

# The Gorgon Medusa

Medusa was the most famous of three Gorgon sisters. Ancient Greek images of Gorgons show each them to be monstrous, with sharp teeth, sometimes a beard, and usually a tongue sticking out [[Myth and Religion 51](#)]. Stories of Medusa describe her as so hideous that a look from her would turn a person to stone.

Athena, goddess of wisdom and war, turned Medusa from a beautiful woman into a Gorgon. Medusa had angered Athena after sleeping with Poseidon in Athena's temple. To prove his bravery, the hero Perseus cut off Medusa's head and the gods helped him to complete his task. Athena gave him a shield to avoid looking directly at Medusa but could look at her reflection; Hermes, the messenger of the gods, gave a sickle in order to cut off Medusa's head; and Hades, god of the Underworld, gave the helmet of invisibility, so that Perseus could get close to Medusa and escape from her sisters, Stheno and Euryale.

Some versions of the story say that King Polydectes sent Perseus on his mission in exchange for not marrying his mother. When Perseus presented the head to King Polydectes, an argument broke out. The head, though separated from the body, still had the power to turn people to stone and Perseus used it to turn the King and his party to stone. In the end, the head was passed on to Athena who placed it in the centre of her breastplate. Athena's breastplate, called the aegis, looks like a cloak because it is made from the Golden Fleece [[Myth and Religion 5](#)]. In some images of the Goddess the head of a gorgon can be seen on her cloak.

Pictures of Medusa or a Gorgon head can be found on Ancient Greek objects used in daily life, such as cups [[Symposium 70](#)], where the Gorgon head appears in the centre. As the drinker finished the wine in the cup, the Gorgon head would appear staring at him. Decorative Gorgon heads also appear on pots, for example on handles or necks [[Greece 11](#)]. Such heads were known as Gorgoneia. They were used for protection as well as decoration. The antefix [[Myth and Religion 51](#)], which decorated a roof tile on the edge of a roof, would have protected the building and its occupants from evil.

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