

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

By Gloria Rose Angelita Lopez*

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.¹ 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.² *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”.

*Master’s Student, University of South Florida, USA.

¹Reema 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.

²Derek 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.³ *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”

³Hugh 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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."⁸ The implication is that the envy, anger, or ill-intent behind the eye is what give the eye it's 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.⁹ 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

⁴Madeleine Glennon, "Medusa in Ancient Greek Art," Met Museum, last modified March 2017, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/medu/hd_medu.htm.

⁵John 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.

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

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

⁸Plutarch, *Quaestiones Convivales* 5.7.3.

⁹Elliott, *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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ The image is so consistently featured with the goddess Athena that there are even depictions of her bearing it in myths before she could have conceivably possessed it, as seen in figure one. 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.

Figure 1. *Birth of Athena Black-Figure Tripod, 570-560 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure Pottery, Louvre Museum, Paris*



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"¹² Achilles is also often displayed holding a shield adorned with the gorgoneion in pottery from the early classical period, as seen in figure two.¹³ It is often assumed to be the shield he receives, delivered by his mother, from Hephaestus despite Homer never describing the shield as such.¹⁴ 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

¹⁰Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 4.706. Translated by Brookes More.

¹¹See reference images 1-4.

¹²Homer, *The Iliad* Book II, line 742. Translated by Richmond Lattimore

¹³See reference image 5.

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

figures which in turn normalize to the use of the object.¹⁵ These mythic semi-historical figures give the image of the gorgoneion power, legitimacy, and prestige in their association. Furthermore, there is additional legitimacy given to the use of the gorgoneion as a powerful image when historical figures like Alexander the Great, shown in figure four, 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.¹⁶ Especially a figure whose renown survives so long, as both mosaics featured were made at the start of the Roman Republic, in port cities.¹⁷ 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.

Figure 2. *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 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>*



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

¹⁶See reference image 6.

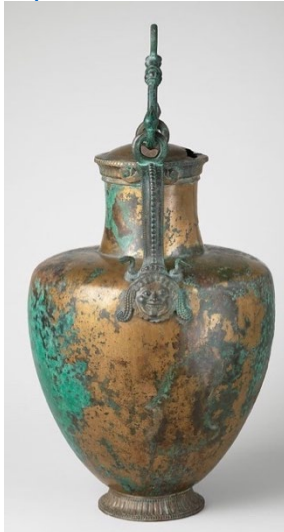
¹⁷See reference image 7.

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



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



Athenian Eye-cups and the Gorgoneion in Pottery

There are many examples of the gorgoneion in pottery, and as the apotropaic eye developed in its popularity and power, the eye itself also 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ This further supports the apotropaic nature of these eye cups. Especially seeing as the gorgoneion was a common motif in other pottery work as an apotropaic image of protection.²¹

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 eye as medallions, pendants, and beads worn as jewelry

¹⁸W. L. Hildburgh, "Apotropism in Greek Vase-Paintings," *Folklore (London)* 57, no. 4 (1946): 157.

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

²⁰See reference images 8-10.

²¹See reference images 11-12.

or adornment. In the case of the apotropaic eye the most common remains found are glass eye beads that were strung into necklaces, as shown in figure seven.²² There are other examples of the use of the apotropaic eye in jewelry. In a museum in Carthage, there are many examples of pendants recovered from tombs that display animal heads with one large third eye on the side of the animal.²³ There is evidence of children having worn these protective amulets in one form or another on red figure and white ground pottery.²⁴ There is also abundant evidence that the gorgoneion was worn by the large number of material remains, specifically those made of gold as seen in figure eight. 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ Like Athena herself, the ancient Greeks wore these objects prominently, making sure their defense was evident to all.

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



²²See reference images 13-15.

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

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

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

²⁶See 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.²⁷ 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, as shown in figure nine. 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>*



²⁷ See reference images 22-25.

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.²⁸ Many display the gorgon's features as brutal and ugly, as seen in figure ten, 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.²⁹ 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 appropriate offering to the gods.³⁰ 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.³¹ As time went on and art evolved so did the gorgoneion's appearance, showcased by contrasting figures ten and eleven. By the late Classical period the gorgoneion's features settled into a softer, more pensive look.³² 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.

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>*



²⁸See reference images 26-28.

²⁹See reference image 29.

³⁰Spathi, 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.

³¹Habib, "Protective Magic," 3.

³²See reference images 30-31.

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



Coinage

This theme continues further still as the gorgoneion permeates near all aspects of ancient Greek life, this time in the form of coinage.³³ 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.³⁴

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>*



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.³⁵

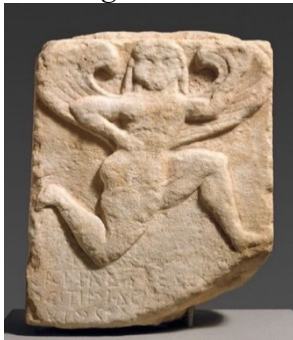
³³See reference images 32-35.

³⁴Lazarou, "Golden Gorgon," 13.

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

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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 Romans prefer gorgoneion decorated oil lamps. Perhaps the gorgoneion was meant to provide a sense of comfort and security through the darkness of nighttime.³⁹

³⁶See reference images 36-41.

³⁷See reference image 42.

³⁸See reference images 43-46.

³⁹See reference images 47-48.

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



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, as seen in figure fifteen, but that does not mean they stopped using gold.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ The intent behind the accessories remains the same however, to protect the wearer from harm and malevolence.

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



In the realm of weaponry, the gorgoneion makes further appearances, showcasing the figure's inherent apotropaic intentions by warding off danger in battle.⁴² 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. The ornamental gorgoneion shown in figure sixteen shows this adapted use to the gorgoneion from the field of war to the arena of war games. 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.

⁴⁰See reference image 49.

⁴¹See reference images 50-53.

⁴²See reference images 54-55.

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.

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



There is no shortage of Roman architectural apotropaic imagery either. Where the Greeks focused on antefix roof tiles to display their apotropaic gorgoneion, the Romans exemplify at mosaic tiles.⁴³ Homes, bath 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, featured in figure seventeen. 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 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.⁴⁴

⁴³See reference images 56-57.

⁴⁴See reference image 58.

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>



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 as seen in figure eighteen. But the gorgoneion's function remains unchanged. Provide protection for the money and prevent unlucky occurrences for its owner's wealth.

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



In the Roman era the gorgoneion remains above many graves on stele or emblazoned across the side of sarcophagai.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ Like the loved one who placed it there, the gorgoneion goal is the safety of the dead.⁴⁷

⁴⁵See reference images 59-60.

⁴⁶See reference image 61.

⁴⁷Bebina 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>.

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>



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.⁴⁸ 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.

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

Reference Images

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



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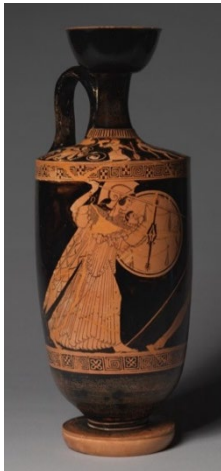


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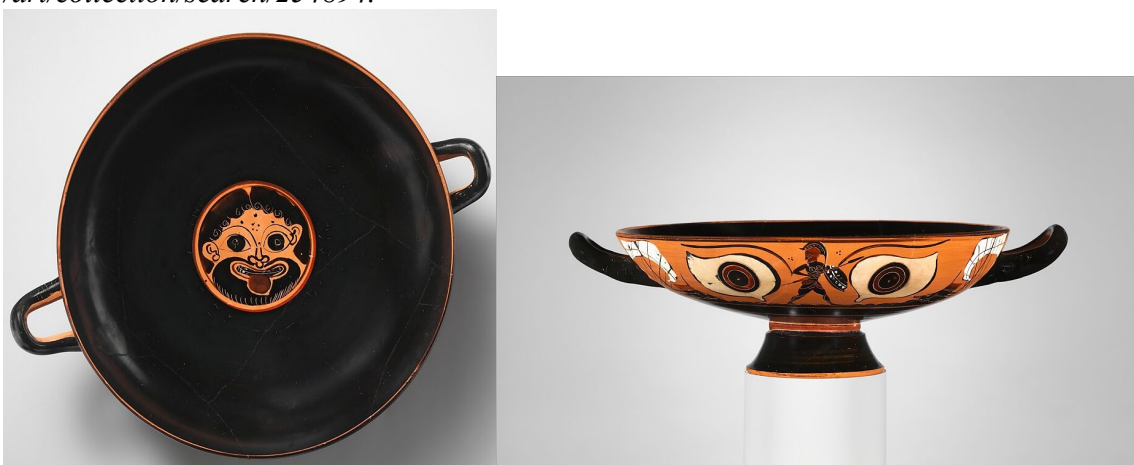


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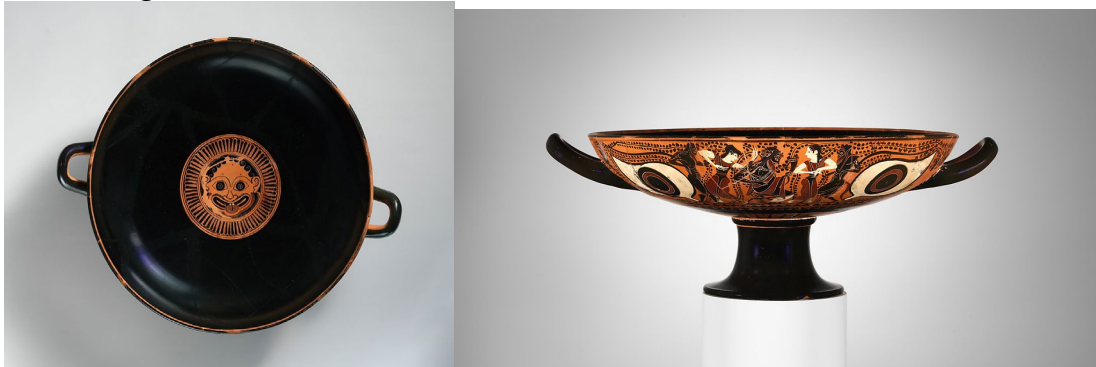


Image 11. *Attributed to C Painter, Terracotta Kylix: Siana Cup (drinking cup), 575 BCE, Terracotta, Black-figure pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/246931>*



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



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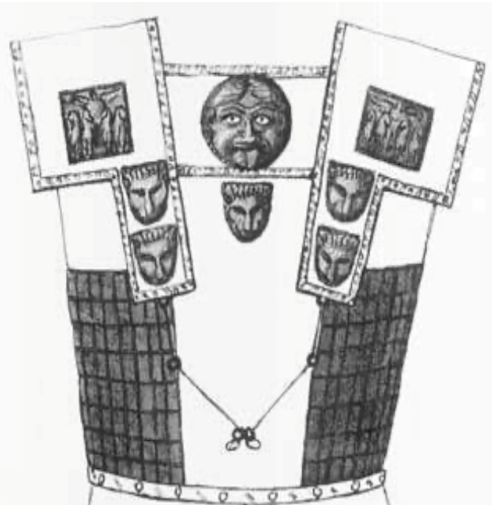


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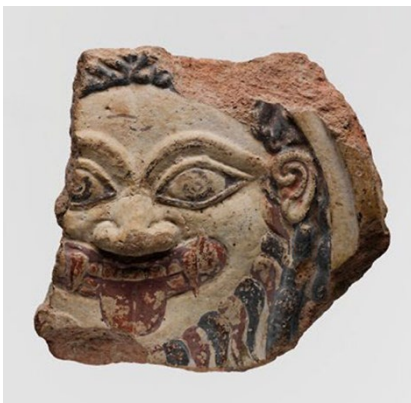


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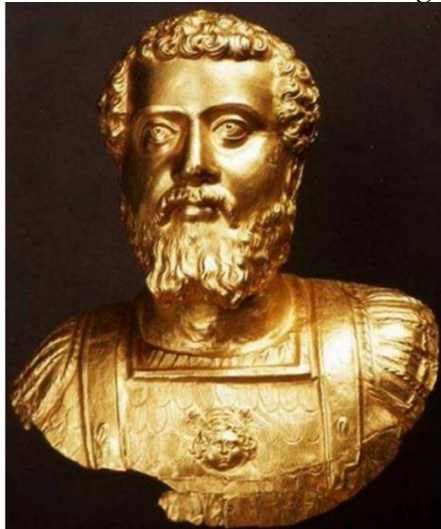


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