the gorgoneion as a pin holding together the Aegis in the form of a protective goatskin.<sup>11</sup> These artifacts showcase the divine authority this image had due to its association with two of the most powerful and important deities in the ancient world. From these divine figures the image of the gorgoneion on shields spread to other mythic heroes. In book eleven of the *Iliad*, Homer describes Agamemnon's shield as bearing not only the gorgoneion, but also the physical heart-stopping power the monster herself had. "Heart-freezing Onslaught and thereon is set the head of the grim gigantic Gorgon, a thing of fear and horror"<sup>12</sup> Achilles is also often displayed holding a shield adorned with the gorgoneion in pottery from the early classical period.<sup>13</sup> It is often assumed to be the shield he receives, delivered by his mother, from Hephaestus even though Homer never describes the shield as such.<sup>14</sup> This association with powerful figures is also displayed with eye-cups. The cup in figure 3 showcases the images of Herakles and Athena in between a set of eyes. The eyes provide additional apotropaic power to the mythic figures which in turn normalize to the use of the object.<sup>15</sup> These mythic semi-historical figures give the image of the gorgoneion power, legitimacy, and prestige in their association. Furthermore, there is even more legitimacy given to the use of the gorgoneion as a powerful image when historical figures like Alexander the Great are depicted wearing and emulating it. The statement made when a figure like Alexander the Great is associated with something mythic is that they two have the power and strength of the harkened being.<sup>16</sup> Especially a figure whose renown survives so long, as both mosaics featured were made at the start of the Roman Republic, in port cities.<sup>17</sup> The familiarity of such a historic figure would only increase the popularity of the icon. The combination of all these powerful associations- the mythic, the divine, the historic that gives credence to why this figure had become so popular. When one wants to emulate strength, they mimic those they perceive to be strongest, their heroes and leaders.

<sup>10</sup>Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 4.706. Translated by Brookes More.

<sup>11</sup>See reference images 1-4.

<sup>12</sup>Homer, *The Iliad* Book II, line 742. Translated by Richmond Lattimore

<sup>13</sup>See reference image 5.

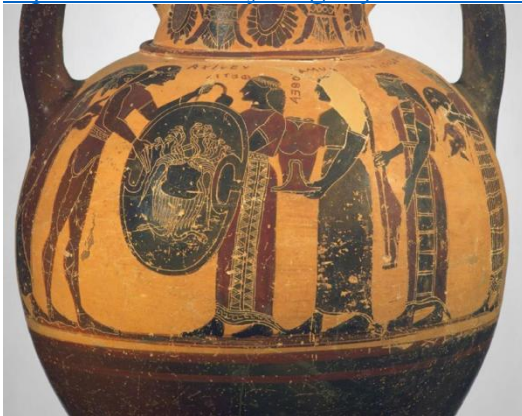
<sup>14</sup>Stephen Scully, "Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight" *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 101 (2003): 33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3658523>.

<sup>15</sup>Sheramy D. Bundrick, "Athenian Eye Cups in Context," *American Journal of Archaeology* 119, no. 3 (2015): 319.

<sup>16</sup>See reference image 6.

<sup>17</sup>See reference image 7.

**Figure 1.** *Camtar Painter, Two-handed jar (neck-amphora) depicting the arming of Achilles, 560-550 BCE, Terracotta, black-figure pottery, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/153416>*



**Figure 2.** *Birth of Athena Black-Figure Tripod, 570-560 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure Pottery, Louvre Museum, Paris*



**Figure 3.** *Attributed to the Painter of Villa Giulia Attic Black-Figure Eye Cup, 530 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure Pottery, J. Paul Getty Museum, Pacific Palisades, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103W3D#full-artwork-details>*



Let us now look closer at the material remains which support the fact that these iconographic figures were commonplace enough to the point of religious connotations. Artifacts across several mediums showcase strong and clear evidence

towards the claim that these images were widely used. This is due to the surplus of material remains and the context for which they were used. The wide variety of places and purposes these iconographic objects were used implies a level of familiarity and cultural acceptance that goes beyond simple *superstitio* and into the field of everyday religious practice.

**Figure 4.** *Mosaic Floor of a House depicting the Head of Medusa, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, Tile, Mosaic, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Photo taken by Author*



### Athenian Eye-cups and the Gorgoneion in Pottery

As the apotropaic eye developed in its popularity and power, the eye itself began appearing on its own. Athenian eye-cups showcase this use of the apotropaic eye perfectly. There is some debate as to what misfortune the apotropaic eye displayed in the eye cups was meant to be warding off. Researchers theorize that the practice of painting the apotropaic eye on the exterior of the cup was meant to protect against the contamination of the beverage during drinking.<sup>18</sup> These eye-cups were often used during symposia by wealthy and influential people, purchased with explicit intent. This is supported by the fact that eye-cups were typically shared as a communal cup passed from one symposiast to another. These cups would have been especially chosen or outright commissioned by the individual hosting the symposium. The cup would be used at only that symposium, after which it was disposed of or traded away. They were traded on aesthetic alone as they were not functional for storage, supporting the assumption that they would have to have been initially very expensive.<sup>19</sup> The extravagant single-use nature supports the idea that they were popular symbols for displaying power. Additionally, Athenian eye-cups even often use apotropaic eyes around the outside in tandem with the gorgoneion image painted at the bottom of the inner cup.<sup>20</sup> This further supports the apotropaic nature of these

<sup>18</sup>W. L. Hildburgh, "Apotropaism in Greek Vase-Paintings," *Folklore (London)* 57, no. 4 (1946): 157.

<sup>19</sup>Andrew Prentice, "Athenian Eyecups of the Late Archaic Period," *Electronic Melbourne Art Journal* no. 2 (2007): 4.

<sup>20</sup>See reference images 8-10.

eye cups. Especially seeing as the gorgoneion was a common motif in other pottery work as an apotropaic image of protection.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 5.** *Bronze Neck-amphora (jar) with Lid and Bail Handle, Last Quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Bronze, Plateware, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/255060>*



**Figure 6.** *Terracotta Kylix: Eye-cup (drinking cup), 530 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure Pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248177>*



### Apotropaic Jewelry

There is evidence of an abundance of material remains bearing the image of the gorgoneion and apotropaic eyes as medallions, pendants, and beads worn as jewelry or adornment. In the case of the apotropaic eye the most common remains found are glass eye beads that were strung into necklaces.<sup>22</sup> Although there are other examples of the use of the apotropaic eye as jewelry. In a museum in Carthage, there are many examples of pendants recovered from tombs that display animal heads with one

<sup>21</sup>See reference images 11-12.

<sup>22</sup>See reference images 13-15.

large third eye on the side of the animal.<sup>23</sup> There is evidence of children having worn these protective amulets in one form or another on from red figure and white ground pottery.<sup>24</sup> There is also abundant evidence that the gorgoneion was worn by the large number of material remains, specifically gold material remains. These ornaments and the wealth displayed in obtaining them furthers that belief that these apotropaic figures were often used by the wealthy to protect themselves and loved ones.<sup>25</sup> The overwhelming number of these artifacts shows that these apotropaic images were acceptable in society to the point that people would openly display them as adornment and that they were respected as apotropaic icons to the point of such acceptance.<sup>26</sup> Like Athena herself, the ancient Greeks wore these objects prominently, making sure their defense was evident to all.

**Figure 7.** Glass Eye Beads, 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Glass, Jewelry, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/24249959>



<sup>23</sup>Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye: An Account of This Ancient and Widespread Superstition* (New York City: Julian Press, 1986), 127.

<sup>24</sup>Lesley A. Beaumont, *Childhood in Ancient Athens: Iconography and Social History* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 62.

<sup>25</sup>Anna Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon-Medousa Artwork in Ancient Hellenic World," *SCIENTIFIC CULTURE* 5, no. 1 (2019), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1451898>

<sup>26</sup>See reference images 16-21.

**Figure 8.** Gold Pendant in the Form of a Gorgoneion (Gorgon's face), 450 BCE, Gold, Jewelry, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/242831>



## Weaponry

The gorgoneion was also often seen adorning weaponry and armor, harkening back to the mythic figures it is associated so prevalently with.<sup>27</sup> Athena and Zeus bore Aegis, the fierce shield that was made from the monster's head. This likely was the inspiring motive for the gorgon's image to appear upon the shield of Agamemnon and Achilles. It makes sense then that ancient Greek warriors aimed to emulate the goddess of war and two of the greatest Greek heroes, the King of the Mycenae and *áristos Akhaiôn*- best of the Greeks. This use of the iconography would also physically embody its apotropaic nature, with the intent of safeguarding the warriors in battle. This is more evident by the armor pieces from ancient Greece that bear the image of the gorgoneion. The guard physically protects the body, while the gorgoneion supernaturally provides assistance to the warrior by warding off misfortune on the battlefield.

**Figure 9.** Bronze Greave (shin guard), 450 BCE, Bronze, Armor, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/256033>



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<sup>27</sup> See reference images 22-25.

**Figure 10.** *Terracotta painted Gorgoneion Antefix (roof tile), 540 BCE, Terracotta, Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253581>*



**Figure 11.** *Terracotta Gorgoneion Antefix (roof tile), 2<sup>nd</sup> Half of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Terracotta, Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250968>*



### Architectural Features

Along these lines, when the apotropaic iconography of the gorgoneion is displayed so openly it implies a level of acceptance and commonplace in the community that means no one would question its inclusion. It is the same for architectural features that display these same iconographic figures. There is a myriad of antefix decorative roof tiles that display the gorgoneion.<sup>28</sup> Many display the gorgon's features as brutal and ugly, evoking her petrifying gaze and the power behind it to protect their homes and temples. The west pediment of the Archaic period Corcyra, Temple of Artemis displays this monstrous open-mouthed and growling figure to protect the temple.<sup>29</sup> The use of this image within the temple has deeper connotations to the gorgoneion's pervasive religious applications. As permanent fixtures, architectural features are always in use and the more visible the feature the more important the imagery typically was. Additionally, there are features within temples, such as hanging votives, that also show the gorgoneions acceptability as an

<sup>28</sup>See reference images 26-28.

<sup>29</sup>See reference image 29.

appropriate offering to the gods.<sup>30</sup> While not on land, the apotropaic eye was used to adorn boats much the same way as they were either painted or carved and then placed on the prows of ships, a practice that has existed since the Late Bronze Age.<sup>31</sup> As time went on and art evolved so did the gorgoneion's appearance. By the late Classical period the gorgoneion's features settled into a softer, more pensive look.<sup>32</sup> This shows that although styles may have changed to display the image as less horrific, its inherent power remained. The frequency of use as evidenced by the numerous antefix tiles shows once again a great level of social acceptance in apotropaic power. Especially as the image was trusted enough to protect homes and temples.

## Coinage

This theme continues further still as the gorgoneion permeates near all aspects of ancient Greek life, this time in the form of coinage.<sup>33</sup> The use of this iconography on coins likely extends back past the Archaic period and into the Hellenistic. With this the gorgoneion only asserts its into the realm of wealth and power even further. The wealthy could afford to buy various ceramic and golden apotropaic talismans to protect themselves, their homes, their families. Why wouldn't they also protect that money with that same apotropaic power? This use in daily life, passed from hand to hand, would only serve to make the image of the gorgoneion even less taboo- normalizing it for everyday use.<sup>34</sup>

**Figure 12.** *Drachm (Coin) Depicting the Gorgon Medusa, 411-356 BCE, Silver, Coinage, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/5758/drachm-coin-depicting-the-gorgon-medusa>*



<sup>30</sup>Spathi, Maria G. "The Interpretation of Clay Gorgoneion-Roundels in Sacral Contexts: Evidence from the Sanctuary of Artemis Limnatis at Ancient Messene." In *Apotropaia and Phylakteria: Confronting Evil in Ancient Greece*, eds. Maria G Spathi, Maria Chidioglou, and Jenny Wallensten, (Oxfordshire: Archaeopress, 2024), 94.

<sup>31</sup>Habib, "Protective Magic," 3.

<sup>32</sup>See reference images 30-31.

<sup>33</sup>See reference images 32-35.

<sup>34</sup>Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 13.

## Grave Stele

It makes sense then, that is the iconography of the gorgoneion has permeated near every aspect of life, then it too should follow one into death. The gorgoneion has been shown to adorn ancient Greek grave stele as an apotropaic protection for the dead.<sup>35</sup> Although there are not many surviving examples of the gorgoneion on grave stele, the image appears on numerous other types of grave goods, such as funerary garb.<sup>36</sup> This apotropaic protection could have had many underlying intentions. It could be to protect their loved one on their way into the Underworld, guiding them across the river Styx and toward their final resting place. The image of gorgoneion could also be meant to protect the grave itself from being disturbed by robbers or supernatural elements performing necromantic rituals. The apotropaic image could be to protect the living from the possibility of an unsettled spirit returning on its own. This goes to show that the gorgoneion once again had a determined level of apotropaic power that can protect the dead and their resting places.

**Figure 13.** *Part of the Marble Stele (grave marker) of Kalliades, 550-525 BCE, Marble, Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254818>*



## Roman Apotropaic Iconography

The Romans also used the image of gorgoneion to display the power and prestige of important historical figures such as Marcus Aurelius and Septimius Severus.<sup>37</sup> They also had no shortage of the image in their pottery. There is evidence of it adorning their vases, jugs, and plates as protective decorations.<sup>38</sup> However, the Romans use this iconography in their pottery in ways that the Greeks did not. There is evidence of decorative votive shields and glass plates, used to symbolize protection and strength. Also, rather than eye-cups being the main example for apotropaic pottery, it seems the

<sup>35</sup>Anna Lazarou, *Metamorphoses of the Gorgo-Medusa From Archaic Greece to Late Antiquity*, (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2025), 68.

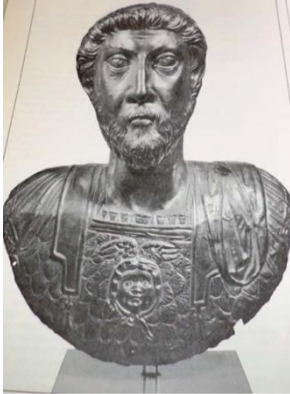
<sup>36</sup>See reference images 36-41.

<sup>37</sup>See reference image 42.

<sup>38</sup>See reference images 43-46.

Romans prefer gorgoneion decorated oil lamps. Perhaps the gorgoneion was meant to provide a sense of comfort and security through the darkness of nighttime.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 14.** *Golden bust of Marcus Aurelius with the gorgoneion on the chest, 170 – 180 CE, Gold, Statuary, Lazarou, “Golden Gorgon,” 11-12.*



**Figure 15.** *Peridot Ring Stone, 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE- 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, Peridot, Jewelry, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/244991>*



**Figure 16.** *Bronze Ornament from Chariot Pole, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, Bronze, Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/24499>*



<sup>39</sup>See reference images 47-48.

Moving onto the continued use of the gorgoneion in jewelry and adornments, the Roman's did not slow production. Their pendants seem to favor natural stone carvings, but that does not mean they stopped using gold.<sup>40</sup> The pendants and medallions are interesting in their design as they maintain the late Classical style of portraying the gorgoneion as soft-faced and near peaceful.<sup>41</sup> The intent behind the accessories remains the same however, to protect the wearer from harm and malevolence.

**Figure 17.** Roman Mosaic of the Evil Eye, 2nd century CE, Tile, Mosaic, Hatay Archeology Museum, Antakya, <https://www.worldhistory.org/uploads/images/16835.jpg?v=1671183126>



In the realm of weaponry, the gorgoneion makes further appearances, showcasing the figure's inherent apotropaic intentions by warding off danger in battle.<sup>42</sup> But there is an interesting addition that, while the apotropaic image upon weaponry can be done to avoid ill fate in war, the Romans may also have used this iconography to avoid ill outcomes in gladiatorial battles or chariot races. As these sports arenas could just as likely to have ended in death or injury, it is understandable why one would want any aid they could get. Embellishing one's chariot with the image of the gorgoneion could provide protection, or her fierce image and the connotation behind it might bring anxiety to one's opponent.

There is no shortage of Roman architectural apotropaic imagery either. Where the Greeks focused of antefix roof tiles to display their apotropaic gorgoneion, the Romans exemplify at mosaic tiles.<sup>43</sup> Homes, bathe houses, temples are all decorated with these elaborate mosaics. These mosaics are also where the Romans take a turn back towards the roots of Greek apotropaia. They return, not only to the apotropaic eye, but also to the image of the Evil Eye under attack. They emphasize the physical nature of defending against evil that the apotropaic image provides. While they do have mosaics featuring the gorgoneion head, and those too at times turn back to the roots of the image. Showing a snarling, dead-eyed figure of a woman, though they

<sup>40</sup>See reference image 49.

<sup>41</sup>See reference images 50-53.

<sup>42</sup>See reference images 54-55.

<sup>43</sup>See reference images 56-57.

are less monstrous than ancient Greek depictions. There is also the continued presence of apotropaic imagery on boats, the gorgoneion joins the apotropaic eye in watching over sailors as she watches over home and temple.<sup>44</sup>

**Figure 18.** Gold Coin (obverse) Head of Septimius Severus, Laureate, bearded, right (reverse) Large head of Medusa, full face, 201-210 CE, Gold, Coinage, British Museum, London, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 12



The gorgoneion's appearance amongst coinage also persists into the Roman era as money rarely changes much throughout the centuries, rather than animals or polis representatives, emperors like Septimius Severus now sit opposite the gorgoneion on the coin's face. But the gorgoneion's function remains unchanged. Provide protection for the money and prevent unlucky occurrences for its owner's wealth.

In the Roman era the gorgoneion remains above many graves on stele or emblazoned across the side of sarcophagii.<sup>45</sup> It protects the deceased as before, guiding them onward and guarding them from evils that may come their way. It appears on cherished grave goods, even at the far edges of the empire in Roman Britain.<sup>46</sup> Like the loved one who placed it there, the gorgoneion goal is the safety of the dead.<sup>47</sup>

**Figure 19.** Marble Sarcophagus with Garland, 200-225 CE, Marble, Sculpture. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/239584>



<sup>44</sup>See reference image 58.

<sup>45</sup>See reference images 59-60.

<sup>46</sup>See reference image 61.

<sup>47</sup>Bebina Milovanovic and Jelena Andjelkovic-Grasar, "Female Power That Protects: Examples of the Apotropaic and Decorative Functions of the Medusa in Roman Visual Culture from the Territory of the Central Balkans," *Starinar (Beograd)*, no. 67 (2017): 169, <https://doi.org/10.2298/STA1767167M>.

## Conclusion

The iconography of the apotropaic eye and the gorgoneion were clearly important in the ancient Greco-Roman world. They were ubiquitous in the culture and used far beyond what would be standard for normal *superstitio* practice, and in turn had valid religious connotations. The gorgoneion gained power and prestige due to its connections with mythic, divine, and historical figures. That prestige lessened the taboo to allow for their widespread use in material goods not only throughout Ancient Greece, but also into the Roman Era. The nature of where the artifacts are found - on temples, on boats, in funerary spaces – and what they are made of – both expensive gold, and cheap glass – implies their importance not only with the wealthy but with the common people. These images appear throughout several areas of daily life, providing multiple layers of protection.<sup>48</sup> The religious practices that are done with the gorgoneion, or the apotropaic eye are not explicit, they are implicit. The nature of their use was religious in its ubiquity, a religious totem is still a totem, even if one doesn't say a prayer every time they see it. These iconographic images were so embedded into the cultural norm that the possibility of them being considered taboo was practically nonexistent.

## Reference Images

**Image 1.** *Marble Head and Torso of Athena, 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, Marble, Statuary, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/251476>*




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<sup>48</sup>Christopher A. Faraone, “Confronting Evil at the Boundaries of the City, the House, and the Human Body,” In *Apotropaia and Phylakteria: Confronting Evil in Ancient Greece*, eds. Maria G Spathi, Maria Chidioglou, and Jenny Wallensten, (Oxfordshire: Archaeopress, 2024), 9.

**Image 2.** *Statue of Athena, first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE, Marble, Statuary, Archaeological Museum of Epidauros, Epidauros, Photo taken by Author*



**Image 3.** *Tithonos Painter, Terracotta Lekythos (oil flask), 480 BCE, Terracotta, Red-figure Pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/252921>*



**Image 4.** Berlin Painter, Red-Figure Lekythos (Oil Vessel): Athena Slaying Giant (body); Satyr between Maenads (shoulder), 490 BCE, Terracotta, Red-figure pottery, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1978.59>



**Image 5.** Dutuit Painter, Two-handed jar (amphora) depicting Hephaistos polishing the shield of Achilles, 470 BCE, Terracotta, Red-figure Pottery, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/153619>



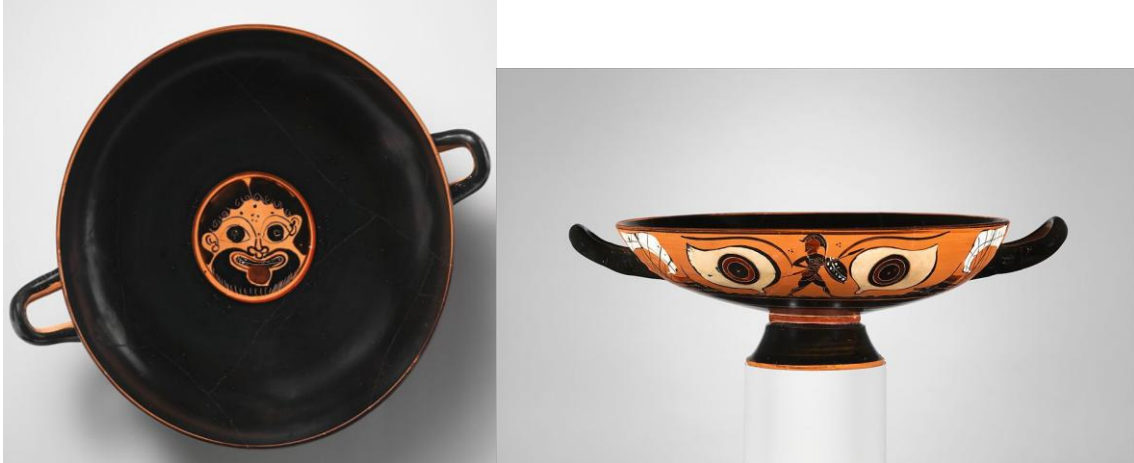
**Image 6.** Miniature Votive Shield with Head of Alexander the Great as Gorgoneion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE, Terracotta, Sculpture, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, <https://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/art/explore-the-collection?id=13145582>



**Image 7.** *Alexander Mosaic, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE, Tesserae, Mosaic, House of the Faun, Pompeii, <https://smarthistory.org/alexander-mosaic-from-the-house-of-the-faun-pompeii/>*



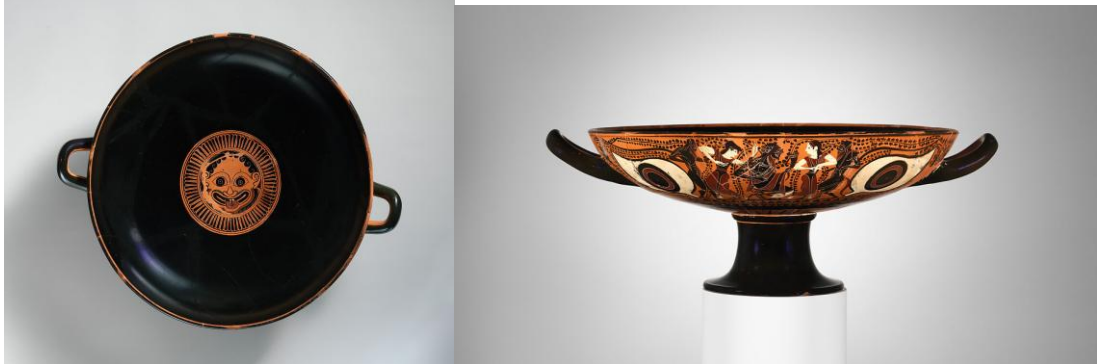
**Image 8.** *Terracotta Kylix: Eye-cup (drinking cup), 520 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure Pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254894>.*



**Image 9.** *Eye Cup, 530 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure Pottery, Harvard Museum, Cambridge, <https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/292633>*



**Image 10.** *Nikosthenes, Terracotta Kylix: Eye-cup (drinking cup), 530 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248906>*



**Image 11.** *Attributed to C Painter, Terracotta Kylix: Siana Cup (drinking cup), 575 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/246931>*



**Image 12.** *Berlin Painter, Gorgoneion, 575 BCE, Terracotta, Red-figure Pottery, British Museum of Art, London, [https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_31684343](https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31684343)*



**Image 13.** *Glass Eye Bead, 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Glass, Jewelry, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250030>*



**Image 14.** *Glass eye bead, 330-370 BCE, Glass, Jewelry, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/239598>*



**Image 15.** *String of Ninety-seven Glass Eye Bead, 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Glass, Jewelry, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/249931>*



**Image 16.** *Cameo of Medusa Head, 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Gold, Jewelry, Hermitage Museum, Norfolk, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 7*



**Image 17.** *Medusa's Face of Beautiful Type, 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Gold, Jewelry, Hermitage Museum, Norfolk, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 7*



**Image 18.** *Roundel, Medallion with Head of Medusa, 5th century BCE. Gold & Silver. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collecti on/search/246818>*



**Image 19.** *Gold Finger Ring from Smyrna, 350-330 BCE, Gold, Jewelry, British Museum, London, Habib, "Protective Magic," 263*



**Image 20.** *Golden Ring from Smyrna: Round Type, very Repulsive, Wrinkled Face, 400-350 BCE, Gold, Jewelry, British Museum of Art, London, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 7*



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**Image 24.** Silver-gilt Gorgoneion Emblem for a Cuirass from Golyamata Mound-Douvanli, Thrace, 450 BCE, Silver, Armor, Plovdiv Museum, Plovdiv, Habib, "Protective Magic," 262



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**Image 26.** Gorgon Head Antefix, 500 BCE, Terracotta, Sculpture, Getty Conservation Research Foundation Museum, Los Angeles, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103VDY>



**Image 27.** Terracotta Antefix with head of Medusa, 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Terracotta, Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/252929>



**Image 28.** Gorgoneion Antefix (Ornamental Roof Tile), 500 BCE, Terracotta, Sculpture, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2021.3>



**Image 29.** *Corcyra Temple of Artemis West Pediment, 580 BCE, Limestone, Sculpture, <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/1255/gorgon-temple-of-artemis-corcyra/>*



**Image 30.** *Antefix, Head of Medusa, 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Terracotta, Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248379>*



**Image 31.** *Antefix, Head of Medusa, 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Terracotta, Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248338>*



**Image 32.** Silver stater, 510-500 BCE, Silver, Coinage, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/257742>



**Image 33.** 20as Coin of Populonia with Head of a Gorgon, 211-206 BCE, Silver, Coinage, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/4244/20as-coin-of-populonia-with-head-of-a-gorgon?ctx=ed01614b-3392-418d-81b6-0944301b871b&idx=6>



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**Image 36.** Two of a Number of Gold Buttons with Gorgon Heads, among offerings found in the Cist Grave of a Girl (Kavallaris Plot), 350-325 BCE, Gold, Jewelry, Veria Archaeological Museum, Macedonia, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 8



**Image 37.** Twelve Gorgon Heads in the Phialae Disc from the fortified Graveyard Kul-Oba near Kerch, Mid 4th century BCE, Gold, Sculpture, Hermitage Museum, Norfolk, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 9



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**Image 39.** Gold and Enamel Funerary Belt bearing Gorgoneia and Funeral Libation Scene, Early Hellenistic Period, Gold, Grave Good, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 10



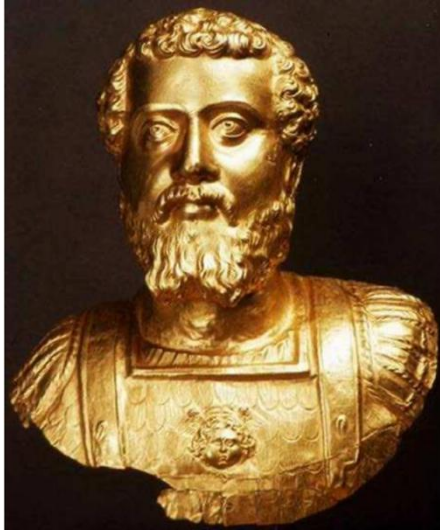
**Image 40.** Bronze Emblems from the Exterior (left) and Interior (right) Doors of the Macedonian Tomb at Langaza, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE, Bronze, Sculpture, Istanbul Archaeological Museum, Istanbul, Habib, "Protective Magic," 265-266



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**Image 42.** *Bust of Septimius Severus- Found on the Hill of St. Petra near Plotinoupolis, Late 1<sup>st</sup>-early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, Gold, Statuary, Archaeological Museum of Komotini, Komotini, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 12*



**Image 43.** *Glass Plate with head of Medusa, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE, Glass, Plateware, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/245390>*



**Image 44.** *Arretine Ware Fragment, 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE- 1st century CE, Terracotta, Pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250274>*



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**Image 46.** *Bronze Jug Handle, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, Bronze, Plateware, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/256832>*



**Image 47.** *JHAM HT 774: Apotropaic Talisman Against the "Evil Eye," 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE, Ceramic, Pottery, John's Hopkins Archaeological Museum, Baltimore, <https://archaeologicalmuseum.jhu.edu/class-projects/the-roman-house-at-hopkins/the-art-of-light/apotropaic-talisman-against-the-evil-eye/>*



**Image 48.** *Terracotta Oil Lamp, 40-100 CE, Terracotta, Pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241489>*



**Image 49.** *Pendant with Gorgon-Medusa, 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE, Gold, Jewelry, Hermitage Museum, Norfolk, Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 12*



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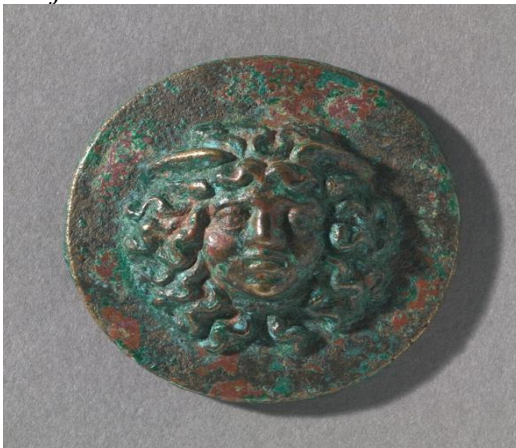
**Image 51.** *Oval Gem with Head of Medusa and Inscription, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE, Jasper, Jewelry, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/266219>*



**Image 52.** *Cameo Glass Disk with Medusa Head, 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, Glass, Jewelry, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collecti-on/search/249256>*



**Image 53.** *Medallion with Gorgoneion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE- 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, Bronze, Jewelry, Harvard Museum, Cambridge, <https://harvardartmuseums.org/collection-s/object/147293>*



**Image 54.** *Medusa's Head as an umbo on a Marble Shield, Sirmium, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, Marble, Sculpture, Milovanovic and Andjelkovic-Grasar, "Female Power," 172*



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**Image 57.** *Mosaic of Medusa and the Seasons, 167-200 CE, Tile, Mosaic, Palencia National Archaeological Museum of Spain, Madrid, <https://etc.worldhistory.org/exhibitions/roman-mosaics-national-archaeological-museum-spain-madrid/>*



**Image 58.** *Bronze Finial with Head of Medusa, 1st century CE, Bronze, Sculpture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collectio#tion/search/255243>*



**Image 59.** *Part of the Funerary Stelae with Medusa depictions, from Viminacium, 1st-2nd Century CE, National Museum of Požarevac, Požarevac, Milovanovic and Andjelkovic-Grasar, "Female Power," 169*



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