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WHY THE ABSENCE OF MYTHICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GORGONEION AND GORGO/MEDUSA IN THE PERIOD FROM THE 11TH TO THE 8TH CENTURY BC?

Abstract: In the present article the puzzled absence of mythical representations of the Gorgoneion and Gorgo/Medusa in the period from the 11th to the 8th c. is critically discussed. The investigation is achieved through exploration of the historical context of the time, which is illuminated by the archeological excavation data and the literary sources more specifically the epics. An attempt is made to highlight this absence in art, even though in the epics that reflect events of the post-Mycenaean period the gorgoneion and gorgon are mentioned for the first time.

Keywords: *Mycenaean, epics, Homer, Hesiod, Iliad, Odyssey, Theogony, Dark Ages, Geometric, sub-Mycenaean, Epic Cycle.*

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THE TIME CONTEXT

The palatial civilizations of the prehistoric Aegean do not seem to have left any cultural legacy to the later inhabitants of Greece, apart from a visibly mythical memory of the institution of the kingdom.¹ However, some specific examples of their art, such as the monumental “cyclopean” walls of Mycenae or the Athenian Acropolis, remained visible and probably influenced to some extent the later development of Greek art.²

The movements and contacts of the peoples of the Greek area of the Mycenaean era to the east, with the Hittites among others, have been documented. Thus, for the period 1400-1220 BC, when many Hittite texts are dated, there are written reports to many raids of the Ahhiyawan (Achaeans) in western Anatolia.³

From the 11th c. BC there were many movements of Greek tribes or parts of them from the mountainous and barren places to the plains and fertile areas and near the coasts and islands of the Aegean.⁴ The consequence of these internal movements was the colonization of western Asia Minor to the southern coast of Antalya (Pamphylia) by tribes of the land of Greece. Thus, the Ionians colonized the area called Ionia, the Aeolians colonized the

¹ DAVIS *et alii*, 2017, 54-72.

² PLANTZOS 2013, 37.

³ KELDER 2012, 42, 43; MARAN 2011, 170-174.

⁴ HISTORY OF HELLENIC NATION, 1971, 16.

northern part of the west coast, which was called Aeolis, while the Dorians through the islands of the Aegean and Crete colonized southwestern Asia Minor.

The economy of the newly established settlements was based not only on agriculture and livestock, but also on trade, mainly maritime, since in the second millennium appeared sailing ships. These ships had a larger tonnage than rowing boats, traveled longer distances and thus allowed the development of trade in heavy raw materials, such as copper and lead, as well as trade in exotic goods (such as ivory, precious and semi-precious stones, fabric dyes and others). Many of the raw materials and exotic goods were imported from Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine. Cyprus, where the Mycenaeans had settled since the end of the 12th century BC, played an important role in trade contacts with the East.⁵

In the 8th c. BC, the city-states began to be established in most of the mainland and island regions. The quests of this period were varied and included, among other things, finding suitable forms of government and adapting to new economic and state requirements. Gradually, tribal societies became political. Although the economy remained predominantly rural, the shipping, trade, and artisanal production were developed further.⁶ At the same time, in this century, the 2nd colonization began to the west, in the Adriatic, Sicily, Southern Italy, southern France and western Spain.⁷ Colonies were established from the big city-states (Corinth, Chalkis, Sparta, Cumae etc.) but also from the city-states that were established in the 1st colony (Phocaea, Miletus etc.).⁸

Among the key historical events related to the present topic and the questions raised in this work, are the abandonment of settlements in the Dark ages, the population decline, the re-establishment of settlements and sanctuaries in Mycenaean sites.⁹ The regional concentration of power, the surplus local production and the foreign trade that was regulated by the palaces, the fortification of the citadels, the expansion of Mycenae through a commercial network and colonies, are some of the reasons that made the socio-economic system very vulnerable.¹⁰ On the other hand, the systematic intensification of agricultural production may have led to the depletion of limited natural resources, especially when demand was at its highest. The Mycenaean economy was very centralized, highly specialized, and close to the inherently limited natural resources of its region. Therefore, the Mycenaean economy could hardly recover from temporary failures and survive the cumulative effect of various factors such as ecological over-exploitation, adverse climatic conditions such as drought, various animal diseases

⁵ TSETSKHLADZE/SNODGRASS 2002; KNAPP/MANNING 2016, 99, 132, 133.

⁶ JEFFREY 1976, 23-59; POLIGNAC 2000, city 99-119; HANSEN 2006, city-state 33, 51, 66, 77, 85, society and city 122; SHAPIRO 2007, 201; ANTONACCIO 2007, 201-224; ROMANO/VOYATZIS 2014, 591, 628-9 (Mount Lykion is one of the few sites of continuous presence of Mycenaean rituals and worship up to the 4th c. BC, with absence of iconographic scenes on the ceramic vases.).

⁷ BOARDMAN 1999; MARTIN 2017, 21, 31-32.

⁸ KOIV 2011, 153.

⁹ VOUTIRAS/GOULAKI-VOUTIRA 2011, 21-23.

¹⁰ SHELMERDINE 1997, 538-550; SHELMERDINE 2008, 289-309; MAGGIDIS 2007, 2009.

but also human pandemics such as plague and finally, the natural disasters resulting from earthquakes and widespread fires.¹¹

Such natural disasters may have acted as catalysts, causing a final blow to the system: to eliminate short-term food supplies, to destroy specialized agricultural production and high-yield livestock, and thus to affect dependent production (such as textiles, wine and oil) and disrupt trade, destroy building infrastructure and discourage the population.

These situations are expected to be followed by civil wars, piracy (such as at Sea people) raids or local uprisings by starving populations in less affected areas, causing decentralization and political fragmentation, the disintegration of socio-economic ties, severe abandonment of vital areas and migration to coasts, islands and new areas.¹²

Thus, the collapse of civilization during the transition period of the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age simultaneously affected the peoples of the SE Mediterranean to the Middle East and in particular Egyptians, Hittites, Canaanites, Cypriots, Minoans, Mycenaeans, Assyrians and Babylonians. These heterogeneous peoples of once powerful and prosperous civilizations continued to interact through trade, exchange, and cultural communication.¹³ The above reasons justify the few sites, the reduction of population and consequently of the various guilds and artists. Hence, the works of art are few, in the whole known world of the time. The above conditions may therefore explain the absence of mythical representations, including the gorgoneion and the Gorgon. The two colonies, however, and the further development of shipping brought about cultural ferment that is reflected in art. At that time, the development of monumental art in Greece began and the oriental rhythm in ceramics appeared. In addition, the writers of the period draw inspiration from foreign myths, as Hesiod draws from the literature of Mesopotamia and Syria in the composition of *Theogony*.

REPORTS TO THE GORGONEION FROM THE EARLY GREEK LITERATURE: HESIOD, HOMER, EPIC CYCLE

There are no representations of the gorgoneion and the Gorgo/Medusa in art from the 11th to the 8th century BC. The reappearance of the depictions of the mermaid head begins in the 8th c. and coincides with the first references to the Gorgoneion by ancient writers, namely Hesiod and Homer. The absence of the gorgoneion and the Gorgo/Medusa in these three centuries, however, is not proof of ignorance of the myths associated with them.¹⁴

In my work I strengthen the possibility that the myths and mythical beings found in the poetic works of the 8th century reflect the mythology of earlier times.¹⁵

¹¹ KANIEWSKI *et alii* 2010, 208-210; LIRITZIS *et alii* 2019.

¹² VERMEULE 1960, 66-69; BETANCOURT 1976, 41-45; DEGER-JALKOTZY 1998, 110-112; MAGGIDIS 2009, 400-405; KNAPP/MANNING 2016, 100-121.

¹³ CLINE 2014.

¹⁴ LAZAROU/LIRITZIS 2022.

¹⁵ KONSTANTINOPOULOS/CHRISTOFIAS 2022.

During the post-Mycenaean and geometric times where the aforementioned political, economic and social ferment took place, the need arose, at the same time, to reshape religion and consolidate the pantheon.¹⁶

At this time Homer and Hesiod composed their poems and consolidated many of the Pan-Hellenic myths concerning the genealogy of the gods, the causes of rituals and the worshiped characters of the deities. For their work they draw evidence from already known myths and rituals, which they negotiate based on their modern socio-political changes and worship needs.¹⁷

Regarding the work of Hesiod, which played a decisive role in preserving the collective memory of the ancient Greeks, we can say with relative certainty that it reflects earlier myths and worship practices.¹⁸ Mixed imaginary beings are mentioned in *Theogony*. Such beings were especially popular in the Mycenaean world (e.g. lion-headed demons, griffins).

They are found in palace art and testify to a symbolic religious content.¹⁹ It is possible that the myths of the power and sacred character of these mixed beings survived the destruction of the Mycenaean palaces and reached the time of Hesiod.²⁰

After all, from the 8th century, when *Theogony* was composed, the oriental rhythm appears in art, which represents a mixed being. It seems that older Mycenaean myths were combined with Eastern patterns and myths and gave rich themes to the artists.²¹

Hesiod seems to have been acquainted with ancient Greek myths and religious beliefs, but also contemporaries of the foreign myths of Mesopotamia, Syria²² and Egypt.²³ Cooper in her dissertation on the First Corinthian decoration of vessels with winged mixed beings, reluctantly considers Hesiod earlier than Homer.²⁴

In his book *Homer, Hesiod and the Hymns*, Janko uses linguistic phenomena to establish a dating of archaic poetry.²⁵ Janko classifies the poems in chronological order as follows: *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Theogony*, *Works and Day*.²⁶

Regarding the Homeric epics, Mazarakis Ainian supports the contribution of at least four historical layers in their composition: a prehistoric-Mycenaean, a post-Mycenaean (11th-9th century BC), one of the 8th century, where Homer also dates, and finally a meta-Homeric in the form of later additions.²⁷ Crielaard's position is similar,²⁸

¹⁶ POLIGNAC 2000, 70; GRETHLEIN 2012, 15-35.

¹⁷ POLIGNAC 2000, 80.

¹⁸ HUNTER 2014, 14; KONSTANTINOPOULOS/CHRISTOFILIAS 2022.

¹⁹ BOULOTIS 2000, 115-116.

²⁰ PETROPOULOS 2018, 213-214.

²¹ NOEGEL 2010, 30; *Hom. Il. Z.*, 152-222, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0133>.

²² POWELL 1991; MORRIS/POWELL 1997.

²³ RUTHERFORD 2009, 14-19.

²⁴ COOPER 2007, 240, note 20: "Although I am erring on the side of caution in allowing a late date, I recognize both that Hesiod may precede Homer, and that the stories he records may have been in circulation long before they are recorded".

²⁵ JANKO 1982.

²⁶ See, JANKO 1982, 189-200; see, NAGY 1992, 174, who considers the correction of the text as a more variable and erratic process than Janko.

²⁷ MAZARAKIS 2000, 13-18.

²⁸ CRIELAARD 1995, 207.

while Snodgrass distinguishes five respective time periods.²⁹ It is difficult to ascertain from which historical layer Homer drew his reports to the Gorgonian head. They are likely to have originated in the prehistoric-Mycenaean layer, given the popularity of mixed monsters in the Mycenaean years.³⁰ In any case, given the combination of older and modern myths in Homer's work, we cannot rule out the existence and knowledge of myths concerning the gorgoneion, before the 8th century.

Regarding the *Epic Cycle*, its dating is even more difficult than the Homeric ones, because they have been preserved in fragments.³¹ According to Clement of Alexandria, the poets of the *Epic Cycle* acted during 800-500 BC. According to *Proclus*,³² the Trojan Circle included the following epics: *Cypria* (11 books covering the events that preceded Homer's *Iliad*³³), *Aethiopis* (5 books that follow the *Iliad*) and *Little Iliad* (4 books that narrate the events from the death of Hector to the fall of Troy. The School of Neoanalysis argued that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* should be considered chronologically later than the *Epic Cycle*, because they seem to have been inspired by them.³⁴

Dihle expressed doubts about such an early dating of the *Epic Cycle*.³⁵ Griffin argued that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* may have been influenced by earlier poems dealing with the same subjects, but we cannot say with certainty that these poems were the *Epic Cycle*.³⁶ The School of Oral Theory suggested that Homeric epics are an amalgam of different poetic traditions, including *Epic Cycle*.³⁷ It is therefore possible that some of the *Epic Cycle* together with other local, oral hexameter poems, constituted the mythical model of the creation of the more mature, Pan-Hellenic Homeric epics.³⁸

From the above, in the *Epic Cycle* I point out the reports to the Gorgons and their origin from *Sarpidon*, which are obviously derived from local myths survived in the long run. It is possible that these local myths were known to Homer and Hesiod, who revived them in their work, so that they have a Pan-Hellenic impact. In any case, I believe that the *Epic Cycle* also demonstrate the existence and knowledge of myths concerning the Gorgons and the gorgoneion before the 8th century, whenever the gorgonian head reappears in the iconography.

THE ABSENCE OF GORGONEIA

The questions that arise from the absence of a gorgoneion and a Gorgon/Medusa in this period, can be summarized as follows: Since myths were known to

²⁹ SNODGRASS 2017, 4.

³⁰ LAZAROU 2019.

³¹ In a sense these epics usually date in the 7th c. BC (MAZARAKIS 2000, 134).

³² *Christomathia*, 5th c. AD.

³³ The marriages of Achilles's parents, the Paris's crisis, the abduction of the beautiful Helen and the sacrifice of Iphigenia.

³⁴ PESTALOZZI 1945; KULLMANN 1960; SCHADEWALDT 1965; KELLY 2006.

³⁵ DIHLE 1970.

³⁶ GRIFFIN 1977, 39, note 5.

³⁷ TSAGALIS 2016, 20-21.

³⁸ WELCKER 1865-1882:2, 235-236; RENGAKOS 2015, 157-162; TSAGALIS 2016, 27.

society before the 8th century, why do we not find relevant representations in iconography at that time? Are there prehistoric sites that are reused in the 9th-8th c. BC, with the published pottery typology containing mythical scenes? Are there mythical representations in the Dark Ages where the gorgoneion and the Gorgon in particular are absent? Or do we have a complete lack of mythological themes?

During the Early Iron Age in Crete, people lived among the ruins of the palace of Knossos, in what can be referred to as the “landscape of memory”, a place imbued with the collective memories of another era. Until 1100 BC, a number of changes are identified by archaeological research in burial practices, settlements and pottery. In many areas, the Mycenaean custom of burying in family chambered tombs is suddenly replaced by individual burials, while cremation is adopted in some places. Local differences in burial practices have been identified, as well as the coexistence of different practices in the same community. The cemetery at Knossos was first established in the late 11th century, but burial practices, including warriors’ burials and family burials in burial mounds and chambered tombs, were a continuation of Late Bronze Age practices. In the 10th and 9th centuries, there was a growing tendency to burn in chambered tombs and by the middle of the 9th century the remains of the incineration were placed in an amphora, which was then placed together with the tombstones in a pit, which was filled with soil and covered with a stone slab, and this become the standard practice for adult burials.³⁹ From the 10th to the 9th BC, mythical scenes are found in rare cases, such as in the vessels of the 9th century BC from Crete, found in the central northern cemetery of Knossos.⁴⁰ There are some representations of female deities and mythical creatures here, but it is impossible to associate them with a particular myth. At the same time there are elaborate clay figurines, such as the mixed statue of the mythical Centaur found in a tomb in Lefkandi, Euboea (Museum of Eretria) dating to 1000-950 BC.⁴¹ (Fig. 1)

In the settlement of Lefkandi (1100-700 BC) the number and type of gifts, but also the parallel burial of the horses, are reminiscent of burial customs described by Homer (c. *Iliad* Ψ), although they date back more than two centuries, before the Homeric epics. The reference to the Centaur (in the *Iliad* Hom. *Il.* 11.832-35 «ὄν Χείρων ἐδίδαξε δικαιοτάτος Κενταύρων. Ἴητροὶ μὲν γὰρ...») (*whose use men say you learned from Achilles, whom the noble Centaur, Chiron, taught. Of our other healers...*)⁴² but also to the “heritage” as depicted (in the *Odyssey*, as well as in the Linear B tablets), confirms the hypothesis that retain memories of both the distant, mythical past of the Bronze Age, as well as the more recent, “heroic” past of the 10th and 9th c. BC.⁴³ At this point I want to note that the relationship of the mythical centaur with the female centaur that Perseus beheads in the Boeotian pithos of the 7th century is not accidental. After all, the common theme of plastic works in the Geometric



Fig. 1. Ceramic centaur figurine recognized as one of the earliest depictions of Chiron, the mythical teacher of heroes. Dated to 925-900 BCE, Late Protogeometric. From Lefkandi, now in Eretria Archaeological Museum, Greece⁴⁴.

period included cult and decorative symbols, such as birds and the horse.⁴⁵ The horse is characteristic of the ceramic decoration but also of the metal statuettes from the 11th to the 9th century BC.⁴⁶ The horse was also a symbol of the *Hippios* (“Ἴππειος”) “of a horse”- Equine- Poseidon but also a symbol of social order. Here I could relate the worship of the *Hippios Poseidon* with reference to *Theogony*, where Medusa has an adulterous affair with the *Equine Poseidon*.

Regarding the proto-geometric and geometric period in general, I note the following: scenes in Greek vase painting are very rare before the 8th century BC, specifically before the work of the crater and the amphora of Dipyllos painter and his immediate predecessors.⁴⁷ (Fig. 2).

In the vessels of Dipyllos of the 8th c. BC, we find secondary scenes such as: chariot parades with the presence of horses that usually accompany the performance scenes in craters, as well as battle scenes that are also usually found in

³⁹ COLDSTREAM 1998, 58; SNODGRASS, 2000.

⁴⁰ COLDSTREAM 1984, 94.

⁴¹ PLANTZOS 2013, 45, Fig. 38.

⁴² <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0133%3Abook%3D11%3Acard%3D822>

⁴³ TSAGRAKIS 2020, 78, 388, 539, 540 K.A.; PAVEL 2014, 10-68.

⁴⁴ PLANTZOS 2013, 45, Fig. 38; DESBOROUGH *et alii* 1970.

⁴⁵ Characteristic Euboean Geometric crater with representations that include horses and birds c. 750 BC (Metropolitan Museum, No 1874.51.965) (PLANTZOS 2011, 49).

⁴⁶ BURKERT 1993, 296, 458; PLANTZOS 2011, 53.

⁴⁷ VOUTIRAS/GOULAKI-VOUTIRA 2011, 33, Fig. 18.



A



B

Fig. 2. A) Funerary ceramic Vase (Krater), Dipylon Cemetery, or Dipylon Vase. Attributed to the Hirschfeld Workshop, c. 750–700 BCE, Geometric period. Source/Museum: Dipylon Cemetery, Athens/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1914. (B) Amphora by the Dipylon Master, Late Geometric Ia, 760-750 BC, National Archaeological Museum NM 804, Athens.

male burials. It is not certain whether these scenes reflect the real burial customs of the 8th century, or if they refer to mythical or mythological events. The same goes for the battle scenes that probably refer to the mythical past of the generation to which the eminent dead belong and not to events of recent history.⁴⁸

The conception of the motifs wants the vase painters of the geometric era to create their works based on theoretical principles, which we meet later in the philosophical thinking of the ancient Greeks. In fact, the geometric age is not a completely new beginning. For example, if we compare the decoration of the Athenian proto-geometric vessels (e.g. the amphora of 950-900 BC from Athens on display in the Ceramic Museum) with that of the slightly earlier sub-Mycenaean period (such as the sub-Mycenaean amphora of the 11th BC from Athens on display at the National Archaeological Museum, Athens), we find a general similarity in their patterns, such as concentric semicircles, concentric circles and wavy lines, with the difference that in proto-geometric ones they have a symmetrical arrangement and

⁴⁸ PLANTZOS 2013, 51.

more careful design.⁴⁹ The decoration of the vases, however, does not include exclusively geometric shapes. In the same century we find a mythical representation with a departure scene, in a geometric crater of an Attic ceramic workshop of 720-730 BC found in Thebes. Some scholars believe that this may be the mythical abduction of Helen from Paris.⁵⁰

The view of the past scholars that it is difficult to recognize the pottery of the dark ages has now been revised.⁵¹ In fact, we can easily identify this particular pottery, as there is a lot of pottery from this period within a generation.⁵² I should note that so far, the evidence of trade imports from

⁴⁹ VOUTIRAS/GOULAKI-VOUTIRA 2011, 35-36, EIK.19-21.

⁵⁰ VOUTIRAS/GOULAKI-VOUTIRA 2011, 33, Fig. 17; FITTSCHEN 1969, 270-73; SNODGRASS 1998, 55-66; AHLBERG-CORNELL 1992 26-27.- retrieved 30-12-2020 < https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1899-0219-1>

⁵¹ VOUTIRAS/GOULAKI-VOUTIRA 2011, 22.

⁵² Pers. Communication 21/12/2020, Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures, Tel Aviv University, and, 2/1/2021, Prof. Eric Cline, The George Washington University, USA., and Prof. Margaret Miller, Sydney University, 12/1/2021; CLINE 2014.

the Aegean to the Near East does not indicate anything about the lesser known Dark ages, nor is there any connection.⁵³

As mentioned above, from ~ 1600-1500 BC until the 8th c. BC we did not find any images of gorgoneion/Gorgo. These reappear in the middle by the end of the 8th c. BC and are discussed elsewhere.⁵⁴ In the Early Archaic period, gorgoneion representations first appeared in Attica (760 BC), in Tiryns (end of the 8th century BC), in Crete (Gortyna and Axos, mid-7th century BC), in Sparta (Sanctuary Artemis Orthia, mid-7th century BC), in Thermo (Aetolia, mid-7th century BC), in Thebes (700-650 BC). Mythical representations of the beheading of Medusa by Perseus and the persecution by the Gorgons are found in Eleusis (early Attic workshop, 670 BC), in Heraion of Argos (persecution of Perseus and beheading of Medusa in 650 BC) and in Thebes (beheading of Medusa with a Centaur body by Perseus, about 670 BC). From these places, Thebes, Tiryns, Argos, Sparta and Crete have been reused since prehistoric times. Besides, in Boeotia, Argolid, Laconia and Crete where these places belong, we have local traditions of heroes, genealogies and deities.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

From the 11th c. BC and with various hypothetical causes (earthquakes, drought, invasions, social unrest) the collapse of the central palaces but also the regional centers, occurred, not only in Greece and the islands, but also in Anatolia and the Hittites to the Middle and Near East. As observed by archeological excavations, this catastrophe in such a large geographical scale formed a new landscape: The population decreased, there was dispersal and migration (for example due to the Sea people), as well as the establishment of other regional settlements.

Also, the descent of the northern Greek tribes of the Dorians brought new traditions. However, the archeological dig brought to light some centers (e.g. Lefkandi), which continued to develop a remarkable civilization, which through trade reached the Near East.

The movement of peoples and the destruction of residential centers I believe has decimated institutions and artists. The heroic epics and the legends are reproduced by the rhapsodists, but they refer to older times and through the oral tradition they are recorded -probably for the first time- in the texts of the 8th c. BC. The mythical representations that reflect the modern Bronze Age, although they appear in abundance after the 8th c. BC, have a minimal presence in the Dark Ages: A representative example is the famous Centaur (10th to 9th century BC) found in a tomb in Lefkandi of Euboea, as well as the mythical scenes in the vessels of the 9th century BC of Crete. The general lack of findings I consider to be accompanied by the lack on an analogous manner of representations of gorgoneia and Gorgon/Medusa. I place their absence in the broader context of the problem mentioned above, in order to arrive at the

⁵³ FANTALKIN *et alii* 2020, 136.

⁵⁴ LAZAROU 2021.

⁵⁵ SAKELLARIOU 2018, 89, 105, 185, 192, 222, 264, 268, 274, 327, 332, 717; GRIMAL 1991, 161, 337, 375, 457, 631.

justification of the conclusion of their absence in the sub-Mycenaean-Geometric period.

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