

CONCLUSIONS

Perseus' victory over the monster, whose gaze brings death, is not a variation on a foreign theme that the ancient Greeks may have appropriated and edited. They surely used a variety of characters and motifs borrowed from their Near Eastern neighbours.¹ However, the myth of Perseus is an original Greek creation, the proof of which is that no other mythical hero has such sophisticated extra-terrestrial technologies as Perseus. He received from gods the invisibility cap, flying boots and instruments to defeat the invincible creature and to keep its severed head. Homer (8th century BC) and Hesiod (about 700 BC), the authors of the oldest Greek literary works, knew the myth of Perseus, but in different versions. The oldest representations of this myth in the visual arts, dating from 7th-6th centuries BC, are also very diverse. The analysis of the image tradition coincides with what we know about the beginnings of the literary tradition: the myth about Perseus and Medusa was created gradually after the 8th century BC. Only then did inspiration from the outside and diverse local traditions merge into the story of the Perseus, which was continuously transformed in the later centuries.²

In the story of Perseus, the special equipment that the gods gave to Perseus, the backward glance that his divine protectors advised him to take, and the monstrosity of Medusa played a key role from the very beginning. The most significant emphasis was placed on Medusa's head, which was often depicted in isolation. At the time the myth of Perseus originated, the Greeks began to define themselves as the exact opposite of the hybrid beings who, along with advanced technologies and visual art, they adopted from the Near East. In the case of the Medusa, the oldest depictions of which combine human beings and reptiles, this hybridity was carried out ad absurdum. The head is the dominant feature of the human being, which differs from animals in its upright stance. In the case of Medusa, however, this part of the body was connected with the opposite of humanity - a snake crawling on the ground. The Medusa, however, was different from the centaurs, sphinxes, and other mythical figures of Near Eastern origin that kept their hybridity until the end of antiquity.

From the 5th century, Medusa could lose all hybrid features and be depicted as a beautiful sleeping girl. In classical Greece, not only the appearance of Medusa changed, but also the way in which she kills, how Perseus killed her and what role Perseus' divine helpers played. At first, Athena and Hermes helped prevent the hero from perishing from his fear of the terrifying monster; later they had to prevent Medusa from seducing Perseus with her beautiful appearance and closed eyes. They used a mirror to show Perseus what Medusa looked like, the third innovation of classical Greek Medusa, next to her beauty and sleep.

¹ Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992), 82-87; Joan Aruz et al., eds, *Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014), 248-319.

² Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 300-311.

The transformation of a monster with wide-opened eyes and roaring mouth to its very opposite, a beautiful sleeping girl, was only ostensible, as ugliness and beauty have been Medusa's attributes from the very beginning. The monster, which spread death wherever it went but appeared to be the exact opposite, drew attention to the limits of human knowledge. Even though Perseus saw Medusa with his own eyes, he was unable to distinguish the terrible monster from the harmless and innocent girl. The Greeks highlighted this aspect by emphasising the conditionality of Medusa's deadly gaze. Since the 5th century BC, Greeks began to portray Perseus as walking on his tiptoes toward the sleeping Medusa or standing directly above her. The Gorgons were mortally dangerous; their devastating attack was immediate and definitive, but only when they were awakened. It was only then that these beautiful girls turned into murderous monsters. The theme of Medusa's sleep became a crucial innovation that refined and enhanced the characteristics of Perseus. He did not win by the strength of his arms, courage or perseverance, but above all by faith in the gods and absolute discipline. The gods provided him with equipment and know-how, and he won because he carried out his act precisely, just as the gods had advised him, and did not hesitate for a second to follow their instructions.

The key image, Perseus cutting off Medusa's head, developed throughout ancient civilisation from the 7th century BC to the 1st century after Christ. This long development was surprisingly consistent. Although we encounter radical changes in it, the essence of its protagonists and the role of the gods remains the same. The artists only further developed and illuminated the themes that from the very beginning formed the core of the story. Nevertheless, Roman artists fully exploited the potential of the motif of mirror image in Perseus' myth. Image type of that we consider today to be typical of the Greek myth appears only in Roman art. Here we encounter for the first time Perseus decapitating Medusa and looking backwards at her mirror image reflected on the surface of the shield.

In her life and after her death, when Medusa only existed as a head, she changed everything into inanimate stone statues, which remained as representations of her victims. Ovid describes Medusa's residence as a kind of sculptor's studio full of statues (*simulacra*) of humans and animals that she had created by looking at them. When Perseus seized her head, he became the sculptor himself, and everyone he showed it to became a marble statue (*signum de marmore*).³ Thus, in the myth of Perseus, the image is an attribute of death. Nevertheless, the representation also brings salvation, because it was with it that the hero killed the monster. Perseus turned the deadly strategy of Medusa against her; he created her image on the shield, which allowed him to kill her. Minerva, the Roman counterpart of Greek Athena, always holds the shield that Perseus gazes at, which means that this innovation also celebrated divine assistance, vitally important.

Ancient Greek myths and their depictions survived both the onset of Christianity and the demise of state organisation throughout the western part of the ancient Roman Empire. The fact that they have never disappeared entirely from the cultural horizon of post-ancient Europe was primarily thanks to the uninterrupted literary tradition dominated by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Latin retelling of Greek

³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4, 780; 5, 183.

myths. The partial reunion of ancient stories and ancient forms of individual mythical figures began in Italy in the middle of the 15th century and was completed a hundred years later. In the first half of the 16th century, this revival became a pan-European phenomenon because artists working in transalpine Europe were also involved in it. Since then, the ancient pictorial types of Perseus and other characters of his myth have once again become an integral part of European culture. The result of this process, however, was not a return to how myths were understood and depicted in ancient Greece and Rome.

From ancient Greece up to the 18th century, ancient myths were conceived as creations of individual poets, sculptors and painters, which meant that artists felt free to further develop, alter, and re-interpret them. Perseus and other figures from ancient myths were given a brand-new face in early modern Europe, which expressed the views and needs of this epoch. Inspiration from the ancient Greek and Roman texts and models was only one aspect of this grand synthesis. Medusa was above all a negative figure; the transformation of her hair into snakes was a deserved punishment for the desecration of the temple. In classical antiquity, we cannot find Athena punishing Medusa, but on the German engraving from the end of the 17th century, we can see the goddess expelling Medusa with snake hair and Neptun from her temple (168). In this picture, Medusa became a prefiguration of the heretics desecrating the temple of the Lord, who must be expelled and punished.



168. Johann Ulrich Kraus, Athena punishes Medusa. Engraving, 1694.

Perseus triumphantly raising Medusa's severed head appears in the art of early modern Europe so often that we can see this image type as one of the emblems of this epoch. We can find a comment on it in the monumental work *The World of Symbols* written by Filippo Picinelli. This Augustinian monk understood the world as a huge book of symbols by which God speaks to us. In this widely read encyclopaedia, which was published in Italian in 1653 and Latin in 1681, Perseus is a symbol of the exercise of justice, which brings about horror. This horror, however, is generally beneficial. Picinelli wrote that "we perceive the punishing justice stained by a crime as something tragic because such a spectacle gives rise to horror, but when we think it well, this dreadful horror has undoubtedly a healing effect. In this regard, there is much to learn from the Perseus symbol ... who holds Gorgon's terrible head in his raised hand."⁴ Terrible things need to be shown; they can give instruction effectively because they are very intense experiences, which remain in our memory forever.

In the 16th to 18th centuries, Perseus differed significantly from his ancient namesake. Artists reassessed ancient pictorial types evoking the myth of Perseus, elaborated upon them and invented entirely new visual types. All representations of the Perseus myth were filled with new content. Above all, there was a multi-layered Christian interpretation rooted in medieval Europe. Closely related to this theological dimension was the status of Perseus as the chosen hero, virtually invincible due to his unparalleled divine favour. European rulers who aspired to absolute power by the will of God identified with Perseus, as seen in examples from Italy, France and the newly forming Habsburg Danube Empire. Especially the scenes of Perseus saving Andromeda, whose erotic charm ensured their visual appeal, were often used as political allegories.

Besides scenes with Andromeda, those with Danae often evoked erotic experiences in its early modern versions. Ancient Greek and Roman models inspired these scenes, but eroticism never played a significant role in antiquity. The ancient literary tradition inspired modern depictions of the Perseus myth, which emphasized the connection with artistic creation. The most significant contribution of early modern Europe was the introduction of Medusa's head and Pegasus as emblems of the visual arts and culture in general. As Hesiod proves, Medusa has been associated with the Muses and art in the Greek imagination from its very beginning. Together with her sisters, she lived by "the singing Hesperides."⁵ When Perseus cut her head off, he opened up art to people because Pegasus was born from her headless body. On the mountain of Muses, Helicon, the winged horse Pegasus created the Hippocrene Spring, a source of poetic inspiration. By petrifying everyone with her gaze, Medusa created the first statues. Greek writers mention this motif merely in passing, but it becomes an essential topic in Roman literature. Nevertheless, neither Greek nor Roman painters ever depicted it. This aspect of the myth of Perseus and Medusa became a theme in the visual arts only in early modern Europe.

⁴ Filippo Picinelli, *Mundus symbolicus* (Cologne: s.n., 1681), 58.

⁵ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 275 (translated by Richmond Lattimore), cf. also 1, 281. Cf. Aratos, *Phaenomena*, 221.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, how ancient myths were analysed was fundamentally transformed, and their depictions in visual art are thus noticeably different from their early modern predecessors. In the 20th century, representations of Perseus myth usually looked more like a parody of paintings and statues that originated in the previous century, even though this was not always the artist's intention. The type of analytical approach that was applied made the difference. Dissolution, which is to say the effort to purify ancient myths, prevailed in the 19th century. Classical myths were purged of everything that was supposed to be irrelevant, and artists concentrated wholly on what they thought constituted the "myth's essence." This essence was often sought in dignity, restraint, or other moral messages.

In the analyses of the 20th century, a state that we might call segregation prevailed, i.e. artists usually focused on the individual aspects of the myth, which they dealt with separately and in isolation. They attempted to capture the character of these isolated parts. In these analyses, as a rule, the emphasis was placed on violence, sex and immorality. Perseus is not the main hero of his myth; it is his victim, the appalling or irresistibly beautiful Medusa. Both approaches to classical myths, dissolution and segregation, coexist today, even though they are mutually exclusive. Artists try to capture the essence of myth, but they understand classical myths' versions as testimonies based on authentic life experiences, which are necessarily unique. The result is a parallel existence of more or less inconsistent definitions, which are constantly increasing in number and variety. This approach of contemporary artists to classical myths places an unsolvable problem before historians. They can describe individual updates of Perseus myth in modern art. Still, it is impossible to summarise these contemporary representations because each one deals with something different. This is especially true of Medusa, which is one of the most frequently depicted themes of ancient mythology. Today, as the scope of artists has expanded, they operate in all genre positions, from the comic to the tragic and from playful improvisations to highly serious analyses.

This is not to say that the myth of Perseus is an empty shell today. In 2020, a statue of Medusa was shown in New York's Collect Pond Park in front of the court of criminal justice as part of the #MeToo movement (169). The Argentinian-Italian sculptor Luciano Garbati created the sculpture in 2008, it represents the naked Medusa with a sword in her left hand and the severed head of Perseus in her right. Similar to Cellini's Florentine sculpture, which Garbati paraphrased, the hero and the monster are similar, both of which have a slightly altered sculptor's face. In the stormy debate that erupted around the statue, what Medusa was and what role Perseus had in her story was again addressed.⁶

Today, artists cannot ignore that classical myth is no longer a topic in social conversation. The typical modern man or woman probably would not recall a single work of art inspired by the myth of Perseus and Medusa. Latin, Greek, and ancient culture no longer belong to general education, which naturally influenced the reception of ancient myths. This gap between specialists and the lay public widens

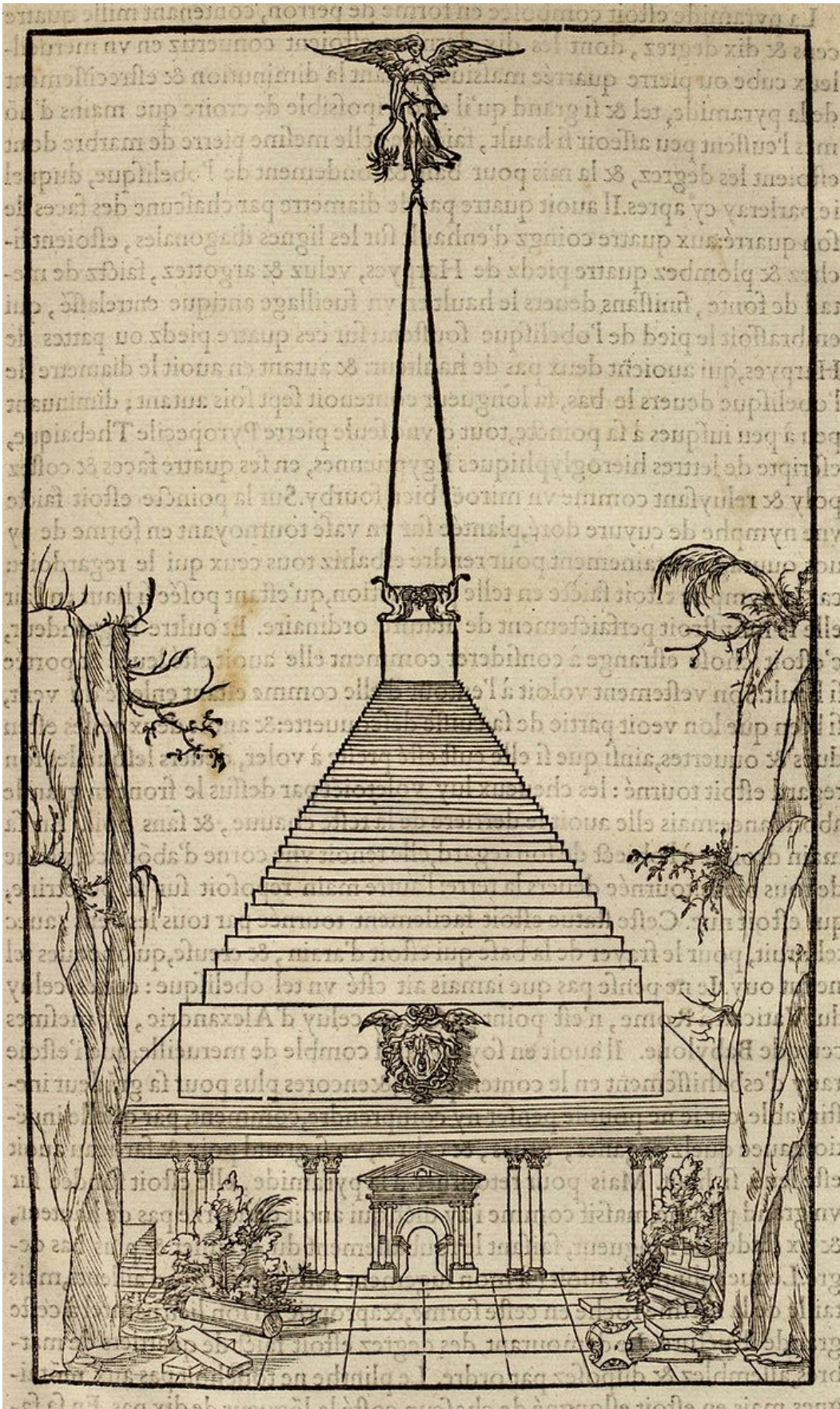
⁶ Julia Jacobs, "How a Medusa Sculpture from a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art." The New York Times, 13 Oct. 2020. www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/arts/design/medusa-statue-manhattan.html

unremittingly. University students know increasingly more about ancient myths and their depiction in art, while the people outside the walls of universities know less and less. Nevertheless, classical myths are still used as a means of communication. These myths were tailored to ancient Greek society and its emotional needs, but it turned out that, from the very beginning, they had exceeded the framework of religious, cultural and social communication in ancient Greek communities. Their creators had touched on something essential that was hidden deep in human beings regardless of when and where they lived. This is why Western civilisation continues to return to ancient myths, especially the story of Perseus. What ended in the 20th century was only the canon of pictorial types created in Greek art in the 5th–4th century BC and revived in early modern Europe.



169. Luciano Garbati, *Medusa*, with the head of Perseus, a sword in her left hand vandalised when the picture was taken (February 12, 2021). Bronze, 2020.

One of the aims of this book is to stress that the representation of the myth of Perseus has changed from the beginning to the present. All pictorial types, which we have followed throughout centuries or even millennia, have been continuously evolving and radically changing in their form and meaning. Every epoch has its Perseus myth. When 20th century artists represent classical myths, they feel obliged as a rule to explain this unusual step by emphasising the uniqueness and hence the originality of their concept. Consequently, the most extreme positions are given preference. Nevertheless, there is no reason why the story of the fearless Perseus, the terrifying Medusa, the dedicated Danae, the beautiful Andromeda, and the mysterious Pegasus should not inspire artists in this century and those to follow.



170. Pyramid with the head of Medusa. Woodcut, 1541.