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**Menstruation in Hellenistic Art:  
A New Reading of the Tazza Farnese**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

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Nassos Papalexandrou, **Supervisor**

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John Clarke

**Menstruation in Hellenistic Art:  
A New Reading of the Tazza Farnese**

by  
**Virginia Malcolm Lichty, B.A.**

**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my dad, who sparked my interest in art history with trips to Europe and countless museums as a child. To him, I owe everything.

## **Abstract**

### **Menstruation in Hellenistic Art: A New Reading of the Tazza Farnese**

Virginia Malcolm Lichty, M.A.  
The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Nassos Papalexandrou

This thesis explores the relationship between the two engraved scenes on the Tazza Farnese, arguing that the iconography served as a protective device and displayed metaphorical symbols of menstruation, fertility, family, and rejuvenation for a *parthenos* of the Ptolemaic court. Of particular interest are the aspects least researched within the lengthy scholarship on the Tazza: the shape, material (sardonyx), and the Gorgoneion. Scholars have done an extraordinary job of interpreting and analyzing the iconography of the interior figures, the date, and the style of the Tazza, yet the shape, material, and the Gorgoneion have received little attention. Generally, these subjects are mentioned in passing or quickly referred to in a couple of sentences within the literature of the Tazza; however, my premise is that these elements were meaningful for contemporary viewers. This thesis seeks to extensively research and discuss these unpopular facets of the Tazza, especially with the aid of ancient literature on stones and the Gorgoneion, to propose a new reading of the Tazza Farnese. In reviewing these aspects of the artifact, I argue that

the Tazza was a sumptuous apotropaic agent for menstruation, fertility, and reproduction in the form of the material, shape, allegories and mythical creatures. Chapter One focuses on the unique shape, the material and its sensory qualities, and an analysis of ancient literature concerning gems and their magical qualities. Chapter Two focuses on the Gorgoneion and its iconography, with an elucidating discussion of the Gorgon's Hellenistic representation as an homage to her original beauty and function as a symbol of fertility and rejuvenation. Chapter Three connects the interior figures, representing an allegory of the Nile, to the Gorgoneion as they serve through the motifs of menstruation, fertility, family, and rejuvenation, to present to a young woman the metamorphosis of her body into a woman and her duties as a wife in Ptolemaic society. The implied references of flowing liquids (as seen in the blood of the Gorgoneion, the Nile, the breastmilk of Isis, and the veins of sardonyx) and cyclical occurrences (the inundation of the Nile and the ecdysis of snakes) have led to my argument that the Tazza Farnese was a celebratory gift intended for a female on the cusp of transitioning into a woman.

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## Introduction

*The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance – Aristotle*

Luxury works of art have largely been overlooked in the history of Greek art in favor of statues and vase paintings. Yet, one piece has remained popular amongst these other media, the Tazza Farnese (Fig. 1). Surviving a long eventful history, the Tazza currently resides in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.<sup>1</sup> This artifact measures twenty centimeters in diameter and displays excellent craftsmanship in the intricately detailed engraved figures. The sumptuous material, sardonyx, catches the viewer's eye with its size and layers of color. Carved on either side, this work presents an interior scene of eight gathered figures and an exterior rendering of a Gorgoneion. To date, no ancient sources on the Tazza exist, leaving questions about the artist, ownership, patronage, date, and proper identification of the iconography.

The Tazza has been under much dispute in terms of its date and interpretation. Scholars argue as to whether the cup was Hellenistic or Roman, an allegory of the Nile flooding or a metaphor of Pax Romana, and who the figures represent. The majority of literature agrees on a Hellenistic date and an allegorical scene of the Nile with Egyptian gods. Stylistic analysis of other cameos, intaglios, reliefs and sculptures has aided

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<sup>1</sup> Catalog No. 27611

immensely in dating the Tazza to around 100-31 BCE<sup>2</sup>. This thesis aims at addressing areas that scholars have tended to neglect, such as the shape of the object itself, the material and its qualities, the relationship between the material and the Gorgon, the Gorgon and its relationship to the interior, and viewership. I argue that the Tazza was not just a decorative utensil but, rather, that the two carved metaphorical scenes displayed functions specifically for women: to protect them from the evils of childbirth through the shape, material, and the Gorgoneion, and to teach women about their cycles and reproductive abilities.

I propose several themes that connect these two sculptural scenes. The themes of menstruation, birth, family, and rejuvenation unite the Gorgon with the allegory of the Nile in creating a complete work of transformation for a female viewer. In addition to this, my study explores the qualities of sardonyx and its relationship to the Gorgon. I examine ancient poetry and prose about stone, especially drawing from Posidippus of Pella, Theophrastus, and Pliny the Elder, in order to better understand how ancient Greeks viewed and used sardonyx. Typically used for cameos, sardonyx became a popular material in Ptolemaic Egypt, but I argue that this stone was chosen for its magical

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<sup>2</sup> Dimitris Plantzos, "Ptolemaic Cameos of the Second and First Centuries BC." *OJA* 15, no. 1 (1996): 39-61. Plantzos gives various examples of other Hellenistic intaglios and cameos similar in style to the Tazza. Of the various dates given for the Tazza, Plantzos makes the most convincing argument of a date period from 100-31 BCE with his stylistic analysis of other contemporary works. Given the numerous interpretations and dates for the Tazza, this thesis follows Plantzos' interpretation and date as his argument and research are both sound and thorough. Therefore, this thesis refers to the interior figures as the Allegory of the Nile and date the Tazza to 100-31 BCE during the Hellenistic period per Plantzos' opinion, which is loosely based off the original argument from Adolf Furtwängler.

properties as well.<sup>3</sup> Overall, I argue on the basis of shape, material, and the depicted scenes propose a new reading of the Tazza. In reviewing these aspects of the artifact, I argue that the Tazza was an ornamented miniature shield with metaphors of menstruation, fertility, and reproduction in the form of allegories and mythical creatures intended for a female owner. The implied references to flowing liquids and cyclical occurrences (flooding and shedding) have led me to my argument that this work was meant for a female viewer in the Ptolemaic court.

My methodology for this thesis follows closely the hermeneutic method with a feminist approach to the material. Klaus Junker describes the hermeneutic method: "...it is the context that forms the basis, in data and in knowledge, for every investigation, while one's own vital capacities are the bridge to the understanding of the objects or phenomena to be investigated."<sup>4</sup> There will always be a distance between the research and the object of research, either temporal or cultural. To overcome this distance, as Junker suggests, hermeneutic methods are evidence-based and presents their findings in a

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<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Lapatin and J. Paul Getty Museum, *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome*, (2015): 115. Lapatin explains the difference between cameos and intaglios, as well as why banded agates (i.e. sardonyx) were used for cameos. Lapatin writes, "In contrast to intaglios, which were cut into the stone and intended to replicate their imagery, in reverse, when used as seals pressed in softer materials, cameos were carved in relief and functioned, for the most part, as decorative objects". As artists cut away the excess stone around the image, the engraver creates a raised relief. Cameos required multilayered banded agates (like sardonyx) to be carved to create the most visually effective art work. Lapatin continues, "...reliefs exploited the layered multicolored structure of banded agate to create polychrome compositions with striking effect appear to have been invented in the Hellenistic period, perhaps as early as the third century BC".

<sup>4</sup> Klaus Junker, *Interpreting the Images of Greek Myths: An Introduction*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 126.



testable form.<sup>5</sup> The goal of the hermeneutic approach is understanding the object through the eyes of its original viewers, not through a modern lens, for a more accurate comprehension of the artifact.<sup>6</sup> With my thesis, I extensively refer to ancient texts on information about stones and their properties, Hellenistic visual culture, mythology about deities, and medical writings on the female body to better inform my argument of the Tazza as a protective ornate miniature shield with engraved themes of female transformations. The Greek word *hermeneuo*, according to Junker, means to interpret, not to prove.<sup>7</sup> This thesis aims to interpret the Tazza's original ownership, function, and meaning through the use of ancient literature. My goal is to contribute a step forward towards suggesting a plausible scenario of the proprietorship and purpose of the Tazza Farnese.

Because of the Tazza's long unique history, there is an abundance of scholarship on this artifact. The exterior Gorgoneion rarely garners more than a passing mention in the scholarship on the Tazza, as scholars primarily focus on the interior scene. The material, function, and viewership of the cup are also heavily overlooked in favor of other aspects of the artifact. The majority of scholarship on the Tazza focuses on the history, iconography of the interior, and style of the work. In 1900, Adolf Furtwängler proposed the Tazza to be an allegory of the fertility of the Nile and identified the three central

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<sup>5</sup> Junker, *Interpreting the Images*, 120.

<sup>6</sup> Junker, *Interpreting the Images*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Junker, *Interpreting the Images*, 120.

figures as Egyptian gods.<sup>8</sup> Building upon this, Jean Charbonneaux and Frédéric Louis Bastet furthered Furtwängler's proposal by suggesting these figures to be portraits of the Ptolemy family.<sup>9</sup> Later recent research debates the date and style of the Tazza, as well as the various identifications/interpretations for each person in the tondo.

Significant scholarship in the realm of iconography and style are provided by Eugene Dwyer, Eugenio La Rocca, and Dimitris Plantzos. Dwyer's "The Temporal Allegory of the Tazza Farnese" presents a complicated reading of the Tazza as a system of allegorical and astronomical allusions for an elite viewer to understand.<sup>10</sup> Dwyer quickly mentions the Gorgon as either the star *Aurigae* or a sun of the underworld as possible connections to the astronomical interior. However, the evidence for these claims is not well supported and a little far-fetched. La Rocca dedicates an entire book to the Tazza, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, yet only explains the material and shape briefly in the first chapter, then concentrates on the interior figures and history of the Tazza in all the remaining chapters.<sup>11</sup> La Rocca's argument of the Tazza as a *phiale* vessel fails to give a definitive understanding of the shape and to relate its form to its function. Plantzos' "Ptolemaic Cameos of the Second and First Centuries BC" addresses previous scholarship on the Tazza and provides excellent stylistic analysis

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<sup>8</sup> Adolf Furtwängler, *Die antiken Gemmen*, Leipzig: Giesecke & Devrient, 1900.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Charbonneaux, "Sur La Signification et La Date de La Tazza Farnese." *Monuments et Memoires publies par l'Academie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 50, no. 1 (1958): 85–103.

Frédéric Louis, Bastet, *Untersuchungen zur Datierung und Bedeutung der Tazza Farnese*, Amsterdam, 1962.

<sup>10</sup> Eugene J. Dwyer, "The Temporal Allegory of the Tazza Farnese," *AJA* 96, no. 2 (April 1, 1992): 255–82.

<sup>11</sup> Eugenio La Rocca, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1984.

of other Ptolemaic cameos to date the Tazza accurately to the first century, before 31 BCE. He discusses the Gorgoneion's iconography in relation to parallels from the Augustan period, but also from late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE Athenian drinking vessels with Gorgoneia on the bottom. Plantzos fails to mention any relationship between the two engraved reliefs. His work is instrumental to my second chapter in comparing the Gorgoneion to contemporary sumptuous works.

Other works on the Tazza do not provide sufficient evidence or do not undertake extended discussions on the qualities of the stone. Therefore, I use ancient and medieval literary sources on stones in addition to gemology books for information on sardonyx. Theophrastus' *On Stones* and Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* discuss stones and their qualities guides my work on the use of sardonyx and the qualities ancient Greeks believed it possessed. Martyn Smith's essay, "Exclusive Stones: Reading Posidippus' *Lithika* through Technical Writing on Stones" and Elizabeth Kosmetatou's article, "'Epigr.' 8 AB and Early Ptolemaic Cameos" both discuss how the Greeks may have perceived engraved gems and stones. Using Posidippus' poems, both authors extract from the text the nature of stones and the playful interaction between material and subject matter which aids in my discussion of the sardonyx and the Gorgoneion. Lastly, my argument about female viewership draws from literature concerning ancient practices of fertility and puberty rites, women in Greece and Ptolemaic Egypt, and Greek and Egyptian religions. I examine ancient literature of the female body by Hippocrates,

Herophilos, and Soranos to assess the medical understandings of women and menstruation and apply these theories to the Tazza's themes of menstruation and fertility.

The Tazza Farnese prominently displays the different magnificent colors of the sardonyx, with the cream color in the center for the figures, framed by the dark sorrel color circling to the outer rim with white veins flowing continuously over the dark mahogany-colored background (Figs. 3 and 18)<sup>12</sup>. The interior contains eight gathered figures while the exterior displays a Gorgoneion (Fig. 2). The Gorgon looks out directly at the viewer with a shocked scared expression in her alarmed eyes and slightly opened mouth. Unlike Archaic and Classical representations of Gorgoneia, this Hellenistic version depicts Medusa with a round face, chubby cheeks, small mouth and eyes, and looking almost completely human with the exception of snakes and a small set of wings in her hair. Medusa's hair flies wildly around her face as small snakes weave in and out of her locks as wings protrude from the top of her head (Figs. 2 and 4). Two snakes are tied in a knot beneath Medusa's neck, their tails kinked, mimicking her hair. Surrounding the Gorgoneion in a circle on the outer rim are large snake skins displaying the underside of a snake with the ventral scutes separated by interscale tissue and scales. Beginning from her neck, two peeled skins flow down, parallel to one another, then split apart at the bottom as they wrap up the rim to meet at the top. From the top, the viewer's

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<sup>12</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 125.

gaze glides downwards to once again meet with the intense stare that pierces through the frenzy of curls and snakes.

On the reverse side, a serene scene takes place, as an older man holds a large cornucopia while sitting in a tree (Figs. 6 and 7). He is accompanied by a bare-breasted woman seated on a sphinx wearing the traditional Pharaoh headdress (Figs. 8 and 9). Above her, a rugged youthful man stands holding a plow in his right hand and a small knife in his left (Figs. 10 and 11). To the right of the scene, two partially nude robust women sit on the rim of the tondo (Figs. 12 and 13). One holds a bowl, a possible reference to the Tazza, the other a small cornucopia as the women both look back to the center of the cup. Lastly, flying above all the figures are two nude males, a cloak billowing behind them (Figs. 14 and 15).

While many scholars argue as to what or who each figure represents, Dimitris Plantzos' article, "Ptolemaic Cameos of the Second and First Centuries BC", provides the most convincing evidence for each figure. Through stylistic analysis with other contemporary Ptolemaic works of art, Plantzos successfully dates the Tazza to 100-31 BCE. He identifies the figures following Adolf Furtwängler (1900), as an allegory of the fertility of the Nile (Fig. 5). Furtwängler believed the composition to be a collection of personified forces that cause and depict the abundant fertility and harvest of the land of

the Nile.<sup>13</sup> Plantzos agrees with Furtwängler's theory, but also considers other interpretations to conclude with a general answer for what the Tazza represents.

Plantzos suggests the Tazza to be a religious allegory focusing on myths concerning the inundation of the Nile. This thesis follows Plantzos' suggestion of a Hellenistic date and the tondo scene representing the Allegory of the Nile, verses previous or later scholarship opposing this view. I approach the interior figures with Plantzos' identification per person and focus on how these figures relate to the themes of menstruation, fertility, family, and rejuvenation as characters of the inundation of the Nile. Looking at figure three, an illustration of the interior figures is labeled with letters for better comprehension of who each figure represents (Fig. 5). Figure A, the sphinx, represents Osiris (Fig.16). Figure B is Isis while figure C is either Nilus the River God or a personification of the Nile River (he is generally thought of as both). Horus as figure D stands below the Etesian winds, figures E and F<sup>14</sup>. Lastly, Figures G and H denote the two daughters of Nilus, Memphis and Anchirroe, or are regarded as *Horai*, personifications of the seasons during which the flooding commenced and ended.<sup>15</sup> The quality, meticulous details of the gods and personifications, and the overall craftsmanship of this sumptuous work have allowed the Tazza to survive mostly unharmed throughout history.

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<sup>13</sup> Plantzos, "Ptolemaic Cameos," 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> The Etesian winds occur at the time of the inundation of the Nile.

<sup>15</sup> Plantzos, "Ptolemaic Cameos," 39-61. The entire article specifies with other examples of Hellenistic art, which figure represents an Egyptian god or personification. Memphis and Anchirroe are two principal rivers that branch off from the Nile.

## A Chapter-by-Chapter Overview

Chapter One of my thesis focuses on the shape and material of the artifact. I begin with the unique shape and the possible functions it may have had, in comparison to like shapes from different materials i.e. silver, as opposed to performing as a drinking vessel. I then engage in an expanded discussion of the material sardonyx, its qualities, and its relationship to the Gorgon. I discuss the sensory effects of the material, mainly the veins, the colors throughout the stone, and the interaction with variations in light. As indicated by Theophrastus and Pliny, the Greeks preferred to work with sardonyx when creating cameos as the material was most suitable for large works, such as the Tazza, and provided layers of color. The Greeks believed that onyx had evil properties that created sorrow and fear in the wearer. However, when paired with sard, the wicked qualities of onyx were restrained. Sard's greatest power was to serve as a protector from the evilness of onyx. With this understanding, I end the chapter with an examination of the material's significance within the Tazza, especially addressing its relationship to the engraved image of the Gorgoneion as apotropaic defensive devices.

The earliest surviving Greek source about stones is Theophrastus' *De Lapidibus* (*On Stones*) dating from 315/14 BCE.<sup>16</sup> A pupil and successor of Aristotle<sup>17</sup>, Theophrastus focuses on rare stones and their qualities, and enumerates the color,

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<sup>16</sup> Dimitris Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1999): 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 109.

density, hardness, and texture of stones.<sup>18</sup> While considered a scientific source, *On Stones* indirectly provides the reader information about how stones were appreciated in Greek society, while reporting the scientific properties of each gem.<sup>19</sup> This work begins with the formation of metals and stones, then proceeds with details of the reactions of certain stones when fire or water is applied. Theophrastus notes the smoothness, solidity, luster, transparency, color, and viscosity distinctive to each gem.<sup>20</sup> Much of our knowledge about ancient thought on stones we owe to Theophrastus. After Theophrastus, Posidippus of Pella intricately describes the qualities of gems in relation to the subject of certain cameos in his poems for the Ptolemaic court. His insights on Hellenistic visual culture and its sociology aid modern readers tremendously as the series of poems performs like a collection of luxurious and marvelous artifacts. Each poem addresses a different stone in its setting and eloquently plays with language in describing the iconography, properties, and purpose of the gem.<sup>21</sup>

In the beginning of the third century BCE, supplementary information about stones appeared in pharmacological, medicinal, and magical texts. These works referenced Theophrastus' *On Stones* frequently, so much so that the Roman Pliny the Elder was able to use these sources and more for his extensive work on the natural

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<sup>18</sup>Martyn Smith, "Reading Posidippus' *Lithika* through Technical Writing on Stones," in *Labored in Papyrus Leaves: Perspectives on an Epigram Collection Attributed to Posidippus (P.Mil.Vogl. VIII 309)*, ed. by Benjamin Acosta-Hughes, Benjamin et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Kuttner, "Cabinet Fit for a Queen: The 'Lithika' as Posidippus' Gem." in *The New Posidippus a Hellenistic Poetry Book*, ed. Kathryn J. Gutzwiller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141.



world.<sup>22</sup> Pliny's surviving testimony is extremely valuable as many Greek texts discussing gems were either lost or damaged throughout time. Pliny presents a review of Greek artists and works of art in several of his books in his *Naturalis Historia*.<sup>23</sup> Jacob Isager, a scholar on Pliny and *Naturalis Historia*, clarifies: "Pliny himself claims that more than 2000 works by Greek and Roman authors were available to him while he worked on his *Natural History*, and his narratives bear the imprint of his use of different sources not always made to agree with each other."<sup>24</sup> Pliny's ability to extract and revise previous ancient scholarship allows us to consider *Naturalis Historia* as a literary summation of those 2000 works. Book 37 of *Naturalis Historia* lists different uses of precious gems in tandem with the colors and characteristics of stones. Pliny introduces Book 37 with these comments about semiprecious stones. Pliny writes,

Precious stones: a subject in which the majestic might of Nature presents itself to us, contracted within a very limited space, though, in the opinion of many, nowhere displayed in a more admirable form. So great is the value that men attach to the many varieties of these gems, their numerous colours, their constituent parts, and their singular beauty, that, in the case of some of them, it is looked upon as no less than sacrilege to engrave them, for signets even, the very purpose regarded as beyond all price, and could not be valued at any known amount of human wealth; so much so that, in the case of many, it is quite sufficient to have some single gem or other before the eyes, there to behold the supreme and absolute perfection of Nature's work.<sup>25</sup> (Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 37.1)

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<sup>22</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 7.

<sup>23</sup>Jacob Isager, *Pliny on Art and Society: The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1991): 9. Pliny's books about works of art are covered in: Book 33 is about precious metal, Book 34/35 on bronze art and painting, Book 36 on marble, art and architecture, and lastly Book 37 is about precious stones.

<sup>24</sup> Isager, *Pliny on Art*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 108-109.

Pliny's rejection for engraving on gemstones stems from the Hellenistic period, as engraved stones were popular luxury works of art. The Greek word for softness or delicacy is *tryphe*. The verb form of this word, *tryphao*, means to live luxuriously or sumptuously. In the Hellenistic period, the Ptolemies, more so than others, frequently applied *tryphao* to their daily and political lives. Kenneth Lapatin suggests the philosophy of the Ptolemies was one of excess, as they displayed their opulence in almost every aspect of their lives.<sup>26</sup> While Pliny may disagree with the philosophy of the Ptolemies, both Pliny and the Ptolemies believed in the power and beauty of Nature as proved by these semiprecious gems.

Theophrastus and Pliny, while excellent ancient sources, do not distinguish similarly colored stones from one another, resulting in confusion about particular stones. An example of this occurs when Theophrastus does not differentiate onyx, sardonyx, or agate by special names, but uses *onychion* as a general term for all three stones. Even though this could be remarked as a flaw in his work, Theophrastus is the first writer to mention and characterize these specific stones. Pliny also applied this term, *onychion*, to both onyx and agate stones.<sup>27</sup> To Theophrastus, *onychion* (onyx) is part of the banded chalcedony group. The striping of layers within the chalcedony are not flat, but angular, wavy, or concentric combinations, as we see in the sardonyx of the Tazza (Figs. 17 and

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<sup>26</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Theophrastus, "On Stones", in *Introduction to Greek Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, ed. Earle Radcliffe Caley and John F.C. Richards, (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1956), 127.

18).<sup>28</sup> Given the missing scholarship in ancient gemology, scholars reference texts from the medieval ages, mainly the thirteenth-century *Book of Minerals* by Albertus Magnus (c. 1193-1280).<sup>29</sup>

Magnus, in his literature on minerals, references the works of the ancients directly when providing the history of the knowledge of a particular mineral or stone. His references to the ninth-century work *Letters on Incantations* by Costa ben Luca, which directly quote from the *Lapidary of Aristotle*, allow us to infer the effects of onyx held by the ancient Greeks.<sup>30</sup> Unlike Pliny, Magnus chose to focus his work only on ancient sources that applied to mineralogy, disregarding the rest of the information of that work, such as the subject of art as found in *Naturalis Historia*. Isager summarizes: “During the Middle Ages these chapters [in Natural History] on art as well as the rest of the Natural History were known, but if we are to judge a manuscript tradition, artistic activity was of no particular interest. What was of interest then were the sections about the medicinal uses of materials from the realms of fauna, flora and minerals.”<sup>31</sup> The attention to medicinal use of minerals aids further understanding of the traits of sardonyx.

My second chapter begins with the myth of Medusa and a brief history of the portrayal of Gorgons in the Hellenistic age for a better understanding of the reception and use of the monster, as well as the iconography associated with her, particularly that of

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<sup>28</sup> Theophrastus, “On Stones”, 127.

<sup>29</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967): vii and xiii.

<sup>30</sup> Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 109.

<sup>31</sup> Isager, *Pliny on Art*, 9.

snakes. I then investigate the viewer's interaction with the Medusa. The artifact mimics a shield with its round form and Gorgoneion exterior image. I propose that, when held fully upright, the Tazza protects the holder and shocks the opposing viewer with the Gorgoneion, if only for a moment. By demonstrating this and providing an understanding of her mythology and iconography, I explain the Gorgon's function as a protector and a symbol of fertility, regeneration, and rejuvenation for women.

Chapter Three considers the Tazza as a luxury art work intended for a transitioning female, either as a puberty rite or wedding gift. The Tazza's iconography and semi-subtle references to menstruation, fertility, birth, and family relate to female bodies and their roles in Ptolemaic society. The ownership and usage of the cup are unknown; however, it is highly likely that it belonged to a woman of the Ptolemaic court because of its sumptuous material and the subject matter. I explore each theme (menstruation, fertility, rejuvenation, and family) thoroughly as it pertains to the Gorgon and to the allegory of the Nile. For example, the themes of menstruation and rejuvenation are seen in the snake skins encircling the Gorgoneion. These sloughed remains symbolize the menstruation of a woman, as snakes cyclically shed their skins and women cyclically menstruate monthly, and the rejuvenation of the new snake skin and the purified body of a woman after menstruation.

The comprehension of the female body and of menstruation was greatly understood by the ancient Greeks as a process of rejuvenation and purification of the body. Women were spongy bodies filled with blood that must be released monthly to

ensure health and sanity of the female.<sup>32</sup> There is little mention of menstruation in the surviving ancient documentation, but information about menstruation endures in Hippocrates, Herophilos, and Soranos on the female body and fertility.<sup>33</sup> There are roughly sixty treatises in the Hippocratic text *Corpus*, of which ten deal with gynaecological subjects, including *Diseases of Women*, which concerns itself with the flow of blood and other womanly bodily functions.<sup>34</sup> The essentials of a woman's health pertained to menstruation, intercourse, and child birth. Without these elements a woman, according to the Hippocratic writers, would be diseased.<sup>35</sup>

Following Hippocrates, in the third-century BCE, the Greek doctor Herophilos worked under Ptolemy II Philadelphos and wrote a book entitled *ὁ Μαιωτικός* (*Midwifery*). Herophilos differed from his contemporaries in that he actually dissected human bodies to truly grasp the intricacies of the human body. He conducted these systematic procedures at the Museum in Alexandria, as well as practicing dissection on convicted criminals donated by the king. Herophilos recorded his findings and hypothesizes from these dissections in over nine works.<sup>36</sup> Herophilos was the first Greek doctor to dedicate an entire study and book to midwifery. Today, *Midwifery* and the

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<sup>32</sup> Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994): 45-51.

<sup>33</sup> Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993): 78.

<sup>34</sup> Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 10. Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, edited by David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1990): 311.

<sup>35</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 319.

<sup>36</sup> Jane Rowlandson and Roger S. Bagnall, eds. *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt: A Sourcebook*, Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 287-88.

majority of his anatomical writings no longer exist, yet they endure in the writings of Soranos (c. first/second-century CE) and Galen (c. 129-200 CE), of whom both were trained at Alexandria. Soranos attended and practiced medicine at Alexandria during the reign of Trajan (c. 98-117 CE) and Galen studied there circa 148-157.<sup>37</sup>

Soranos of Ephesos taught in Rome, after the creation of the Tazza, during the time of Emperors Trajan and Hadrian. Only sections of the original Greek of Soranos' *Gynaikeia* remain, yet fortunately his work was fully transcribed into Latin. *Gynaikeia* is an encyclopedia for midwives and provides a new approach to the anatomical study of women.<sup>38</sup> Arguably, Soranos does not limit female health to just reproductive functions, but considers personal health and survival of females, independent of reproduction.<sup>39</sup> These ancient medical texts aid in my research in ancient understanding of menstruation, fertility, and flow of liquids, subjects I claim are found within the Gorgoneion, the veins of the sardonix, and the central interior figure, Isis. Isis is the pivotal thematic element in the iconography. She is placed in the center of the tondo, thereby reinforcing the gendered focus of the Tazza. After a thorough investigation of Isis' iconography, mythology, and her relationship to Ptolemaic women, I conclude with a new reading of

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<sup>37</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 287-88. Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 321. Hanson explains, "Neither Soranos nor Galen is likely to have seen the insides of a human female, and for knowledge of the female uterus, they rely on the now lost *Midwifery* of Herophilos of Khalkedon, who practiced and dissected at Alexandria in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphos, little more than half a century after the beginning of the systematic dissection of female animals by Aristotle and his followers."

<sup>38</sup>Guilia Sissa, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead: the Female Body in Ancient Greece," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, edited by David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1990): 354-55.

<sup>39</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 320.

the Tazza as more than a cup or luxurious work of art, but, rather, a metaphorical device for ancient women of the Ptolemaic court to understand their changing bodies and roles in society.

As stated by Aristotle, art represents its inner significance. Though the Tazza was created long after Aristotle, I believe this quote aptly pertains to the sumptuous work of art. Often fixated on the interior figures, scholars and viewers alike forget the inner significance of the sardonix and its protective powers, of the Gorgoneion and her original representation as a goddess of fertility and nature, of Isis and her connection to women, and the theme of menstruation echoed in the allegory of the Nile and in the decapitated head of Medusa. Junker explains the hermeneutic spiral which is the process of starting with a thesis and ending with a result through a multitude of contextual aspects. Junker states,

The hermeneutic spiral requires a greater expenditure of method and argument. Just as a spiral has several turns, so the procedure of scrutinizing a thesis and stating it more precisely requires, as a rule, several circuits. Each aspect of the context which is to be integrated into the assumed outcome represents, as it were, one turn in the spiral; and the more numerous the turns, the more secure and refined the *final* result.<sup>40</sup>

By assessing the work on multiple levels, as Junker suggests, in terms of its material, function, and iconography, I intend with this study to promote a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the two carved sides of the Tazza, its inward significance, and its overall purpose. The cup's shape, its function, the qualities of the

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<sup>40</sup> Junker, *Interpreting the Images*

material, and the relationship between the exterior and interior sculptural figures allow me to provide a hypothesis of how the Tazza was perceived by a gendered viewer, a young woman of the Ptolemaic court.



## **Chapter One: The Protective Qualities of the Tazza Farnese: An examination of shape, material, and function**

At the height of the Hellenistic period the Greeks pursued and conquered new territories around the Mediterranean, thereby opening up their artistic repertoire to new exotic features from these different lands. The Ptolemaic court in Alexandria, Egypt especially incorporated these new styles as the court artists infused Egyptian, Greek, and Near Eastern traits to create a cohesive, specific Ptolemaic style within their art. The Tazza Farnese is an example of this amalgamation of various ethnic styles. The shape, material, and function of this artifact pull mostly from the Greeks; however, there are certain aspects that are Persian, Ptolemaic, and Egyptian. To understand how the ancients would have viewed this artifact, this chapter will begin with the shape, then progress to a comprehensive review of ancient and medieval literature on stones and sardonyx, and conclude with the nature of the device, especially, as I argue, its protective function.

Typically used for cameos, sardonyx became a popular material in Ptolemaic Egypt, but this stone likely was chosen for its magical property, protection. Thus, the Tazza was not just a decorative utensil but, rather, a defensive device through the apotropaic powers of sardonyx. The Gorgoneion engraved on the exterior complements the theme of protection, as Gorgons were used to ward off evil spirits with their powerful stares and heinous features. With these two great defensive aspects in the work, the Tazza likely functioned as a miniature shield rather than as a cup or libation bowl. When

a person holds the Tazza upright completely, the gaze of Medusa connects with the opposing viewer and transforms the holder into the Gorgon. The cup converts into a shield which guards the owner and shocks the viewer, if only for a moment.

### **The Enigmatic Shape of the Tazza**

At the onset of the Ptolemaic period, Egyptians began adopting Hellenizing forms into their repertoire of drinking vessels. These new Ptolemaic forms borrowed from previous Egyptian periods, imitated Greek and Italic vessels, and adopted unique profiles from the Persians. Greek replicas in the Ptolemaic repertoire were: *kraters*, *oinochoes*, *aryballoi*, *amphoras*, *kantharos*, *hydrias*, *olpes*, etc.<sup>41</sup> The *phiale* shape, commonly attributed to the form of the Tazza, served as an offering cup or bowl.<sup>42</sup> It added a distinctive element to the new collection of Ptolemaic vessels. This form of vessel first appeared during the reign of the Persians over the Egyptians and were generally made from metal (Fig. 25).<sup>43</sup>

Like the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Ptolemies adopted *phialai* into their collection of drinking basins for symposia and as libation tableware used upon altars for the gods.<sup>44</sup> The flat plate-like form holds the liquid in a shallow-dipped central area. On

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<sup>41</sup> Anna Wodzińska, *A Manual of Egyptian Pottery*, AERA Field Manual Series 1, (Boston: Ancient Egypt Research Associates, 2009): 29.

<sup>42</sup> Brooklyn Museum, Detroit Institute of Arts, and Hypo-Kulturstiftung, eds. *Cleopatra's Egypt: Age of the Ptolemies*. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Brooklyn Museum, 1988): 225.

<sup>43</sup> Brian A. Sparkes, *Greek Pottery: An Introduction* (Manchester; New York: New York: Manchester University Press, 1991) 85.

<sup>44</sup> Sparkes, *Greek Pottery*, 76 and 78.

the exterior, in the center of the bowl, is a raised *omphalos* offering a place for the finger to be inserted beneath, before tipping the *phiale* towards the mouth (Fig. 25).<sup>45</sup> Yet, the Tazza does not contain an *omphalos* itself creating an enigmatic quality about its shape. Unlike other *phialai*, the Tazza has a more pronounced basal torus, as the base of the cup measures almost the same circumference as rim of the flared rim (Figs. 19, 20, 21, 22).<sup>46</sup> Often scholars quickly state that the Tazza is a *phiale* vessel and then segue into a new subject, although due credit must be given to Eugenio La Rocca who attempts to understand this unique idiosyncratic shape in comparison to other Egyptian, Persian, and Hellenistic *phialai* (Fig. 19).<sup>47</sup> However, where La Rocca's argument fails to give a definitive stance on the shape is his lack of relating the form to function. The shallowness and wide lip of the Tazza, when brought fully upright to the mouth, does not seem suitable to sip from, as liquids would cascade down the chin and neck of the drinker. Given the clean white interior figures, untainted by wine or other dark liquids, it is unlikely that the Tazza served as a libation bowl for symposia, sacrifices, dedications, or ceremonies. I propose a wholly new concept for the Tazza's shape: the wide brim, the concave interior, and the Gorgoneion on the exterior of this artifact mimic a shield.

In addition to the form, the material and the iconography of the exterior demonstrate that the Tazza functioned as a decorative miniature shield, rather than a

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<sup>45</sup> Sparkes, *Greek Pottery*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> Jon van de Grift, "Review of *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, by Eugenio La Rocca", *AJA* 89, no. 4 (1985): 712. La Rocca, *L'età d'oro di Cleopatra*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> La Rocca, *L'età d'oro di Cleopatra*, 6-7.

*phiale*. In the Hellenistic era, Gorgoneia typically were emblazoned on a multitude of objects such as household utensils, coins, kilns, and shields as emblems.<sup>48</sup> Harkening back to Athena and her aegis, the Tazza appears to replicate Greek battle shields with the Gorgoneion on the exterior. Ancient literature fails to clarify the nature of the aegis of Athena and Zeus, though we know this armor was held by the deities. Two forms of this magical armor are apparent: either a piece of body armor, like an animal skin, or a shield (Fig. 37). Homer first introduces the aegis in the *Iliad* (*Il.* 5, 739-742) and there are later mentions of it as a Gorgon shield of Athena by both Euripides and Aristophanes.<sup>49</sup> Greek artists chose to represent the aegis as either body armor or a shield (Fig. 37). Depicted as a shield in statues or vase paintings, the severed head of Medusa fills the expanse of the exterior with her loose coiling snake locks and opened mouth to petrify enemies (Figs. 34, 35, and 36)<sup>50</sup>.

Throughout the history of warfare in ancient Greece, terrible monsters were proudly exhibited on the exterior of soldiers' shields as means to frighten the enemy.<sup>51</sup> The stare of Medusa, on a shield, petrified any living being into stone; creating a powerful protective barrier between the soldier and the enemy. Jean Pierre Vernant explains the extreme, even fatal, discomfort of interacting with the Gorgons. He writes, “

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<sup>48</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Death in the Eyes, Figure of the *Other*,” in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, by Jean Pierre Vernant, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 112.

<sup>49</sup> George Henry Chase, *The Shield Devices of the Greeks in Art and Literature* (Chicago: Ares, 1979) 9 and 17.

<sup>50</sup> Josef Floren, *Studien Zur Typologie Des Gorgoneion*, (Münster Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1977).

<sup>51</sup> Chase, *The Shield Devices*, 9.

If the sight of these monsters is unbearable, it is because by the mixture in their faces of human, bestial, and mineral elements, they embody the figure of chaos, the return to the formless and indistinct, and the confusion of primordial Night: the face itself of death....”<sup>52</sup> To the Greeks, the Gorgons incarnated terror and death, they were one of the utmost terrible creatures to behold.<sup>53</sup> The connection between the Gorgon and the observer not only scared the person to death, but transformed the being permanently into stone. When looking at the Gorgoneion on the Tazza, the spectator sees a mirror of him or herself in the Gorgoneion, with her frightful face forever carved in stone. The concept of the observer morphing into the Gorgon and further analysis of viewer interaction with the Medusa will be explained in the following chapter. The tradition of Gorgoneia as emblematic apotropaic décor on shields and other objects survived into the Hellenistic era.<sup>54</sup> Dioskourides, a third-century epigrammist from Alexandria, recites in the *Palatine Anthology* of the Cretan warrior Hyllos, dedicating a shield with a Gorgoneion emblazoned on the front. Dioskourides describes the shield,

The Gorgon that turns men to stone and eke the triple knees  
He bade them paint: you’ll find them there, saying to all they meet  
Look thou down on me, my foe; that look of them will freeze.<sup>55</sup> (*Palatine Anth.*  
6.126)

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<sup>52</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, “In the Mirror of Medusa,” in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, by Jean Pierre Vernant, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 144.

<sup>53</sup> Vernant, “In the Mirror of Medusa”, 144.

<sup>54</sup> Ingrid Krauskopf, “Gorgo, Gorgones,” *LIMC* IV (1988).

<sup>55</sup> Stephen R. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 156.

Even in the third-century BCE, Greeks still believed in Medusa's powerful deadly gaze and found it necessary to paint it on armor. Gorgoneia became common iconography elsewhere, such as engraved amulets to be worn or used to avert the evil eye, as we see in the Tazza. Although previous scholars of the Tazza quickly assume that the shape imitates a Persian *phiale*, I have provided above reasons for an alternate understanding of the Tazza's shape. The shape may be reminiscent of the drinking or libation phialai, but this is a superficial resemblance as no ancient vessel resembles the Tazza in shape or profile. The emblematic usage of the Gorgoneion on the exterior of the Tazza suggests that it was thought of as a protective device: a shield. This interpretation is reinforced by the considerations I put forth in the following section.

### **Material – Sardonyx and its inherent properties**

As previously stated, the Hellenistic era ushered in new styles, new lands, and new resources due to the conquests of Alexander the Great.<sup>56</sup> Athenaios of Naukratis summarizes this new era best in his work *Deipnosophistae*, “the all-highest Alexander brought away for his own use the treasures of Asia” (*Deipn.* 6. 231e).<sup>57</sup> A multitude of gems and stones were brought back as material for jewelry and luxury works of art. Hyacinth, garnet, beryl, amethyst, agate, sard, topaz, carnelian, rock crystal, and sardonyx were highly favored among the gems found in Asia.<sup>58</sup> These new stones inspired

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<sup>56</sup> Gisela Marie Augusta Richter, *Handbook of Greek Art* (London: Phaidon, 1983) 251.

<sup>57</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 105. (*Deipn.* 6. 231e)

<sup>58</sup> Richter, *Handbook of Greek Art*, 251.

Hellenistic artists to create a new art form in engraving, the cameo. This new form began around the third/second century BCE in Alexandria, Egypt. Cameos differ from intaglios, as the designs are worked in relief rather than incised. Cameos were not meant for impressions or seals, like intaglios, but as purely decorative objects.<sup>59</sup> Ornate articles served as more than aesthetically pleasing items to gaze upon, but also as amulets due to the powers of the specific gem.

In addition to this opulence, gems were used for their magical and medicinal powers.<sup>60</sup> Pliny the Elder reports on the various forms of stones used as medicines as one set of powers associated with gemstones. He bases his information on the writings of Demokritos, who elaborates on stones providing healing qualities for maladies and injuries (*NH* 38: 146,147,160). Some examples Pliny provides are: achate gems healed scorpion and spider bites (*NH* 37: 139), the perfume of achates deterred storms (*NH* 37:142), and Arabica stones provided relief from pain (*NH* 37: 145).<sup>61</sup> Likewise, it was widely held among Greeks and Romans that stones contained enchanted elements that could benefit or harm humans.<sup>62</sup> Merchants often enhanced the magical natures of stones with stories of the exotic lands from which the stones originated, adding to the magical qualities of that particular gem. The fabled stories surrounding these semiprecious stones

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<sup>59</sup> John Boardman and Claudia Wagner, "Luxury Arts", in *A Companion to Greek Art*, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World 90, edited by Tyler Jo Smith and Dimitris Plantzos (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 217.

<sup>60</sup> Isager, *Pliny on Art*, 212.

<sup>61</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 110.

<sup>62</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 109.

became so great and commonly known, that these properties became common subjects in myth and folklore.

An example of this is Hermes, the messenger god, who became associated with the subjects of magic and its accouterments. One myth pertaining to Hermes and magical rings occurs in *Navigium* by Lucian. The main character, Timolaos, meets with Hermes to give him multiple rings which possess the powers of eternal youth, health, strength, and desirability.<sup>63</sup> Since the Mycenaean period, gems had often been used as ring stones, as rings were statements of power. Greek kings would use their signets to “stamp” their approval on documents or vases. During the Hellenistic period, stones were no longer used solely for rings as a means to demonstrate the stones’ powers. These fables and myths, like those of Timolaos and Hermes, heightened the Greeks’ awareness of gems and their magical powers. Eventually, gemstones were employed with other sumptuous materials, like metals, or alone to create awe-inspiring luxury works of art, like the sole use of sardonyx for the Tazza.

Before examining sardonyx, consideration of onyx and sard must be discussed separately to comprehend the powers of both stones before they combine to create sardonyx. The information below is drawn from Albertus Magnus’ (c. 1193-1280) thirteenth-century *Book of Minerals*. Because of the missing scholarship in ancient gemology, scholars reference texts from the medieval ages, particularly Magnus. His

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<sup>63</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 110. (*Nav.* 41-44).



literature on minerals references the works of the ancients directly when providing the history of the knowledge of a particular mineral or stone. His references to the ninth-century work *Letters on Incantations* by Costa ben Luca, which directly quote from the *Lapidary of Aristotle*, allow us to infer the effects of onyx held by the ancient Greeks.<sup>64</sup> *Onyx* is the Greek word for fingernail.<sup>65</sup> This word does not apply precisely to an anatomical part, but to other objects with the color and horny luster of a fingernail. Typically regarded as a pure black stone, onyx comes in five varieties, based on differentiation of color and veins.<sup>66</sup> The stone can be light pink with white veins streaking hence the comparison to a fingernail, but it also can be black with interruptions of white veins.

Onyx in the medieval period, like *onychion* in antiquity, was a blanket term applied to banded calcareous travertine (onyx marble) and to an array of chalcedony. Any chalcedony with thin or thick distinct layers of contrasting colors, as we see in the sardonyx of the Tazza, was considered onyx (Fig. 18).<sup>67</sup> After describing the diverse types of onyx, Magnus explains the magical essences contained within the stone. He writes,

Take the stone which is called Onyx, which is of black colour. And the kind is best which is full of white veins. And it cometh from India, unto Araby, and if it be

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<sup>64</sup> Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 109.

<sup>65</sup> Pliny 37.24.90-91.

<sup>66</sup> Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 109.

<sup>67</sup> Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 108.

hanged upon the neck, or finger, it stirreth up anon sorrow or heaviness in a man, and terrors, and also debate.<sup>68</sup>

Magnus continues to delineate the troubles of wearing onyx, claiming that it induces nightmares, dissensions, and strangely increases saliva in children. He further attempts to prove these properties of onyx to be true by explaining its capability to generate black bile in the head. Magnus states, “If [onyx] really has all these [features], surely this is because it has the power of affecting black bile, especially in the head; for all these disorders come from the motion and vapour [of black bile].”<sup>69</sup> In the Medieval period, it was commonly believed that black bile was the cause of depression. Therefore, onyx creates black bile in the head which in turn produces sorrow and fear within the wearer. These treacherous elements proved useful for those seeking revenge on their unsuspecting adversaries, yet onyx was employed frequently in ancient engraved gemstone works despite its unfortunate properties. Naturally paired in nature, onyx and sard produce sardonyx, a popular material for engravings.

According to Theophrastus and Pliny, the Greeks preferred to work with sardonyx when creating cameos, as the material was most suitable for large works, such as the Tazza, and provided layers of color for a more complex and advanced composition of figures (Figs. 1 and 27).<sup>70</sup> Sardonyx became a popular medium to use for gem cutting, as

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Best et al. eds., *The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus of the Virtues of Herbs, Stones and Certain Beasts, Also A Book of the Marvels of the World*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 27.

<sup>69</sup> Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 109.

<sup>70</sup> Theophrastus, *On Stones*, 127. Pliny 37.23.86-89.

the various layers allowed for bright white figures prominently displayed against a dark copper or black background, as seen in the Tazza (Fig. 3). But why? Magnus writes, “...by its [sard’s] counteracting powers it restrains onyx from doing harm.”<sup>71</sup> When paired with sard, the destructive powers of onyx were controlled. Before comprehending this matter entirely, we must first look to the technical elements of sard and sardonyx.

The word sard, or *sardion* in Greek, derives from the city of Sardis in Asia Minor, believed by the ancients to be the origin of this stone.<sup>72</sup> Sardonyx actually hails from India and Arabia, and traces of it have even been found in Thrace. Sardonyx is a form of chalcedonic microcrystalline quartz.<sup>73</sup> On the Mohs scale for density and hardness, chalcedonies typically rate at 6.5-7.5 Mohs out of a scale of 10, which is diamond, the hardest substance. Sardonyx rates at seven Mohs. Stones this hard could not be cut exclusively by metal tools. Instead, abrasive powder mixes were applied, with olive oil to reeds. The abrasive mixture, not the tool itself, cuts through the stone.<sup>74</sup> The beautiful array of colors presented in sardonyx explains why this particular stone was chosen time and again for cameos. Cutting through the hard layers, more colors would present themselves to the ancient artist. According to Pliny, sardonyx is composed of onyx with

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<sup>71</sup> Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 117.

<sup>72</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 108. Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 117. From Magnus we learn that sard and sardonyx actually hail from India and Arabia. The trading routes established between the Greeks and Romans with the Indians and Arabians in antiquity explain how sardonyx was introduced into the Mediterranean world. Because of these routes, the accessibility to fine gems and stones increased, allowing patrons to possess high quality cameos or intaglios made of exotic unique stones.

<sup>73</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 108-09. Theophrastus proclaimed that sards of a darker shade were male and lighter hues were female.

<sup>74</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 107.

red layers of sard forming a tri-colored stone (*N.H.* 37.23.86-89)<sup>75</sup>. Sardonyx is predominately red due to the sard component. Two other colors are white and black from the onyx component in the composition of the stone. Like onyx, sardonyx exists in five variations with different combinations of red, brown, white, yellow, and black.<sup>76</sup>

The exceptional beauty and quality of sardonyx alone made it a valued stone amongst the Greeks; however, the protective trait of the stone heightened the sacredness of any object made of it.<sup>77</sup> Magnus describes the powers of sardonyx, writing, “It [sardonyx] is said to drive out licentiousness and to make a man chaste and modest. But its greatest power is due to the fact that, although there is onyx in it, it cannot do any harm because it has sard combined with its substance.”<sup>78</sup> Sard served as an impenetrable barrier between the onyx and human flesh. It permits the wearer to be safe from the induced misery of onyx. It was also believed that sardonyx made the wearer brave in battle and acted as a protection against, and a remedy for, wounds.<sup>79</sup> Medieval mineralogists, such as Magnus, believed that, if sardonyx frequently touches the skin or is placed in the mouth, the stone strengthens the intellect, awareness, and all the senses of the body of that person. While engaging the intellect, sardonyx eliminates foolishness and anger. There are no remaining ancient sources describing these traits of sardonyx,

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<sup>75</sup> Pliny, 37.23.86-89.

<sup>76</sup> Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 117.

<sup>77</sup> Lapatin, *Luxus*, 107.

<sup>78</sup> Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, 117.

<sup>79</sup> Duffield Osborne, *Engraved Gems, Signets, Talismans and Ornamental Intaglios, Ancient and Modern*, (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1912), 278.

but it is not too far-fetched to believe medieval sources, as their references were from the ancients and from texts no longer in existence today. Overall, the purpose of sardonyx is to sequester uncouth qualities, to intellectually stimulate the wearer, and ultimately to serve as a protecting agent from onyx and other external evils.

When viewing the Tazza, the quality and sensory effects of the stone are immediately apparent (Fig. 17). Before the recognition of the figures or the nature of the work, the colors, composition, and size of the sardonyx attract the gaze (Figs. 20 and 24). The stark contrasts of colors visibly define the veins in the stone. The white, yellow, and light reddish-brown veins lie parallel to the next color, never blending (Fig. 18). While some ancient patrons and/or engravers preferred stones with no veins or blemishes, the engraver and/or patron of the Tazza prominently displays the irregularities within the composition of the stone (Figs. 17 and 23).<sup>80</sup> This serves as a reminder to the viewer that, though the stone has been manipulated to represent human and mythical creatures, it is still a natural object, given the organic arrangement of the colors. By recognizing the stone as sardonyx, Ptolemaic court viewers may have easily recalled its effects and, therefore, effortlessly understood the function of this artifact or, at least, understood the usage of sardonyx within this luxurious work of art.

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<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth Kosmetatou, "Poseidippos, 'Epigr.' 8 AB and Early Ptolemaic Cameos," *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik* 142 (2003): 42.

The smooth surface of sardonyx provides a lustrous sheen around the entire Tazza (Fig. 1). When viewed under certain lighting, the light plays off the stone, illuminating different colors of the Tazza. The interaction and juxtaposition between the opaqueness and translucence of the colors create a surprising aspect of this stone. The center of the tondo, with the interior scene of the Allegory of the Nile, is predominately a creamy-white color with some mixture of ruddy brown and dark black spots (Fig. 3). The lighter yellow layers allow light to pierce through from behind. On the exterior, below the neck of the Gorgoneion, two snake skins begin to divide, revealing a blemish in the stone (Fig. 23). Upon first glance, it gives the impression of a break in the stone, but further inspection shows the surface to be unbroken. The fine delicacy of the top layer of the stone on the exterior displays the bubbling of a white and brown layer underneath. Other areas of the Tazza remain impervious, such as the dark brown on the rim or on the body of the sphinx (Figs. 16 and 17). Lastly, the astounding size of the Tazza, 20 centimeters in diameter, approx. 8.5 inches, produces a sense of wonder and awe, as most cameos or intaglios are miniscule in comparison to the Tazza. With all these striking features of the sardonyx, in addition to its magical properties, it becomes quite obvious why this stone was chosen for such a sumptuous work of art.

### **Posidippus & Hellenistic Visual Culture**

The poems by the Ptolemaic court poet, Posidippus (310-240 BCE), further the understanding of the ancients and their usage of semiprecious stones, as they promote

unique information not found in Pliny or Theophrastus. These poems, through the power of language, indirectly define idiosyncrasies of stones and why they were pertinent in engraved works. Pliny writes, "... for many people a single gemstone is sufficient for a high and perfect contemplation of the things of nature."<sup>81</sup> The stone is considered for its organic beauty, not for its scientific interest.<sup>82</sup> The poems of Posidippus, unlike those of Theophrastus and Pliny, eloquently emphasize the striking visual features of stones. Such poetry on the Tazza likely existed, but none survive today; therefore, we look to Posidippus' works as excellent examples. Although Posidippus does not write about the Tazza, as it was created after his time, Posidippus' poetry on other gems encourages the hypothesis that the Tazza was a protective device because sardonyx had such extraordinary qualities.

Found as a wrapping on an Egyptian mummy, the Milan Papyrus dates to the third-century BCE and contains fragments of the *Lithika* of Posidippus.<sup>83</sup> The eighth epigram of this work describes a large cornelian (sardion) engraved work of the Persian King Dareios III.<sup>84</sup> The king was defeated by Alexander the Great at Guagamela in 331 BCE and his defeat became a popular subject in art.<sup>85</sup> This engraved work displays King

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<sup>81</sup> Pliny 37.1

<sup>82</sup> Smith, "Reading Posidippus' *Lithika*," 108.

<sup>83</sup> Kosmetatou, "Poseidippos, 'Epigr.' 8 AB," 35.

<sup>84</sup> Kosmetatou, "Poseidippos, 'Epigr.' 8 AB," 35.

<sup>85</sup> Kosmetatou, "Poseidippos, 'Epigr.' 8 AB," 36.

Dareios III isolated from his troops. Posidippus expresses this carved scene in relation to the elements of the gem in carefully chosen words. Posidippus writes,

οὐτ' ἀκχῆν ἐφόρησε τὸ κάρδιον οὔτε γυναικῶν  
δάκτυλος, ἠρτήθη δ' εἰς χρυσέην ἄλυσιν  
Δαρεῖον φορέων ὁ καλὸ[ς] λίθος – ἄρμα δ' ὑπ' αὐτὸν  
γλυφθὲν ἐπὶ σπιθαμῆν μήκεος ἐκτέταται –  
[φ]έγγος ἐνερθεν ἄγων· κα[ὶ] ἀμύνεται ἄνθρ[α]κας Ἰνδοῦς  
αὐγαῖς ἐξ ὁμαλοῦ φωτὸ[ς] ἐλεγχόμενος·  
[τρι]πίθαμον περίμετρον· ὃ καὶ τέρας, εἰ πλατὺν ὄγκον  
[ἐνδοθε]ν ὑδρηλ[ή] μὴ διαθεῖ νεφέλη.

No woman's neck has ever worn this sardion, nor woman's finger, yet it was prepared for a gold chain the handsome stone that bears Dareios –and a chariot under him carved stretches a span long – light oozing from within. It holds its own against Indian rubies when put to test, with rays of even luster. Its perimeter is three spans; this, too, is a wonder that, from within, the watery cloud does not run through the wide mass. (*Lithika* I 36-II 2)<sup>86</sup>

Elizabeth Kosmetatou, one of the lead scholars on Posidippus, declares, “The poet praises the gem's beauty which is due to its brilliance and luster by choosing a vocabulary that indirectly also alludes to the representation of Dareios III under siege.”<sup>87</sup> For Posidippus, a particular exceptional quality of a stone is tied directly to the meaning of the epigram. His choice of the words, “light oozing from within”, not only describes the appearance of the stone, but also functions “as an allusion to a succession of optical effects that single out the representation of the tragic hero.”<sup>88</sup> A cloud-like presence seems to surround this lone king within the engraving. Posidippus' cryptic observation of a cloudy effect, with

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<sup>86</sup> Kosmetatou, “Poseidippos, ‘Epigr.’ 8 AB,” 35.

<sup>87</sup> Kosmetatou, “Poseidippos, ‘Epigr.’ 8 AB,” 37.

<sup>88</sup> Kosmetatou, “Poseidippos, ‘Epigr.’ 8 AB,” 37.



the King, leaves the reader pondering if it was engraved or part of the stone. Cornelian can be uniformly colored, but can occasionally be a cloudy color when under transmitted light.<sup>89</sup> For modern viewers, this inherent quality of cornelian would not have seemed transparently obvious; however, to an ancient observer it may have.

As a Ptolemaic court poet, Posidippus' perspicacious audience would likely have understood this subtle reference within the poem. It is plausible that the intrinsic properties of sardonyx would be well-known amongst court observers of the Tazza. Because cornelian was chosen for the engraved image of the defeated Dareios III, due to the gem's properties that corresponded well with the iconography of a lone king, I argue that sardonyx would be a seamless choice in material for the Gorgoneion, given both the gem and mythical creature are defensive in nature. The tight composition of molecules in sardonyx begets an exceptionally hard substance. Coordinated with its magical property to protect the wearer, sardonyx is the ideal material for an engraved Gorgoneion on an ornate miniature shield, like the Tazza. Posidippus' insight to Hellenistic visual culture, through his rhetorical poetic celebrations of art poems, displays how complex seemingly simple objects, like decorative arts, were to the ancients. It was no mere accident or whimsy a certain stone was chosen to be an intaglio or a cameo. Instead, Posidippus demonstrates to his audience, as mentioned in his eighth epigram, through his multilayer words and verses, the aesthetic through which the Ptolemaic court perceived gems and

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<sup>89</sup> Kosmetatou, "Poseidippos, 'Epigr.' 8 AB," 37-38.

works of art. Posidippus' poem about King Darieos III, carnelian, and its qualities, allows us to draw the conclusion that the ancients would have recognized the powerful characteristic of sardonyx, therefore understanding why this material was employed to depict a beheaded Medusa.

Another poem from Posidippus' *Lithika* delivers a concrete case of qualities associated with a certain stone, an engraved blue chalcedony, likely an *iaspis* (jasper), of a rider-less horse disappearing into the sky.<sup>90</sup> Within this poem, a nuanced word describing an aspect of the gem demands that the reader think of something not attested within the poem. Martyn Smith explains, "... the authors of the age ask their readers to supply a great deal. They are expected to recognize, and bring to the text an understanding, not just of literary allusions...but of those to history, geography, medicine, religion, etc."<sup>91</sup> The epigrams of Posidippus demanded a playful interaction with his words for the reader to naturally understand. It is conceivable that a Ptolemaic reader would have known this implied allusion of cloudiness in the cornelian, the implied allusion of safety in sardonyx, and the implied allusion of the adjective used for this next gem. Posidippus writes,

εὔ τὸν Πήγασον ἵππον ἐπ' ἠερόεσσαν ἱάσπιν  
χειρὰ τε καὶ κατὰ νοῦν ἔγλυφ' ὁ χειροτέχνης·  
Βελλε[ρ]οφόντης μὲν γὰρ Ἀλή{v}ιον εἰς Κιλικῶν γῆν  
ἤριφ', ὁ δ' εἰς κυανῆν ἠέρα πῶλος ἔβη,  
[ο]ὔνεκ' ἀηνιόχητον ἔτι τρομέοντα χαλινοῖς

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<sup>90</sup> Smith, "Reading Posidippus' *Lithika*," 105.

<sup>91</sup> Smith, "Reading Posidippus' *Lithika*," 116.

— [ἴ]ππ[ον ἐν] αἰθερίῳι τῶιδ' ἐτύπω<ε> λίθῳι.

Pegasus etched upon misty [airy]<sup>92</sup> jasper – the artist's hand and mind, working together, have caught it superbly: Bellerophon has fallen to Cilicia's Aleian Plain, his colt has pranced off into the deep blue sky – and so he carved him, on this ethereal stone, free of the reins, shuddering, still, at the bit (*Lithika* II 33-38).<sup>93</sup>

Posidippus highlights the marvel and wonder of the stone and the excellence of craftsmanship in the engraved horse. A Hellenistic might have employed the words “shielding” or “protective” for an association with sardonyx; Posidippus applies the word “airy” in his poem about this stone, referring to an actual variety of *iaspis*.<sup>94</sup> Posidippus points out the skill of the craftsman artistically and for his smart decision in choosing a stone, *iaspis*, that mimics the air to suit the subject of Pegasus, the flying horse.<sup>95</sup>

The *iaspis* stone was chosen to relate the iconography of the work, the Pegasus, much as I propose that sardonyx was chosen for the Gorgoneion. Generally considered a red stone, jasper, similar to onyx, comprises a wide range of colors from green to yellow to brown to the rare form of blue, like this stone. The characteristics of the blue jasper as airy, light, misty, and an imitation of the sky were chosen to enhance the depiction of Pegasus, the flying horse, just as sardonyx complements the Gorgoneion. The poems of Posidippus offer an insight into the level of knowledge the Ptolemaic court would have possessed to appreciate these thought-provoking poems. Because no ancient source on

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<sup>92</sup> Some translations of this epigram choose the word misty over airy. According to Martyn Smith's version, the word airy is employed.

<sup>93</sup> Frank Nisetich, “The Poems of Posidippus,” in *The New Posidippus a Hellenistic Poetry Book*, ed. Kathryn J. Gutzwiller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>94</sup> Smith, “Reading Posidippus' *Lithika*”, 105.

<sup>95</sup> Smith, “Reading Posidippus' *Lithika*”, 105-106.

the Tazza survives today or any Hellenistic poetry on sardonyx, we draw from Posidippus' poetry for understanding how the ancients related to and thought about gems and luxury artworks. Therefore, material for engraved works was chosen for two factors: aesthetics and inherent qualities within the stone, as we see with sardonyx and the Tazza.

The aspiration to select a stone whose characteristics matched that of the iconography was a general practice in the Hellenistic age. Scholars of Hellenistic engraved gems agree upon this, stating how stones and their idiosyncrasies were specifically chosen for certain engraved images. In addition to Posidippus, the tradition of writing poetry about gems and their engravings extended to other ancient poets. The following two examples hail from the *Anthologia Graeca* and complement Posidippus' poems as these two epigrams vividly illuminate certain features of a gem and its engraving.

One epigram by Addaios (c. 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE), describes Tryphon's Galene, or Galatea, carved in an Indian Beryl stone.<sup>96</sup> In this poem, Tryphon speaks to the Indian Beryl<sup>97</sup> and through the power of persuasion the gem "transforms" into Galene, a sea Nereid (Fig. 29). Addaios composes the epigram from the viewpoint of the Indian Beryl

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<sup>96</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 89.

<sup>97</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 89. Adolf Furtwangler believes this epigram is about a series of engraved Indian Beryl stones with Galene as the main subject.

which speaks to the reader. The gem describes its transformation into a work of art explaining,

Ἴνδῆν βήρυλλον με Τρύφων ἀνέπεισε Γαλήνην  
εἶναι, καὶ μαλακαῖς χερσὶν ἀνῆκε κόμας·  
ἦνίδε καὶ χεῖλη νοτερὴν λειοῦντα<sup>1</sup> θάλασσαν,  
καὶ μαστούς, τοῖσιν θέλω ἀνηνεμίην.  
ἦν δέ μοι ἡ φθονερὴ νεύση λίθος, ὡς ἐν ἐτοίμῳ  
ῶρμημαι, γνώση καὶ τάχα νηχομένην.

An Indian beryl erst, great Tryphon's skill  
Has bent my stubborn nature to his will,  
And taught me Galatea's [Galene's] form to bear,  
And spread with gentle hands my flowing hair.  
Mark how my lips float o'er the watery plain,  
My swelling breasts the charmed winds constrain;  
Freed from the envious gem that yet enslaves,  
Thou'lt see me sport amid my native waves. (Addaios, *Anth. Gr.* 9. 544).<sup>98</sup>

In this epigram, the Indian Beryl announces that its stubborn nature has been swayed by the sweet words of Tryphon, so that it may represent Galene on its surface. Plantzos declares, “The epigram describing Tryphon’s Galene...suggests that the subject was most suitable for the stone in which it was cut.”<sup>99</sup> Indian Beryl, unlike sardonyx, is a soft stone and can be easily broken, carved into, and transformed. As the personification of the calm sea, Galene’s specific duty from Poseidon was to keep the sea pacified and the waves soft. The Indian Beryl’s quality of softness echoes these duties of pacification and

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<sup>98</sup> Charles William King, *Antique Gems Their Origin, Uses, and Value as Interpreters of Ancient History and as Illustrative of Ancient Art* (1860), 38. W. R. Paton, trans. “The Greek Anthology 9,” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), 301.

<sup>99</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 111.

enriches the engraving of Galene as sardonyx elevates the apotropaic defensive powers of Medusa.

Within the epigram a transformation happens between the Indian beryl and Galene. The stone morphs into Galene who becomes “alive” in a sense. About halfway through the epigram, the narrator changes from the gem to the engraved image itself when she describes her “flowing hair”. Tryphon has taught the Indian beryl the “form to bear” and has freed the engraved image from the stone. If, in applying this idea of liberating an image from the depths of the stone to the Tazza, we see the Medusa freed, yet she is also one with the sardonyx, as both share the power of protection, just as Galene is complete with the Indian beryl because of their soft natures. As argued thus far, we have seen that production of a work of luxury art involved not only the craftsman’s skill but the chosen material, as the latter provides an important component to the overall visual effect of the work.

In one final epigram, from the *Anthologia Graeca*, Plato the Younger recites a quick reference, a pun on the meaning of the word *amethystos* (amethyst), to the sobering power of amethyst and the wine god, Dionysus, engraved on this particular gem (Fig. 28).<sup>100</sup>

Ἡ λίθος ἔστ’ ἀμέθυστος, ἐγὼ δ’ ὁ πότης Διόνυσος·  
ἢ νήφειν πείσῃ μ’, ἢ μαθέτω μεθύειν.

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<sup>100</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 111.

The stone is amethyst, but I am the toper Dionysus.  
Either let it teach me to be sober, or learn itself to get drunk.  
(Plato the Younger, *Anth. Gr.* 9. 748).<sup>101</sup>

As it was widely known in the Hellenistic age that amethyst prevents inebriation, the association of Dionysos with amethyst appears effortlessly linked. Both the gem and the engraved figure, Dionysos, pertain to a state of the body when interacted with/not engaged with alcohol, sobriety or inebriation. The color of the stone emulates the pigment of red wine and offers the drinker a chance at immortality: to drink and not be under the influence of alcohol, like the god himself.<sup>102</sup> Likewise, I argue sardonyx and the Medusa are effortlessly linked because of their defensive natures. As it may have made sense to a Hellenistic engraver or viewer to place the image of Dionysos on the wine-colored gem amethyst, I propose that this association of engraved image relationship with stone was applied to the Gorgoneion and sardonyx. From these literary examples on gemstones, a pattern emerges, answering the question as to why certain stones were chosen for luxury works of art, for their immanent properties.

The shape and material are two premises discussed within this chapter that have introduced the concept of the Tazza as an apotropaic device, furthered by the presence of the Gorgoneion. The distinguishing shape of the Tazza and the engraving of Medusa imitate an ornate miniature shield, not a *phiale*. The view of the Tazza not as a cup, but rather as a shield, led to a discussion of the inherent qualities of sardonyx, which shields

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<sup>101</sup> Paton, "The Greek Anthology 9," 405.

<sup>102</sup> Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, 111.

or protects the wearer from the detrimental effects of onyx. As discussed throughout this chapter, stones and their idiosyncrasies were specifically chosen for certain engraved images to create a multilayered work of art. These engraved images were further enhanced by the specific property of the gem, like the *iaspis* and Pegasus example from Posidippus' *Lithika*. Yet, scholarship on the Tazza has remained aloof to the material sardonyx. The commentaries on sardonyx by Theophrastus, Pliny the Elder, and Albertus Magnus enlighten us about the sensory effects of sardonyx: the veins, the colors throughout the stone, and the interaction with variations in light; and about the intrinsic quality within the stone, protection. The magical qualities of stones and gems were part of a larger context of literature than just scientific studies. Poetry by Posidippus, Addaios, and Plato the Younger was examined to understand Hellenistic visual culture. This assessment of poetry led me to the conclusion that properties of gems were highly involved in the process of creating luxury art, as the gem enriched the engraved image, just as sardonyx enhances the Gorgoneion as an apotropaic feature of the Tazza.

My second chapter will expand upon this notion and examine the Gorgoneion in the Hellenistic era as a talisman, but also as a symbol of birth, rejuvenation, and fertility for females. An unlikely chosen image for such natural transitions in life, the decapitated head of Medusa gruesomely, but truthfully, prepares a young girl for her upcoming metamorphosis into a woman. This idea will be discussed in the upcoming chapters, providing a different and novel elucidation of the Tazza Farnese.



## Chapter Two: Reinterpreting the Gorgoneion: Finding Beauty in the Grotesque

The exterior Gorgoneion rarely garners more than a passing mention in the scholarship on the Tazza, as scholars focus on the interior scene; a surprising fact, given the wealth of literature on this ancient artifact (Fig. 2). Of the scholarship pertaining to the Tazza, two sources offer short accounts regarding the Gorgoneion and what purpose she may have in the Tazza. Eugene Dwyer's article, "The Temporal Allegory of the Tazza Farnese," presents a complicated reading of the Tazza as a system of allegorical and astronomical allusions for an elite viewer to understand.<sup>103</sup> Dwyer quickly mentions the Gorgon as either the star Aurigae or a sun of the underworld as possible connections to the allegedly astronomical interior. However, the evidence for these claims is not well supported and a little far-fetched. Dimitris Plantzos' article, "Ptolemaic Cameos of the Second and First Centuries BC," addresses previous scholarship on the Tazza and provides excellent stylistic analysis of other Ptolemaic cameos to date the Tazza accurately to the first century, before 31 BCE.<sup>104</sup> He discusses the Gorgoneion's iconography in relation to parallels from the Augustan period, but also from late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE Athenian drinking vessels with Gorgoneia on the bottom (megarian

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<sup>103</sup> Dwyer, "The Temporal Allegory of the Tazza Farnese," 255-82.

<sup>104</sup> Plantzos, "Ptolemaic Cameos," 39-61. Plantzos mentions in a brief footnote that he does not believe such a connection existed between the outer and inner engravings; however, given the lack of attention to the Gorgoneion in comparison to the rest of the interior scene within his article, I disagree with Plantzos as there is more to the Gorgoneion than he discusses. This chapter will discuss at length linking it to the Allegory of the Nile, giving the Gorgoneion her due recognition.

skyphoi). Plantzos fails to mention any relationship between the two engraved reliefs throughout his extensive analysis.

A.L. Frothingham offers a brief thought about the relationship of the interior scene and the Gorgoneion on the Tazza in his article, pertaining to the iconography of Gorgons, “Medusa, Apollo, and the Great Mother”. After examining the artifact in Naples, Frothingham found a strange juxtaposition of the Gorgon and the interior.<sup>105</sup> The seemingly calm demeanor of the Gorgoneion on the exterior, in comparison to other Gorgoneia, portrays a different Medusa from the typical grotesque tropes (Figs. 42, 43, and 44). Published shortly after the interpretation of Adolf Furtwängler, Frothingham’s article agrees that the interior scene represents the Allegory of the Nile. He suggests that the Gorgoneion signifies the sun as an aid in the fertility of Egypt. This last source gives us a moment’s pause. Though often referred to as a talisman and weapon to use against enemies, here the Medusa reveals an unsuspected aspect of herself to the modern observer: fertility. As the sun, the Gorgoneion provides nutrients and warmth to guarantee growth in all living things.<sup>106</sup> Frothingham does not further argue this suggestion, but in the remainder of the article he explores the connections of the Gorgon to earth and sun deities from earlier civilizations. Modern viewers of Medusa regard the mythical creature as a heinous monster, who frightens and kills viewers by transforming them into stone. Others perceive the Gorgon through a psychological lens, thanks to

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<sup>105</sup> A.L. Frothingham, “Medusa, Apollo, and the Great Mother.” *AJA* 15, no. 3 (1911): 349-377.

<sup>106</sup> Frothingham, “Medusa, Apollo,” 349. “As a procreative and fertilizing energy embracing the action of light, heat, and water on the earth, she became an embodiment of both the productive and destructive forces of the sun and the atmosphere, an emblem of the sun-disk.”

studies by Sigmund Freud asserting that Medusa is a symbol of male castration.<sup>107</sup>

However, I argue that the Gorgoneion represented more than fear and death. She was a representation of fertility, rejuvenation, and regeneration.

In my first chapter, the protective nature of the Gorgoneion was explored in its relationship to sardonix. Given the defensive nature of sardonix, the concave round shape of the artifact, and the placement of the apotropaic Gorgoneion on the exterior, I propose that the Tazza functioned as a miniature decorative shield. Within this chapter, I will examine the original myth of Medusa by Hesiod, investigate the viewer interaction with the Gorgoneion, and provide a brief history of the portrayal of Gorgons through to the Hellenistic age for a better understanding of the reception and use of the Gorgon, as well as the iconography associated with her, particularly that of snakes. By demonstrating this and providing an extended analysis of her portrayal, I will argue that the Gorgoneion not only serves as a talisman, but also as a symbol of fertility, regeneration, and rejuvenation, ultimately linking the two engraved scenes on the Tazza as life-transition metaphors for women (Figs. 1).

### **Hesiod's Medusa – Mythology of the Gorgon**

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<sup>107</sup> Miriam Robbins Dexter, "The Ferocious and the Erotic: 'Beautiful' Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no.1 (2010): 39. Dexter writes, "Early psychoanalytical interpretations of Medusa echo this tradition of gynophobia. Sigmund Freud interwove the story of Medusa with his theory of the castration complex. According to Freud, 'to decapitate = to castrate.' The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Freud believed that the snakes upon Medusa's head were derived from the castration complex. The snakes 'replace the penis'".

Unlike the Gorgoneion on the Tazza, the iconography of Gorgons and Medusa has generated a vast amount of scholarship. In regards to the origins of Medusa, modern investigations divide into two groups of thought: zoological or cosmological. In the 1830s, theorists of the zoological rationale believed that the Gorgon originated from fear of animals. Twentieth-century theorists Gerojannis and Wolters maintain this idea as they propose that the source of inspiration for the Gorgon came from the lion.<sup>108</sup> Other scholars, such as R. Pettazzoni believed the Gorgon to be anthropomorphic and derived from the Egyptian goddess Hathor. Frothingham agrees with Pettazzoni that the origins of Medusa come from Egyptian deities, as well as from Near Eastern deities like the Great Mother of the East. Early-modern research has introduced a psychological approach to the creation and meaning of the Gorgoneion.<sup>109</sup> Psychologist Wilhem Wundt first recognized the universal aspects within the Gorgoneion as a mask with a mixture of animalistic features including snakes and lions (Fig. 43). Naturalistic rationalists, however, believe that the derivation of Medusa hails from natural physical phenomena like volcanic eruptions, storms, or ocean waves.<sup>110</sup> Adolf Furtwängler states, "...the Gorgons as storm demons, atmospheric forces manifesting themselves in the thunder and lightning, which dazzle and terrify."<sup>111</sup> Both these schools have defined Medusa as a monstrous bogey comprised of animal or unnatural features to be used as apotropaic devices. These interpretations of Medusa present her as an evil demon, not as a complete

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<sup>108</sup> Thalia Phillis Howe, "The Origin and Function of the Gorgon-Head," *AJA* 58, no. 3 (1954): 209.

<sup>109</sup> Howe, "The Origin," 209.

<sup>110</sup> Howe, "The Origin," 210.

<sup>111</sup> Frothingham, "Medusa, Apollo," 350.

figure.<sup>112</sup> To understand her true nature, as a symbol of more than terror and death, we must look to the myth of Medusa and Perseus from Hesiod's *Theogony*.

The earliest mention in literature we have of Medusa and Perseus hails from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, yet the two characters are not connected or mentioned together. It is not until Hesiod's *Theogony*, where the original myth of Perseus appears, circa 700 BCE, that we see interaction between Medusa and Perseus.<sup>113</sup> Hesiod records,

Φόρκυι δ' αὖ Κητῶ γραιίας τέκε καλλιπαρήους  
ἐκ γενετῆς πολιάς, τὰς δὴ Γραιίας καλέουσιν  
ἀθάνατοί τε θεοὶ χαμαὶ ἐρχόμενοί τ' ἄνθρωποι,  
Πεμφρηδῶ τ' εὐπέπλον Ἐνυῶ τε κροκόπεπλον,  
Γοργούς θ', αἱ ναίουσι πέρην κλυτοῦ Ὠκεανοῖο  
ἐσχατιῇ πρὸς νυκτός, ἴν' Ἑσπερίδες λιγύφωνοι,  
Σθεννώ τ' Εὐρυάλη τε Μέδουσα τε λυγρὰ παθοῦσα:  
ἢ μὲν ἔην θνητῆ, αἱ δ' ἀθάνατοι καὶ ἀγήρω,  
αἱ δύο: τῇ δὲ μὴ παρελέξατο κυανοχαίτης  
ἐν μαλακῷ λειμῶνι καὶ ἄνθεσιν εἰαρινοῖσι.  
τῆς ὅτε δὴ Περσεὺς κεφαλὴν ἀπεδειροτόμησεν,  
ἐξέθορε Χρυσάωρ τε μέγας καὶ Πήγασος ἵππος.<sup>114</sup>

Keto bore to Phorkys the fair-cheeked hags, grey from birth, who are called the Graiai by immortal gods and men who go on earth, fine-robed Pemphredo and saffron-robed Enyo, and the Gorgons, who live beyond famous Okeanos, at the limit toward Night, with the clear-voiced Hesperides, Sthenno, Euryale, and unlucky Medousa; she was mortal, but they were immortal and ageless, both of them; the Dark-Haired god lay with her in a soft meadow and flowers of spring. And when Perseus cut off her head, out jumped great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus.... (*Theogony* 270-281).<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Frothingham, "Medusa, Apollo," 350.

<sup>113</sup> Dexter, "The Ferocious," 27.

<sup>114</sup> Hesiod, and Glenn W. Most, *Hesiod, Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006) lines 270-281.

<sup>115</sup> Hesiod, and Richard S. Caldwell, *Hesiod's Theogony*, (Cambridge, MA: Focus Information Group, 1987), 46.

Hesiod begins outlining the genealogy of the Gorgons as offspring to Keto and Phorkys, then tells where these creatures reside, beyond the ocean at the end of the horizon. Of the Gorgons, Euryale and Sthenno were immortal and ageless. Deemed “unlucky”, Medusa is the only sister of the Gorgons to be mortal. This mention of her mortality foreshadows her imminent death.

Before she is slain, Hesiod mentions a “Dark-Haired god”, who has sexual relations with Medusa in a bed of flowers during the spring season. This line in the poem I propose implies that Medusa is a symbol of nature and fertility. The “Dark-Haired god” has been identified by numerous scholars to be Poseidon, god of the sea.<sup>116</sup> This would correlate well, given that he is also the god of horses and Medusa gives birth to a flying horse, Pegasus. The mention of a supple meadow and “flowers of spring” also allude to the sexual and fertile nature of Medusa. The flowers represent the fruit or “children” of the meadow, as the meadow provides a safe atmosphere for these plants to grow; the flowers foreshadow Pegasus and Chrysaor. This relationship also implies the beauty of Medusa, though Hesiod does not mention her looks.

Unlike the zoological and naturalistic theorists, who believe Medusa to be a heinous creature, Hesiod hints at her gorgeous features by noting this important relationship. Poseidon, is a major god, and his lying with Medusa is no mere accident. In later versions of the Perseus and Medusa myth, particularly the accounts by

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<sup>116</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 123.

Apollodorus, Pindar, Pausanias, and Ovid, the beauty of Medusa is noted as striking and so stunning that Poseidon could not resist her.<sup>117</sup> Together they created Chrysaor and Pegasus to which Medusa gives birth once Perseus cuts off her head.

Throughout time, the myth of Perseus and Medusa becomes more extravagant and romantic as other ancient authors add to the original myth of Hesiod. We look to Apollodorus for the most consistent version of these myths.<sup>118</sup> The tale begins when Perseus, the son of Zeus and Danaë, sets off to behead Medusa as a task set for him by King Polydectes. Perseus receives aid from Athena and Hermes in the form of four gifts: a *kunēē* (the helmet of Hades, which makes one invisible when worn), winged sandals like those of Hermes, a *kibisis* (a hollow pouch deep enough to hide the head of Medusa), and a *harpē* (a curved sickle to slice off her head).<sup>119</sup> With these tools, Perseus will be well prepared to kill Medusa. Athena also lends her bronze shield to Perseus to use for protection and as a mirror to look into to find Medusa and avoid her gaze.<sup>120</sup>

Hermes guides Perseus to the site where the Graiai reside to obtain information about where the Gorgons live. The Graiai, as described by Hesiod, are “fair-cheeked

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<sup>117</sup> Vernant, “In the Mirror of Medusa,” 149-150. “In certain versions of the myth recounted by Apollodorus, Pausanias, and Ovid, it is the excess of this beauty and its radiance that constitute the dynamic element of the drama, whether because it unleashes the jealousy of Athena and impels the goddess to slaughter her rival, or because it leads Perseus, dazzled by the perfection of Medusa’s face, to cut off her head after having killed her so he will never have to separate himself from this resplendent visage.” Dexter, “The Ferocious,” 28. Pindar describes her as a beautiful-cheeked maiden. He writes, “...the head of the beautiful-cheeked Medusa was carried off by the son of Danaë, who, we assert, came into being because of a shower of gold.” (*Ibid.* 12.16-18).

<sup>118</sup> Vernant, “In the Mirror of Medusa,” 146.

<sup>119</sup> Vernant, “In the Mirror of Medusa,” 146.

<sup>120</sup> Vernant, “In the Mirror of Medusa,” 147.

hags, grey from birth” and share one eye among the three. Perseus stealthily catches the eye/vision of the Graiai in between passes from one Graiai sister to another and demands the whereabouts of Medusa.<sup>121</sup> Desperate for their only eye, the Graiai sisters share the Gorgon’s location. Perseus returns the eye and flies off on his winged sandals towards the horizon. Once on the Gorgon-inhabited island, Perseus uses the bronze shield of Athena to find Medusa. He finds her asleep, the image of her head reflected in the bronze shield.<sup>122</sup> Perseus sneaks up from behind and uses the *harpē* to slice off her head. “And when Perseus cuts off her head, out jumped great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus.”<sup>123</sup> Perseus flees quickly from the island with the head of Medusa in his *kibisis*.

### **Becoming the Gorgon – An examination of the Gorgoneion on shields**

As stated above, the myth of Perseus and Medusa changes frequently throughout Greek and Roman literature. Most versions transition into the tale of Perseus and Andromeda, telling of Perseus burying the Gorgon head in the agora of Argos to protect the city, or accounts of Perseus giving the head to Athena, who then mounts it onto her shield/aegis. Although the aegis and Gorgon were well documented in the *Iliad* (5.735) and the *Odyssey* (11.635) before this particular attestation of the myth, there is no other surviving source explaining how the Gorgoneion became part of the aegis.

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<sup>121</sup> Vernant, ““In the Mirror of Medusa,” 144.

<sup>122</sup> Vernant “In the Mirror of Medusa,” 145 and 147.

<sup>123</sup> Hesiod and Caldwell, *Hesiod’s Theogony*, 46.



In the first half of the fifth-century BCE, Pherekydes notes this action of Athena and recounts, “Athena then took the head from Perseus and placed it on her own aegis.”<sup>124</sup> As explained in chapter one, the form of the aegis is unclear as it could pertain to either a shield or piece of body armor, likely a breast plate. In the *Iliad* (5.735), Homer states that the aegis belongs to Zeus who gives it to Athena, and the Gorgon head is placed somewhere on the device. Adorning her defensive weapon with a traditional blazon, an *episēma*, the aegis of the goddess is complete with this addition of the Gorgoneion.<sup>125</sup> As I argue in Chapter One, the shape and exterior engraving of the Tazza mimic the aegis of Athena and Greek shields (Figs. 34, 35, 36, 38, and 39). Ingrid Krauskopf suggests this as well, “On the Tazza Farnese the wildly moving hair is enhanced by the hair flood [voluminous magnificent hair] of Medusa covering the entire Aegis....”<sup>126</sup> My proposal is furthered enhanced with the protective nature of the material sardonix and the powers of the Gorgoneion to avert evil with her omnipotent stare. Yes, the Gorgoneion functions as a talisman as proposed by several scholars and theorists of Medusa as stated above. However, I differ from these scholars as I believe it is her stare and beauty that turn the viewer to stone, not her monstrosity.<sup>127</sup> Like the modern idiom “if looks could kill”, I

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<sup>124</sup> Kim J. Hartswick, “The Gorgoneion on the Aegis of Athena: Genesis, Suppression and Survival,” *Revue Archéologique* (1993): 275. Hartswick notes, “Pherekydes’ remarks are in a note on *Argonautica* IV. 1515 (FHG, I. 75, fr. 26)”.

<sup>125</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 148.

<sup>126</sup> Krauskopf, “Gorgo, Gorgones,” *LIMC* IV, 328. Krauskopf writes, “Die wildbewegten Haare dieses Typus werden noch gesteigert in der die ganze Ägis bedeckenden Haarflut der Medusa auf der Tazza Farnese....”

<sup>127</sup> The Greek adjective *gorgos* means terrible, fierce, and frightful as defined by Miriam Robbins Dexter in her influential article on the portrayal of Medusa as a beautiful goddess, not a terrifying monster. Dexter, “The Ferocious,” 25. While I understand the meaning of this adjective, I look to the meaning of the word Medusa as counterpoint to this word. Medusa means guardian, goddess according to Thalia Phillis Howe

argue that the look of the Tazza's Medusa is a shield to protect the user and ensnares the viewer with her sensational stare and alluring looks.

Given the Gorgoneion's fascinating appearances and apotropaic qualities, the image of Medusa's head was more than an appropriate image to place on shields. Jean-Pierre Vernant explains, "In the *Iliad*, the Gorgon mask and eye operate in a strictly defined context; they appear as an integral part of the equipment, the mimicry, and even the grimacing expression itself of the warrior (man or god) who is possessed by *menos*, battle fury."<sup>128</sup> The face and eyes of Medusa concentrate the power of death, expressed as well in the eyes of the warrior as he sets his sights on killing.<sup>129</sup> The warriors become the Gorgon in their ferocious battle cries and in asserting their powers to kill (Fig. 34).

The idea of becoming the Gorgoneion by placing oneself behind her image, masking one's true identity to assume the role of this great force, aids in warding off evils. Consistent with his focus on the effects of the Gorgon's stare, Vernant elaborates particularly on the subject of assuming the identity of Medusa. Vernant states, "Possession: to wear a mask means to cease being oneself and for the duration of the masquerade to embody the Power from the beyond who has seized on you and whose

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in her article on the origins of Medusa. Howe, "The Origin," 214. To my understanding, all goddesses within the Greek pantheon were attractive, alluring, and ideal representations of the female form. If the word Medusa means goddess, then it would be an inappropriate term for a terrible, fierce, and frightful creature. I believe the name Medusa was given appropriately for her beautiful features, not because she was a monster.

<sup>128</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 117.

<sup>129</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 117.

face, gestures, and voice you mimic.”<sup>130</sup> The Sanskrit word *garṅ*, from which the word Gorgon originates, has a connotation of noise, which is why the Gorgon is always depicted with an open mouth, to express her scream.<sup>131</sup> As soldiers march toward battle, roaring in unison to frighten their enemies, their *menos* reiterates itself within the image of the Gorgoneion. In *Pythian* 12.9-12, Pindar writes of the piercing groan issuing from the mouths of the Gorgons as they pursue Perseus; these cries also escape from the heads of snakes associated with the Gorgons.<sup>132</sup> In the clash of bronze shields against one another, the loud piercing sound of swords striking metal, one can easily relate those ear-splitting reverberations to the open-mouthed Gorgoneion. It is as if the head of Medusa emits those noises herself from the armor of the soldier. The Gorgon inspires fear as she appears on the battlefield with the image of her decapitated head, her terrifying eyes, and her open mouth epitomizing her deafening shriek.<sup>133</sup>

While these unflattering features of Medusa are so frequently employed to illustrate the Gorgoneion, these disrupting lineaments of her beauty produce an effect of strangeness and grotesqueness unfamiliar to a human (Figs. 34, 36, 37, and 42). It is more than off-putting to see an amputated head, especially that of a woman, as it is men who usually fight in war.<sup>134</sup> Though the Gorgon and Gorgoneion are some of the oldest reproduced images within Greek art, the depiction of this mythical creature, even in the Hellenistic era, still

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<sup>130</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 137-138.

<sup>131</sup> Howe, “The Origin,” 211.

<sup>132</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 117.

<sup>133</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 117.

<sup>134</sup> With the exception of the female warriors, the Amazons.

produces a stupefying effect upon the spectator.<sup>135</sup> Vernant writes about the monstrous form that Medusa often takes which “oscillates between two extremes: the horror of the terrifying and the hilarity of the grotesque.”<sup>136</sup> Though Vernant’s observation appears to contrast with what I assert of the alluring Gorgoneion on the Tazza, I believe “the horror of the terrifying” exists within her wide-open eyes and parted lips stifling a louder shriek (Fig. 2). Though she comes across as a beautiful Gorgoneion, in comparison to archaic versions, she is still terrifying with this immediate moment before hysteria and chaos consume the emotions expressed on her face. Throughout this discussion of the Gorgoneion, one action remains clear and necessary for the powers of Medusa to work: the act of looking.

### **Viewer Interaction with Medusa**

Viewer interaction with the Gorgoneion commences with the engagement of the eyes, gazing into the eyes of Medusa; her macabre stare, and her accentuated enlarged frontal eyes allow for uninterrupted eye-contact with the onlooker. This silent communication transpires when the user of the Tazza lifts the artifact fully upright, revealing the Gorgoneion. There lies between the observer and the Medusa of the Tazza a relationship of “touching” through the lens of the eye. The interaction is both physical

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<sup>135</sup> Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery*, 31. Wilk writes, “Depictions of the Gorgon first appeared around the eighth century B.C.E., and the image has been with us ever since. That’s about as far back as what we would call Greek art goes, so the Gorgon is indeed one of the oldest figures in Greek art. As with all images, it has undergone changes through the years, but most of the important features held constant through classical times.”

<sup>136</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 113.

and mental between the engraved image and the person. Anne Carson explains the crucial importance of touching within human society and its significance to the Greeks.

Carson analyzes,

As members of human society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another – whether the touch is physical, moral, emotional, or imaginary. Contact is crisis. As the anthropologists say, ‘Every touch is a modified blow.’ The difficulty presented by any instance of contact is that of violating a fixed boundary, transgressing a closed category where one does not belong. The ancient Greeks seem to have been even more sensitive than we are to such transgression and to the crucial importance of boundaries, both personal and extrapersonal [sic], as guarantors of human order.<sup>137</sup>

The “difficult task” the spectator of the Tazza endures is not to make eye contact or “touch” the Gorgoneion. The “modified blow,” as referred to by anthropologists, applies to the Gorgoneion when her touch, or rather her stare, pierces through to the eye of the receiver, and he or she immediately morphs into stone. Carson’s mention of the Greeks’ cautiousness about boundaries to keep human order certainly applies to the boundary broken between humans and this mythical creature with the shared frontal gaze. The Greeks believed that mortals were not safe or worthy of directly looking at the gods; therefore, throughout most of Greek art, deities are presented either in side profile or three-quarters view, rarely frontal to the spectator. Yet depictions of Medusa almost always represent her frontally, gazing straight out into the audience, as we see on the Tazza.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>Anne Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire.” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, eds. David M. Halperin et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 135.

<sup>138</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 114.

To directly engage with the frontal glare of a deity has fatal consequences, and a process occurs as the viewer becomes part of the Gorgon. Looking at Medusa, into her eyes, the viewer ceases to be oneself and transforms into the divine being.<sup>139</sup> This face-to-face encounter with the frontal Gorgon puts a man or woman in the position of symmetry to the god, yet remaining on his or her own axis. The reciprocity between the god and spectator implies duality and identification, or, as Vernant eloquently states: “a Power of death” transfers to the observer.<sup>140</sup> Vernant explains further, “Through the effect of fascination, the onlooker is wrenched away from himself, robbed of his own gaze, invested as if invaded by that of the figure facing him, who seizes and possesses him through the terror its eye and its features inspire.”<sup>141</sup> This “fascination” is the unique beauty of the Gorgoneion presented on the Tazza. The beholder cannot turn his eyes away from her unusual features: her round soft eyes, her supple face, and her cascading locks flying wildly around her (Fig. 2).

The observer is “lost in the eye of this Power”, the clout of her beauty and her power to kill. Medusa ensnares the viewer, thrusting him or her into the world of death, where she presides as a killer.<sup>142</sup> Vernant concludes, “It is a simple reflection and yet also a reality from the world beyond, an image that captures you because instead of merely returning to you the appearance of your own face and refracting your gaze, it represents in its grimace

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<sup>139</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 137.

<sup>140</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 137.

<sup>141</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 137.

<sup>142</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 137.

the terrifying horror of a radical otherness with which you yourself will be identified as you are turned to stone.”<sup>143</sup> How fitting that the Gorgoneion on the Tazza not only turns one into stone, but the material of the Medusa herself is of stone, sardonyx, therefore furthering this association of what is to become of the viewer, a hard frozen image trapped forever in stone like herself (Fig. 2).

### **The Iconography of Medusa and her new Hellenistic form**

Returning to the Tazza, the shape was not the only aspect of this artifact to be influenced by other cultures. In the engraved Gorgoneion, traits from other deities in Egypt, the Near East, and Hattusa combined to create this new style of Gorgon.<sup>144</sup> From these previous civilizations, the Gorgoneion adapted certain aspects for its motifs that changed throughout the Archaic, Classical, Late Classical, and Hellenistic periods leading into the Tazza’s version of the Gorgoneion.<sup>145</sup> Largely known for its realistic depictions

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<sup>143</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 138. Described in the *Odyssey* as the head of a Gorgon, an awful creature, Medusa is associated with Persephone and Hades, hence the relation between the world of death and Medusa.

<sup>144</sup> Krauskopf, “Gorgo, Gorgones,” *LIMC* IV, 328. Krauskopf suggests, “Frühe Beispiele aus Großgriechenland und Ägypten, die nicht das "Urbild" selbst sein können, sind schon genannt worden (134. 189). In Ägypten (134. 137. 139. 140. 187. 217. 223. 224; ohne Flügel: 120. 121?) und im Westen (129. 130. 135. 136. 218. 222; ohne Flügel: 189. 220)”. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery*, 62-65. Frothingham, ““Medusa, Apollo,” 366. Frothingham also suggests Assyria, and other ancient civilizations pre-dating the Greeks, the Minoans and Mycenaean as sources for the Medusa’s iconography. Other deities the Medusa draws upon are the Minoan Snake Goddess, lion goddess, bird goddess, the Mother Goddess of Asia Minor (particularly Kybele from Sardis and Cybele from Phrygia), and Artemis. From these divinities, Medusa acquires unique forms, particularly that of animals: snakes, lions, birds, and horses per Frothingham’s proposal.

<sup>145</sup> Krauskopf, “Gorgo, Gorgones,” *LIMC* IV, 317. Krauskopf summarizes, “Die dritte Komponente des Gorgobildes besteht in der Entlehnung einzelner Züge von zahlreichen orientalischen Dämonen (Humbaba, Lamaštu, Pazuzu und andere namenlose) und von den ägyptischen Gottheiten Bes und Hathor...”

of the human form, the Hellenistic period interestingly presents the Gorgon as an attractive woman. It breaks from the tradition of illustrating the Gorgon as a heinous monster and instead sheds a new light on her as the comely being she once was.<sup>146</sup> We first begin with the origins of the iconography of Medusa, and her form throughout Greek art, to fully understand how this novel and radical portrayal of Medusa culminates in the Hellenistic period.

It is noteworthy that in addition to appearing on shields, the images of the Gorgoneion and the Gorgon materialized on pediments of temples, *akroteria* and antefixes, in private homes, on fabrics, seals, coins, vases, and gems. Of these many different representations, three consistent forms have remained when depicting Medusa: as a full figure, with her sisters, the Graiai; the Gorgoneion (head of Medusa), or on the aegis with decoration of serpents.<sup>147</sup> Of these forms, two fundamental characteristics arise in the portrayal of the Gorgon: a frontal position and distortions of the human face with bestial elements mixed in, as we see in the Gorgoneion on the Tazza.<sup>148</sup> These two features of Medusa's iconography pose questions about her origins and what she originally represented.

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<sup>146</sup> Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC IV*, 328-330. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery*, 33.

<sup>147</sup> Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC IV*, 317. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery*, 33. Wilk writes, "But not all early Gorgons are shown as heads alone. On vase paintings the bodies of Gorgons are sometimes shown in profile, though the heads are still turned to stare directly out of the vase at the viewer. Almost invariably these running Gorgons represent the two immortal sisters, Stheno and Euryale..."

<sup>148</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 112-113.



As stated in the introduction, Frothingham believed that the Gorgoneion on the Tazza signified the sun. His proposal for this stems from the Greek assimilation of oriental and Egyptian traits of sun worship.<sup>149</sup> As a sun-god, snake-god, and beast-king, the Egyptian deity Bes has been suggested as a parallel to the archaic representations of Medusa.<sup>150</sup> Clark Hopkins agrees with this notion of the Gorgon, stating “In the Mediterranean artistic tradition the Egyptian and Aegean sun disks formed the most obvious aspect of the solar influence on the Gorgon. Less obvious but perhaps equally important was the part played by the fertility and solar myths of the Syro-Phoenician coast.”<sup>151</sup> Mimicking the shape of the sun, the sun disk in Egyptian culture was the symbol of Ra, the sun god. It was often placed to identify divinities, and sometimes the Uraeus was placed underneath. Most typical of this motif was the double-headed Uraei with either head rising to either side under the sun disk (Fig. 47). Correlating to this image, the round face of the Tazza’s Gorgoneion replicates the disk, and the double serpent knot, tied beneath her missing neck, displays either snake tail veering off in a different direction like

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<sup>149</sup> Frothingham, “Medusa, Apollo,” 369-370. “...Egyptian traits under the influence of sun worship, by which the Gorgon Medusa passed from being mainly a fecundity goddess, an alias of the Mother Goddess, with a solar connection added to the central idea; to the second stage of being primarily a sun-spirit, associated with the Mother Goddess, as embodying the fecundating and destructive effects of the sun.”

<sup>150</sup> Frothingham, “Medusa, Apollo,” 367-368. Krauskopf, “Gorgo, Gorgones,” *LIMC* IV, 322-323. Krauskopf writes, “Spätestens in der 2. Hälfte des 6. Jh. setzt vor allem in Zypern und in den von Phönikiern besiedelten Gebieten im Westen eine Entwicklung ein, die die Gorgonen in einen Kreis von Dämonen einbezieht, die nach östlichen und vor allem ägyptischen Vorbildern gestaltet wurden. Offensichtlich hat man vor allem den ägyptischen Bes als eine den Gorgonen verwandte Gestalt empfunden (zu Bes und den G... Die wechselseitige Beeinflussung geht so weit, daß manchmal kaum noch zu entscheiden ist, ob Bes oder eine Gorgo gemint ist”.

<sup>151</sup> Clark Hopkins, “The Sunny Side of the Greek Gorgon,” *Berytus* 14 (1961): 25. Krauskopf, “Gorgo, Gorgones,” *LIMC* IV, 329.

the Uraei (Figs. 2 and 4).<sup>152</sup> Lastly, the arrangement of snakes slithering upwards out of her hair and head parallel the rays of the sun (Fig. 2).<sup>153</sup> This comparison to the sun, through the subtle reference of the double-headed Uraei within the serpent knot and the serpents acting as rays beaming outward, encourages the idea of the Gorgon as a symbol of fecundity (Figs. 31, 39, and 40).

The Archaic version of Medusa represents her as a divinity of nature as she is often portrayed with bestial facial elements and surrounded by animals, particularly lions and snakes (Figs. 43 and 44).<sup>154</sup> The Archaic form of the Medusa typically includes some the following aspects: wings, a round face, a protruding tongue, a beard, a standing stance with legs in profile with one advanced revealed leg, a kneeling position, running, or one or both arms raised above her head (Figs. 42, 43, and 44).<sup>155</sup> Her face expresses a large grinning mouth revealing rows of teeth, fangs, or tusks. Her tongue protrudes from this cartoon-like smile. Occasionally she will have a beard or deep, furrowed wrinkles in her skin.<sup>156</sup> Oftentimes, Medusa recalls the face of a lion with her accentuated staring eyes and her hair

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<sup>152</sup> Hopkins, "The Sunny Side," 25.

<sup>153</sup> Frothingham, "Medusa, Apollo," 371.

<sup>154</sup> An excellent example of an Archaic Medusa incorporating these monstrous features is the pediment sculpture of the temple of Artemis in Corfu. The western pediment boasts a full-bodied Medusa in a kneeling running position. Her hefty bloated face presents a grotesque appearance with huge almond-shaped eyes, a menacing grin revealing her teeth, two slits for her nostrils, and curled stylized hair with braided locks falling down on her shoulders. From beneath her protruding ears two serpents emerge just above her wings. Flanking either side of Medusa are her offspring, Pegasus and Chrysaor, and two large lions. Two snakes tie around the waist of Medusa, alluding to the Egyptian Uraei, in a stylized knot. Here, Medusa can be seen as a goddess of fertility, of snakes, and of beasts. The addition of her children emphasizes the matronly nature of Medusa.

<sup>155</sup> Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC* IV, 317.

<sup>156</sup> Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery*, 31. Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 113.

resembling a mane flying wildly all around her visage.<sup>157</sup> Snakes writhe throughout her unkempt locks. Lastly, her ears are pronounced, at times like those of a cow, and occasionally horns grow from her skull, recalling traits of the Egyptian goddess Hathor.<sup>158</sup> These bizarre elements of the Gorgon's face indicate to the viewer her status as a wild beastlike creature, but also as a deity of nature, given her association with lions, cows, snakes, and birds like other previous and contemporary nature divinities.

The iconography of the Archaic Gorgon as a heinous monster survives throughout most of the Classical and Late-Classical periods. The beautiful Gorgon starts to appear shortly after the fourth century BCE.<sup>159</sup> Archaeologists do not have a concrete date for the first appearance of this specific style, a Medusa represented with just her head and wings, with the snake tie underneath, as seen in the Tazza.<sup>160</sup> The Gorgon undergoes a transformation harkening back to her original beauty. No longer depicted as an obscene and gruesome creature, her fangs, beard, toothy grin, and accentuated features removed, she now resembles a young woman (Figs. 38, 39, 40, and 41). To differentiate her from

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<sup>157</sup> Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC* IV, 317. Suggested images of bearded Medusas or Gorgons with manes from the *LIMC*: 3, 4, 10, 160, 161, & 162.

<sup>158</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 113. Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC* IV, 317.

<sup>159</sup> Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery*, 33.

<sup>160</sup> Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC* IV, 328. Though we have seen examples of Greater Greece and Egypt designs found within the Gorgoneion. Krauskopf writes, "Meist werden die Medusenköpfe jedoch in Dreiviertelansicht, oft mit nach oben gewandtem Blick dargestellt (120-121a. 134-143. 187. 189. 190. 217-219. 222. 224. 226. 227). Diese Gesichter sind fast ausnahmslos sehr füllig; besonders späthellenistische Exemplare wirken manchmal fast etwas aufgedunsen (120. 140. 141.). Daneben finden sich jedoch auch knochigere (142) und schmalere Gesichter (137) sowie solche ohne Flügel (118. 120. 121. 121a. 217. 228). Dasselbe gilt für G. in Vorderansicht 129 to 133. 186. 191. 221. 223. schmaler Kopf: 117. 132. ohne Flügel: 117. 220. 228. Die Art, wie die Schlangen zwischen Scheitel und Kinn angeordnet sind, variiert; manchmal züngeln auch seitlich am Kopf Schlangen aus dem Haar hervor (gut zu sehen bei 118. 121. 138. 223. 224. 227a.)".

other young females, Hellenistic artists attach her wings to her decapitated head (Figs. 2, 38, 39, and 41).<sup>161</sup> Late Hellenistic examples of Gorgoneia depict the fair maiden with stout, slightly bloated faces, as seen in the Tazza and the Medusa Rondanini (Figs. 2 and 41).<sup>162</sup> Both these Gorgoneia present issues of dating and of style, whether Hellenistic or Roman.

Given their similar looks in face and iconography, the Tazza Farnese and Medusa Rondanini Gorgoneion have been largely argued to date from the Hellenistic period. Today, the Medusa Rondanini has been identified as a Roman copy of an original Greek bronze sculptural piece, once placed on the south retaining wall of the Athenian Acropolis, supposedly by Antiochus III.<sup>163</sup> Plantzos convincingly proves the Tazza's Gorgoneion dates to the first-century, likely 31 BCE. He writes, "Although its [the Tazza Farnese] parallels date from the Augustan period... the type was growing in popularity from the later second century: it was employed on Republican coinage...and other media."<sup>164</sup> According to John Boardman, the transition from Hellenistic to Roman style is seamless and to discriminate a distinction between the two styles is nearly inexecutable.<sup>165</sup> This particular image of the Gorgoneion was employed on jewelry, the bottom of drinking vessels, and on mold-made pottery, found in late second-century deposits in the agora of

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<sup>161</sup> Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery*, 33-35.

<sup>162</sup> Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC* IV, 328.

<sup>163</sup> Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC* IV, 329. J.D. Belson, "The Medusa Rondanini: A New Look," *AJA* 84 vol. 3 (1980): 374. Belson argues the Medusa Rondanini may have been the first of its kind dating to the fifth-century; however, scholars still debate for a later fourth-century date.

<sup>164</sup> Plantzos, "Ptolemaic Cameos," 48. *LIMC* Gorgones Romanae 106a and 106b.

<sup>165</sup> Boardman and Wagner, "Luxury Arts," 217.

Athens, coins, and various architectural elements.<sup>166</sup> From this new Hellenistic interpretation of Medusa and the understanding of her iconography from ancient nature and sun divinities, an alternate meaning of the Gorgoneion reveals itself as more than just an apotropaic device, but a tragic end to a stunningly attractive goddess of fertility and nature manifested into one image.

### **Medusa & Snakes – Fertility, Regeneration, and Rejuvenation within the Gorgoneion Image**

Medusa was not a bogey, but a divinity related to many things, particularly of snakes. This obvious aspect of the Gorgon has remained fairly unobserved throughout this chapter, as other subjects were examined completely. Now turning to serpents, and their interwoven meaning with the Gorgon, I explore how snakes advance the relationship of Gorgoneion with fertility through their chthonic character and sexual undertones, thereby causing the Medusa to signify more than just child-bearing dimensions of fertility. Indeed, she symbolizes female genitalia. From this topic, I will move into the last part of this chapter the argument that the multi-dimensional goddess epitomizes regeneration and

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<sup>166</sup> Plantzos, "Ptolemaic Cameos," 48. Krauskopf, "Gorgo, Gorgones," *LIMC* IV, 329. Krauskopf elaborates, "Viele der hellnistischen G. auf Schmuckstücken und Prunkgefäßen oder in dekorativer Verwendung in der profanen Architektur werden um ihrer selbst willen, aus Freude an der virtuoson Ausgestaltung des Themas, Geschaffen worden sein, was natürlich nicht ausschließt, daß man ihnen auch eine amulettartige Wirkung zuschrieb. G. auf Münzen sind in dieser Zeit wohl aufgrund lokaler, dynastischer oder familärer Traditionen der Magistrate geprägt worden, die jeweils im Einzelfall zu klären wären. Wo G. in der Grabkunst erscheinen (117. 120. 134. 189), mag ihre Wächterfunktion eine Rolle spielen. Die Tradition, G. an oder über der Grabtür anzubringen, läßt sich bis ins 5. Jh. zurückverfolgen (83); später werden sie gern paarweise im oberen Teil de Tür angeordnet (117. 120), während im unteren Teil Löwenköpfe Türklopfer im Maul halten (120; vgl. Gorgones Romanae 65)."

rejuvenation through her attribute of snakes, thus providing a legitimate connection to the interior engraved figures of the Tazza, who symbolize fertility, regeneration, and rejuvenation within the Allegory of the Nile.

In the *Odyssey* (11. 635), the Gorgon is mentioned in association with Persephone and Hades, gods of the dead, as an awful monster of the underworld.<sup>167</sup> In addition to monstrosity, the grotesque, beauty, fertility, regeneration, and rejuvenation, Medusa also has a chthonic nature, as seen in the *Odyssey*, as well as her attribute of snakes. Snakes were viewed as animals of the earth and the underworld as they seamlessly slip between the surface of the earth and underneath the dirt.<sup>168</sup> Charles Bardes states, “Snakes emerge from the ground, evoking images of death and menace but also subterranean knowing, the genius of place, chthonic wisdom.”<sup>169</sup> Snakes exist between the living and the dead, thereby implying that serpents possess certain powers and insights, as these reptiles issue forth from the ground. They can behold what mortals cannot see below and what the dead cannot view above. Snakes are able to interact with both worlds of the living and dead with ease, a feat no other animal has accomplished. As a representative of nature and the underworld, it is suitable that Medusa is outfitted with snakes.

Many objects containing the Gorgon image have been found in numerous tombs and burial monuments throughout the ancient world. Typically employed to ward off bad

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<sup>167</sup> Vernant, “Death in the Eyes,” 137-138.

<sup>168</sup> Charles Bardes, “Caduceus,” *Agni*, (2006): 235–38.

<sup>169</sup> Bardes, “Caduceus,” 235. One good example of this is the aboriginal Athenian snake, Erichthonios, who lay at the feet of Athena in several depictions of the goddess. Another example is the statue of Athena in the Parthenon where Erichthonios is portrayed in the interior of Athena’s shield rather than by her feet.

spirits from the dead, the chthonic aspect of the Medusa may have aided in the transformation from life to death, leaving the earth for the underworld. Miriam Robbins Dexter argues, "...burial monuments were often the sites of rituals involving the concept of regeneration. This raises the possibility of seeing Medusa's gaping mouth of death as the vulva, the cave through which we reach the Underworld, which may be compared to the womb of the birthmother."<sup>170</sup> In pre-ancient cultures, death and rebirth were intertwined in the tomb serving as a ritual place for rebirth. Therefore, it is not too far-fetched to see the tomb as a womb; both function as a safe enclosed space for an individual as a temporary place before transitioning into the next phase, life or death, which leads to the notion that Medusa denotes female genitalia.<sup>171</sup>

The face of the Gorgon as an image of female sexual organs is not an original theory, as comparisons to it have been proposed by earlier scholars, such as Vernant. He compares the Gorgon/female genitals to the example of Satyrs and Silenoi who emblemize the *phallos*.<sup>172</sup> Vernant explains, "These two types [Gorgon, Satyrs and Silenoi] also have noticeable affinities with the stark and crude representation of the sexual organs – both masculine and feminine – a representation that, just like the monstrous face whose equivalent it is in certain respects, also has the power to provoke both sacred fear and liberating laughter."<sup>173</sup> In following Vernant's hypothesis, the face

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<sup>170</sup> Dexter, "The Ferocious," 39.

<sup>171</sup> Dexter, "The Ferocious," 33.

<sup>172</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 113.

<sup>173</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 113.

of Medusa assumes the role of female genitals, but she also presents male sexual organs via her snakes. The phallic resemblance in the body of these reptiles transparently lends to the sexual overtones of snakes.<sup>174</sup>

If the head of the Gorgon portrays the vulva and is petrifying to the male observer, according to Vernant, this theory would align with feminist theorists, who believe images of women represent castration and decapitation, and the fear of overpowering female sexuality.<sup>175</sup> Vernant formulates, “If Medusa’s decapitation can be construed as the ‘castration’ of her genitalized head, the neck, in particular, is associated with female sexuality, in that, after defloration, the bride’s neck is thought to thicken and her voice grow deeper.”<sup>176</sup> Referring to Hesiod’s myth of Medusa, when the Gorgon is “castrated”, she immediately gives birth to Chrysaor and Pegasus. An interesting note about this castration is the weapon of choice, the *harpē*. Known mostly as an agrarian

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<sup>174</sup> Bardes, “Caduceus,” 236.

<sup>175</sup> Laura, Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18. Mulvey connects viewing the female body with power and powerlessness in a society deeply stratified by gender and class in the 1970s. Her method of psychoanalysis leads the author to discover where and how fascination of film is reinforced by preexisting patterns of fascination within an individual subject and social formations that have molded men. According to Mulvey, narrative film gives viewers pleasure by protecting them against the possibility of loss of power and status by the physical differences between the sexes, the absence of the penis or castration. Mulvey states there are two forms of gazing to escape from castration, scopophilia and voyeurism. This groundbreaking article has become a method of viewing and analyzing for many feminist writers today. Ancient art historians apply Mulvey’s feminist theory outlines on film to the nature of gaze in works of art and how females are transformed in those works. Dexter, “The Ferocious,” 39. Dexter’s article tends to lean towards the extreme (and modern) views/interpretations of feminist theory and how the ancients viewed sexuality, with which I am not in complete agreement. Even though I am taking a feminist approach to the reading of the Tazza Farnese, I argue differently from Dexter. While the Medusa may represent female sexual organs, she was not feared for that reason. It was her death stare and stunning beauty that led to frightening a viewer to death.

<sup>176</sup> David Armstrong and Ann Ellis Hanson, “Two Notes on Greek Tragedy; The virgin’s voice and neck: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 245 and other texts.” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 33 (1986): 97.



tool for harvesting wheat, the use of the *harpē* as a weapon associates this act, of killing the Gorgon, within an agricultural context, even more so as she gives birth to Chrysaor and Pegasus. This instrument was also utilized in the castration of Ouranos, the primordial sky god.<sup>177</sup> When Ouranos was castrated, his genitals and semen landed in the ocean, giving birth to the goddess Aphrodite. Chrysaor, Pegasus, and Aphrodite all emerged from severed body parts, not from the vagina.<sup>178</sup> This was not uncommon in Greek mythology, as other deities were born from non-vaginal body parts, such as Athena from the head of Zeus. Within these myths, the *harpē* reiterates to the audience the act of harvesting, cutting a plant to receive its fruit, with sex as the deity is slain by the *harpē* and gives birth to new divinities. However, the *harpē* also indicates a correspondence between the upper and lower body parts of the body, specifically between the neck and mouth.<sup>179</sup>

The Greeks believed that within the female body there existed two necks, the throat and the vagina.<sup>180</sup> Both organs are similar in cylindrical shape and function as a canal between an opening and the inside of the body. To the Greeks, when a woman experienced intercourse for the first time, her voice deepened and her neck enlarged. These changes in her upper body reflected sympathy to the widening and change of her

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<sup>177</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 136.

<sup>178</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 136.

<sup>179</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 136.

<sup>180</sup> Armstrong and Hanson, "Two Notes on Greek Tragedy," 97.

lower body.<sup>181</sup> Subtle references to this metamorphosis of the necks appear throughout Greek literature. Though the Hippocratic corpus does not specifically detail the changes of the body after defloration, the term *de morbis virginum* is applied to the therapeutic value of intercourse to young women as the Greeks believed sex resolved circulation problems and prevented diseases.<sup>182</sup> Just how apparent were these signs of voice alteration and engorgement of the throat?

One example, from circa 280 CE, recounts a tale about a woman's revelation of her lost virginity to her parents just from her appearance and speech. The Roman poet Marcus Aurelius Olympius Nemesianus, court poet to Emperor Carus (r. 282-283 CE), recounts the tale of a shepherdess, Donace, who engages in sexual intercourse with two young shepherds in his *Eclogue 2*. Nemesianus writes,

The signs are: her voice no longer sounds so slender and pure as before, but is troubled and thickened; her neck is coarsened; she blushes a great deal and her veins swell: that is to say the circulation in her upper body is accelerated and flushed compared to its previous state.<sup>183</sup>

These signs are detected by her parents immediately. From our understanding of Medusa, we know the Gorgon had a deafening shriek and gave birth from her neck. It is highly plausible, given this information on virginity and the transformation of the throat, that, when Poseidon sexually engaged with Medusa, her voice changed to a high-pitched

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<sup>181</sup> Armstrong and Hanson, "Two Notes on Greek Tragedy," 97 and 99. Catullus 64.376f provides an example of a bride, the wedded Thetis, who the Fates claim will have her neck measured the day after the wedding to ensure the marriage was consummated.

<sup>182</sup> Armstrong and Hanson, "Two Notes on Greek Tragedy," 99.

<sup>183</sup> Armstrong and Hanson, "Two Notes on Greek Tragedy," 97-98.

octave and her throat was impregnated, causing it to swell. Hopkins comments, “It seems curious that the death demon should give birth to offspring, but it is not chance in a seasonal cycle that the death of one phase gives birth to the next.”<sup>184</sup> The cyclical events of Medusa’s dying and regenerating a part of herself into her offspring demonstrates that fertility and regeneration are synonymous terms with the Gorgon.

Regeneration and rejuvenation are two aspects of the Gorgon that exhibit through the use of her blood and the ecdysial process of snakes. Blood of the Gorgon was considered highly valuable as it could poison as well as heal a person. Apollodorus explains,

... [They say that Asclepius] having received from Athena blood flowing from the veins of the Gorgon, used that flowing from the left side for the destruction of humanity, [while] he used that from the right side for saving [humanity], and because of this, that he roused the dead.<sup>185</sup>

In this instance, her blood represents both regeneration and death. The blood of the Gorgon parallels the venom of snakes, as both are poisonous and antitoxic.<sup>186</sup>

In ancient civilizations, snakes were worshipped as healers, because of their medicinal venom and also because of their ability to shed their skin.<sup>187</sup> Snakes are able to heal themselves of physical ailments to their outer shell by shedding their skin through

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<sup>184</sup> Hopkins, “The Sunny Side,” 29.

<sup>185</sup> Dexter, “The Ferocious,” 29-30. The play *Ion* by Euripides also explains the function of Medusa’s blood. lides composes,

“Queen Creusa tells an old servant about Medusa’s blood, which Athena gave to Erichthonius, the ancestor of the Athenian line: ‘Two drops of blood from the Gorgon...One [is] deadly; the other brings healing of diseases.’ (*Ibid.* 1003-5).

<sup>186</sup> Dexter, “The Ferocious,” 29.

<sup>187</sup> Bardes, “Caduceus,” 235.

ecdysis (Fig. 32). It begins with the death of the bottom layer of the outer skin, which softens and becomes dull. Snakes initiate ecdysis by rubbing their heads against barriers and stones to loosen and break the skin.<sup>188</sup> As a literal symbol of regeneration, the snake sloughs the dead outer skin, revealing new, rejuvenated skin. Medusa intensifies her association to regeneration and rejuvenation with her attribute of snakes. Her blood contains healing properties for one to utilize, and the ecdysial process of snakes for new, youthful skin suggests rejuvenation. Surrounding the Tazza's Gorgoneion are snake skins, which depict the underside of a snake with the ventral scutes separated by interscale tissue (Figs. 2, 4, and 33).<sup>189</sup> The engraved Gorgoneion presents Medusa as multifunctional, multidimensional, and complex. She symbolizes fertility, regeneration, rejuvenation, and death.<sup>190</sup>

In contrast to many art historians, in their studies on the Tazza Farnese, who are quick to dismiss the Gorgoneion, my chapter has provided a wealth of new information about the Gorgoneion and Medusa, finally giving this side of the Tazza the attention it deserves.<sup>191</sup> I argued that the Gorgoneion represents more than fear and death, as she embodies qualities of fertility, rejuvenation, regeneration, and protection in herself.

Through reviewing the original myth of Medusa, provided by Hesiod, we see that the

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<sup>188</sup> Carl H. Ernst and George R. Zug, *Snakes in Question: The Smithsonian Answer Book*, (Washington [D.C.]: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996): 30.

<sup>189</sup> Harvey B. Lillywhite, *How Snakes Work: Structure, Function, and Behavior of the World's Snakes*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 7.

<sup>190</sup> Dexter, "The Ferocious," 29.

<sup>191</sup> Dwyer, "The Temporal Allegory of the Tazza Farnese," 255-82. Plantzos, "Ptolemaic Cameos," 39-61. Dwyer and Plantzos' articles on the Tazza quickly reference the Gorgoneion and do not explain the exterior engraved image at length.

Gorgon originally was a fair maiden, not a grotesque woman. The investigation of the interaction between Medusa and the viewer revealed the tension and submission of the spectator to the Gorgon, as she overwhelms the observer with her unstoppable powers and petrifies him or her to death. From this discussion, I provided a brief examination of her previous gruesome archaic portrayals that dominated her iconography for many centuries to the breakthrough depiction of the Medusa as a youthful, attractive woman. Through this assessment, the origins of Medusa and her attributes were explained, enlightening us as to her relationship to various sun and nature deities. This section culminated in an understanding that Medusa served not only as an apotropaic device, but also as a goddess of fertility, nature, animals, rejuvenation, regeneration, and death. This multi-faceted divinity relates to the interior figures on the Tazza as more than just a sun, star, or no relationship at all as previously suggested. Instead, the Gorgoneion plays a pivotal role with the Allegory of the Nile, as both engraved scenes represent themes of fertility and rejuvenation for a young woman of the Ptolemaic court about to transition into a new phase of her life.

### Chapter Three: Female Viewership of the Tazza Farnese

Until now, this thesis has primarily steered away from discussion of the interior figures, instead investigating the less-researched aspects of the Tazza Farnese: the shape, the material, and the Gorgoneion. As examined in Chapter's One and Two, the multifaceted Gorgoneion served not only as an apotropaic emblem to ward off evils, but also was portrayed as a goddess of nature, fertility, regeneration, death, and rejuvenation. The aspects of fertility and rejuvenation serve as the connection between the Gorgoneion and the engraved figures of the interior. Generally thought of as two separate scenes by most, these engraved figures purposefully complement one another in representing the overall theme of the Tazza Farnese: transformation. Two additional themes, menstruation and family, unite the Gorgon and the mythological characters to complete the overall focus of change. But why such an engendered focus for a luxury work of art, especially designed for a female?

During the Hellenistic era, the roles and perceptions of women began to change drastically from those of Classical and Archaic women. Women began to appear more outside of the home, and opportunities for more education arose in crafts, occupations, and competitive events.<sup>192</sup> Medical writers during and after the Hellenistic period, such as first-century CE Soranos of Ephesus, changed their views on women and no longer regarded them as just fertile beings destined to be wives and mothers.<sup>193</sup> Soranos

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<sup>192</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 330.

<sup>193</sup> Soranos reflected these developments dating back to the Hellenistic period within his writings.

regarded a woman's sexual life separately from her general health and altered the prevailing physiological model for women, as some women, he argued, were similar in sexual behavior to men. Ann Ellis Hanson interprets this new-found scholarship on females as due to the changes in the lives of women, particularly those of royals.<sup>194</sup> In the time the Tazza was created, around 100-31 BCE, the Ptolemies and Egyptians were accustomed to females in higher political roles, such as that of pharaoh, for example, Hatshepsut (c. 1507–1458 BCE), Nefertiti (c. 1370 – ca. 1330 BCE), and Cleopatra I (c. 204 – 176 BCE). Typically, ancient women were excluded from public positions and nearly any type of financial or personal independence.<sup>195</sup> Jane Rowlandson and R.S. Bagnall explain the difference between Hellenistic queens and Ptolemaic royal females, “Compared with the other Hellenistic Kingdoms, the Ptolemies accorded an exceptionally prominent role to the women members of their dynasty. Like queens elsewhere, they might hold property, and had some financial independence; more unusually, several of them ruled as regents or even in their own right.”<sup>196</sup> Though the concept of a female pharaoh was not novel to Egyptians, Cleopatra VII (60-30 BCE) would reign as the last pharaoh of Egypt and extended her powers as had no other female pharaoh before. In an attempt to secure Egypt's independence from Rome, Cleopatra began love affairs with Julius Caesar and Marc Antony to ensure that the lands of Egypt were under Egyptian authority, not Roman rule. Though this plan eventually led to war

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<sup>194</sup> Hanson, “The Medical Writers' Woman,” 330 and 334.

<sup>195</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 24.

<sup>196</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 24.

against Augustus and to her untimely demise, Cleopatra left a legacy of a strong powerful female leader willing to die for her country.

Hellenistic queens preceding Cleopatra exercised their royal powers in less public and smaller outlets, but these actions were significant enough to be remarked as influential and authoritative for the queens. They donated gifts to gods and sanctuaries to show their devotion and thanks. The Macedonian Queen Olympias (375-316 BCE) reportedly sent a *phiale* to the goddess Hygeia in Athens; and the Ptolemaic Queen Arsinoë II (316-270 BCE) dedicated an entire building, named after herself, to a Mystery cult at Samothrace.<sup>197</sup> Even though this newfound presence in society allowed for some degree of equality amongst the sexes, women were still reminded of their ultimate duty as females: to procreate. Menstruation, intercourse, and childbirth were held as essential experiences for a woman's health.<sup>198</sup> Luxury items, such as cameos, were in high demand by the Ptolemies, who lived extravagant lifestyles and showcased their opulence through their material possessions (Figs. 1, 26, and 27).<sup>199</sup> I propose that the Tazza, as an extravagant work of art, was intended as a celebratory gift for a young girl of the Ptolemaic court, in transition from *parthenos* to *gynē*, to protect her in this new daunting yet exciting phase of her life, but also with metaphorical motifs to remind her of her duties as a woman in Ptolemaic society.

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<sup>197</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1984): 15.

<sup>198</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 319.

<sup>199</sup> Dwyer, "The Temporal Allegory of the Tazza Farnese," 261.



The ownership and patronage of the Tazza are unknown; however, I argue that a woman of the Ptolemaic court possessed this artifact because of its sumptuous material, the exterior rendering of the Gorgoneion, the engraved figure of Isis placed in the center of the tondo, and the overall subject matter addressing female concerns. Within this chapter, I will thoroughly explore each theme: menstruation, fertility, rejuvenation, and family as they pertain to the Gorgoneion and the Allegory of the Nile. The subjects of menstruation and rejuvenation are pictorially rendered through powerful symbols: in the snake skins encircling the Gorgoneion, in the process and result of the inundation of the Nile, and in the display of cornucopias held by two interior figures. Isis is the pivotal thematic element in the interior iconography as she is placed in the center of the tondo, thereby reinforcing the gendered focus of the Tazza. Her multi-faceted nature, similar to the Gorgon's, provides females with a goddess of their own, as Isis catered particularly to women's needs. I will also discuss ancient Ptolemaic fears of childbirth and how the Tazza was likely a gift for a coming of age *parthenos* or a mother-to-be *gynē*. In reviewing these aspects of the artifact, I argue that the Tazza was an apotropaic agent used for protection and symbolically displayed the bodily changes within a female throughout her life and her role within society as a woman.

### **The Ancient Female Body**

The bodily changes within a female, i.e., menstruation and rejuvenation, imply references to flowing liquids and cyclical occurrences within the Tazza's material and iconography in connection with the female body. This has led to my argument that this

work was meant for a female viewer of the Ptolemaic court. Throughout this chapter we will repeatedly see the likeness of females to bodily fluids and to the perpetual state of being “wet”. Liquids are also viewed within the Tazza in the form of the sardonix veins, the implied reference to blood from the decapitated Medusa head, the flooding of the Nile River, the wet drapery of the figures, and the bare breasts of Isis, suggesting breastmilk. Why such emphasis on these bodily fluids?

To the Greeks, blood was the indicator of mortality and separated mortals from the divine.<sup>200</sup> This belief persists throughout Greek history that the gods did not possess human blood, like humans, because they did not consume food, particularly *sitos* (grain). It is interesting to note the presence of tools for agriculture and the shaft of wheat held by Isis, though the divinities did not eat those agricultural products (Figs. 8 and 9).<sup>201</sup> Thus, blood is wholly distinctive to mortals and the concept of life.

Distinguishing mortals further, the amount of blood contained or flushed out of the body indicated to the Greeks whether the human was female or male. Women, because of their menstrual cycles and childbirth, bleed far more than men. Therefore, the Greeks believed, according to Hippocratic scholarship, that females stored more blood in their bodies, which differentiated them from males.<sup>202</sup> In addition to the amount of blood, the temperature of a human declared the body as either female or male; females

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<sup>200</sup> Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1998): 92.

<sup>201</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 92. The Iliad mentions the result of blood produced within mortals who consume *sitos* and food. (Il. 5.339-42).

<sup>202</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 92.

were wet and cold while males were dry and hot. Hippocrates explains these differences, describing females as flourishing in watery, colder environments, unlike males who thrive in arid, hot climates.<sup>203</sup> Hippocrates believed that women will never attain a dry-state as the female physique and psyche remain cold and wet throughout life.<sup>204</sup> Lastly, the distinction between a girl and a woman was determined by the amount of blood within the female's body. Helen King writes, "A third use of blood in creating categories involves emphasis on the differences between the flesh of the immature girl who does not yet bleed – the *parthenos* – and the *gynê* who does."<sup>205</sup> To females in Greek society, following the Hippocratic belief, the transition from a virgin-like state to a sexually active state was considered a very significant life event, next to marriage.<sup>206</sup>

After the age of a female's menarche, the amount of time between puberty and adulthood was extremely vital. In order to suppress unwanted pregnancies and partly to control women's sexual desires, frequently girls married when they began menstruation at the ages of 14-16 years old.<sup>207</sup> Females were classified within society by two terms,

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<sup>203</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," 137.

<sup>204</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," 137-8.

<sup>205</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 92.

<sup>206</sup> Sissa, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead," 339-364. Sissa discusses the vague term of *parthenos* and the difficulty of applying the term to young females as it applies to virgins and women who are sexual, but not married. Mary R. Lefkowitz, "The Last Hours of the Parthenos," In *Pandora: Women in Classical Greece*, edited by Ellen D. Reeder, (Baltimore, MD: Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery in association with Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 1995): 32. Lefkowitz explains, "This transitional point in women's lives, when they are ready (and able) to become wives and mothers, is of particular interest, because this was considered the main role of women in ancient society. It is what Odysseus wishes for Nausikaa, when he hopes to persuade her to rescue him: 'may the gods give you what your heart longs for, a husband and a home'".

<sup>207</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 75. Lefkowitz, "The Last Hours," 32. Lefkowitz writes, "According to the Hippocratic treatise *About Young Women (Peri Parthenon)*, parthenoi at the onset of puberty are particularly liable to delusions; some become murderous, others suicidal".

*parthenos* and *gynê*, as a determination of their youth and fertility. The writer of *On Diseases of Virgins* explains that girls at puberty produce more blood than do middle-aged women, as their bodies absorb the excess blood to sustain their growing bodies.<sup>208</sup> A *parthenos* was categorized as either a virgin or an unmarried woman and a *gynê* classified as a married woman.<sup>209</sup> The time between these two states of a female's life was non-existent as the Greeks compressed menarche, marriage, and childbirth into sequential events to ensure a smooth conversion from *parthenos* to *gynê*.<sup>210</sup> Archaic and Classical Greeks believed women were bound to bleed and the essentiality of bleeding led to a healthy fertile life. While Hellenistic medical beliefs provided a more broad study of women, as opposed to a sole focus on fertility, the idea of women's continually bleeding throughout the majority of their lives remained consistent.<sup>211</sup>

### **Menstruation and Rejuvenation**

Women were thought to contain a surplus of blood and stored this vast amount of liquid within the sponginess of their mature flesh, only to release this blood during menstruation. Here the blood would "wait" until evacuation, menstruation, or childbirth, or to be utilized inside the body.<sup>212</sup> Hence the common representation of ancient women with voluptuous, soft, curvy bodies versus the typical chiseled and taut male in art (Fig. 9). We see this juxtaposition in the Tazza as the Horai reveal their plump backsides

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<sup>208</sup> *Mul.* I.1 (vii. 14. 6-7). King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 78.

<sup>209</sup> Sissa, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead," 339. King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 92.

<sup>210</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 79.

<sup>211</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 316.

<sup>212</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 317.

compared to the toned physique of Horus (Figs. 10 and 12). According to Hippocratic belief, which was also maintained by Hellenistic medical scholars, menarche was an internal process before the blood flowed down and out of the female body.<sup>213</sup> If the menses were blocked, they would accumulate and overflow the uterus. The form of the uterus was widely believed to be shaped like an upside-down jug: the *fundus* (bottom), then the *cervix* (neck) which opens in a downward position leading to the *os* (mouth) at the bottom to excrete the blood (Fig. 45).<sup>214</sup> The ancient Greeks were not far off from the actual shape of the organ, as the uterus points downward and opens into the internal os, which leads to the cervix and to the vaginal canal through the external os. Should the menses find no exit, the fluids would spill over from the uterus into other receptive areas of the body, which then lead to the body's overflowing with blood. To avoid this, irrigation, retention, and release were of major concern to the Greeks to ensure a healthy, fertile woman. The body provided other ways for the menses to leave, should overflowing happen, such as nosebleeds; however, excess blood was also absorbed by the fetus for nourishment, and after the child was born, the blood transformed into lochial fluids and breastmilk.<sup>215</sup> In contrast, women who did not menstruate, with the exception of women who were either pregnant or menopausal, posed problems of illness for which the Greeks supplied medical procedures and medicines to procure menstruation. Menopause altered the female from a "wet" state into an arid body that no longer bled.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 78.

<sup>214</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 317-8.

<sup>215</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 317-8.

<sup>216</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 76.

The repetitive cycle from wet to dry in a woman's life appeared in nature as well, specifically with the annual inundation of the Nile.

Menstruation and the Nile's flooding greatly compare, as both occurrences leave behind rejuvenated areas, fertile and ready to conceive. When a woman sheds her inner lining, the uterus cleanses itself of menstrual fluid and blood to create a new layer of tissue to receive and nourish the fertilized egg. Though this modern understanding of the uterus was not known to the Greeks, they did believe after menstruation the female body was rejuvenated and ready to conceive.<sup>217</sup> The Nile operates similarly; after the flood, the river leaves behind a layer of silt which fertilizes the land, allowing for a suitable environment to grow crops. This natural occurrence remained a mystery to the Egyptians and Greeks, who considered the elusive happening to be a cosmic event.<sup>218</sup>

Rainfall in Egypt has always remained sparse throughout time; therefore the Egyptians relied heavily upon the floods of the Nile for survival. The entire valley of the Nile was inundated for a month or two during the summer months.<sup>219</sup> Once the water retreated, farmers sowed the newly rejuvenated soil immediately, as the earth was still damp and luscious in nutrients. These crops would be harvested the next spring.<sup>220</sup> The Egyptians and Greeks associated this unparalleled event with the creation of the world. Plutarch relates Osiris to the Nile and Isis to the land to express the divine-like natural cyclical inundation. Plutarch states,

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<sup>217</sup> Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 41-109.

<sup>218</sup> Dwyer, "The Temporal Allegory," 261.

<sup>219</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 4.

<sup>220</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 4.

οὕτω παρ' Αἰγυπτίοις Νεῖλον εἶναι τὸν Ὅσιριν  
Ἰσιδι συνόντα τῇ γῆ, Τυφῶνα δὲ τὴν θάλατταν, εἰς ἣν ὁ  
Νεῖλος ἐμπίπτων ἀφανίζεται καὶ διασπᾶται. Επλήν ὅσον ἡ γῆ  
μέρος ἀναλαμβάνουσα καὶ δεχομένη γίγνεται γόνιμος ὑπ'  
αὐτοῦ.

And thus among the Egyptians such men say that Osiris is the Nile consorting with the Earth, which is Isis, and that the sea is Typhon into which the Nile discharges its waters and is lost to view and dissipated, save for that part which the Earth takes up and absorbs and thereby becomes fertilized.<sup>221</sup> (Plutarch, *Mor. Isis and Osiris* 363 D-E)

The comparison of the creation of the world, and to that extent human life, to the inundation of the Nile appealed to the Egyptians and drew the attention of Greek philosophers.<sup>222</sup> The Egyptians postulated that life originated from the remaining shallow pools after the flood, and the fertilizing agent of the water upon the silt.<sup>223</sup>

Furthermore, Isis as the Earth relates the soil to a female's body, the womb, as Isis "takes up and absorbs and thereby becomes fertilized" after the flooding, exactly as a uterus functions when the fertilized egg implants itself into the lining of the uterus after menstruation. The Egyptians planned their seasons according to the inundation of the Nile and calculated the beginning of the flood with the constellations of Isis and Osiris. The Egyptians believed that Isis caused the flooding each year with her tears as she mourned the anniversary of the death of Osiris. When Sirius (Sothis), the star of Isis, began to rise in the sky, the Egyptians comprehended this as the beginning of the

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<sup>221</sup> Dwyer, "The Temporal Allegory," 263. Plutarch, "Moralia. Isis and Osiris," trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936): 76-79.

<sup>222</sup> Dwyer, "The Temporal Allegory," 261. Dwyer writes, "Greek authors speculated on the celestial origins of the Nile, identifying it with the constellation of Eriadnus, the heavenly river."

<sup>223</sup> Dwyer, "The Temporal Allegory," 263.

inundation.<sup>224</sup> Around the same time, the constellation of Orion rose horizontally in the night sky and was viewed as Osiris rising from the dead. To celebrate the upcoming floods and the annual rising of Sirius, the Egyptians marked this event as the New Year and celebrated it with festivals.<sup>225</sup> The Egyptians then divided the year into three seasons based on the flooding: *akhet* (the flood), *peret* (the sowing), and *shemu* (the harvest).<sup>226</sup> The Allegory of the Nile depicts the *shemu* season, as the personification of the Nile sits in his blooming tree and the Horai are seated amongst stalks of grain towering above them; the three figures all hold either an empty cornucopia or a bowl, waiting to be filled (Figs. 6, 7, 12, and 13).<sup>227</sup>

According to the interpretation I propose in this thesis, the empty cornucopias of the Tazza interior represent the vacant womb of a woman after the “flood”, menstruation, waiting to receive fruit of the harvest, the fertilized egg. The Allegory of the Nile showcased to Ptolemaic female viewers the success and benefits of menstruation as the fruit of their womanly labors would produce children and procreate the Ptolemaic bloodline. Females could relate to the inundation of the Nile as the annual flooding reflected a woman’s monthly cycle. The purification of the land and the uterus allowed for newly rejuvenated soil and tissue from which life would grow.<sup>228</sup> The worries

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<sup>224</sup> Dwyer, “The Temporal Allegory,” 261.

<sup>225</sup> Dwyer, “The Temporal Allegory,” 261.

<sup>226</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 4.

<sup>227</sup> Dwyer, “The Temporal Allegory,” 263.

<sup>228</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 78. Robins explains that menstruation was generally thought of as a purification process. Robins demonstrates this through an ancient Egyptian example of the bride princess Ahwere from the later Demotic story of Setne Khaemwaset. Ahwere states, “...when my time of purification came I made no more purification.” Robins analyzes, “Since from what follows it is clear that



accompanying the metamorphosis of a girl to a woman were put to ease, as the Tazza displayed that there were other natural forces demonstrating similarly episodic transitions.

The Tazza exhibits another example of a natural occurrence of a recurring transition in the snake skins encompassing the Gorgoneion. As discussed in Chapter Two, engraved around the Gorgoneion are sloughed remains indicating that rejuvenation has taken place (Fig. 2). The ecdysial process happens when snakes grow, similar to menstruation when a girl starts puberty. The peeling off of the old snake skin parallels the shedding of the inner lining within the uterus; both processes leave behind rejuvenated tissue. The Greeks did not know about the process of the uterus sloughing off its lining, as they believed menses built up within the entire body. Yet, the Hippocratic writers, in their medical texts about menstruation, acknowledged that some type of sluffing process, similar to our modern understanding of the uterus and menstruation, happened monthly within the womb.<sup>229</sup> The Greeks believed the female body's natural porous state could easily soak up blood, but could not discharge it as effortlessly. Lesley Dean-Jones explains, "It would seem that they [the Greeks] assumed some mechanism which impelled a woman's flesh to surrender its blood so that it was

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she means she had become pregnant, we can deduce both that menstruation, at this time at least, necessitated purification, and that missing an expected period was taken as a sign of conception."

<sup>229</sup> Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 62. Dean-Jones writes, "The Hippocratics believed that the most favourable time for conception was just after menstruation when the passages of a woman's body (along which her seed travelled) as well as her womb were empty, but they were aware that conception could take place at any time of the month..." *Mul.* I. 24 (viii. 64. 3-5) "In the time before [menstruation], the stoma of the womb is rather more closed and the vessels [φλέβες] being full of blood do not draw in the seed as well [as just after menstruation]".

ready to soak up the next month's excess..."<sup>230</sup> This "mechanism," believed by the Greeks, that forces the female body to expel the blood monthly is essentially the sloughing of the inner lining of the uterus.<sup>231</sup> To the Greeks, the shedding of skin was likened to women as they too lost a part of themselves cyclically; hence the relationship between snakes and women. The Egyptians, and many other ancient societies around the globe, also paired female deities with snakes for likely the same reason: the rejuvenation process. Medusa's association with menstruation and rejuvenation is seen in these snake skins, thereby providing another example on the Tazza for a female viewer of the transition from an old state into a new form.

### **Fertility**

In addition to menstruation and rejuvenation, Medusa also served as a symbol of fertility, as argued in the previous chapter. The origins of Medusa and her syncretism with other nature and fertility goddesses from different cultures affirm my argument that this widely considered heinous monster, originally represented a beautiful aspect of nature, fecundity. The similarity of the iconography between the Gorgoneion and sun discs exhibits another characteristic of fertility, as the sun provides nourishment for growth and reproduction. The original myth of Medusa, as sung by Hesiod, is laden with references to fertility, such as the abundant meadow, where she and Poseidon have intercourse; and when Perseus slices off her head with a *harpē*, his gesture similar to the

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<sup>230</sup> Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 63.

<sup>231</sup> Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 63.

decapitation of wheat, Medusa gives birth to Chrysaor and Pegasus. Lastly, the comparison of the Gorgoneion to female genitalia, though a crude depiction, and of snakes to phallic symbols solidifies the notion of Medusa as an exemplification of fecundity. The cherubic face of the Gorgoneion corresponds with the fleshy Horai on the front, as all female engraved figures are hefty in their appearances (Figs. 2 and 13). The artist of the Tazza depicts all of the women with round, soft bodies with large hips, breasts, and buttocks to stress their fertile dimensions.

Frequently found in ancient art, fertility was depicted either in agrarian settings with the fruits of the harvest or in the accentuation of the female form, both of which occur in the Tazza. Isis and the Horai are depicted with curvy half-nude bodies, exposing either breasts or bottoms in full display (Figs. 8, 9, 12, and 13). The backsides of the Horai, a typical Hellenistic posture for nudes, are revealed as drapery falls off their hips, showing their ample bodies (Figs. 12 and 30). Isis appears clothed in her typical knot-dress, yet her breasts are completely exposed (Fig. 8). Typically, Isis appears fully clothed in Hellenistic models, unless she is breastfeeding a young Horus (Figs. 48, 49, 50, 51, and 52).<sup>232</sup> Horus is represented as a full-grown youth in the Tazza, so why depict Isis with bare breasts? When a developing female becomes fertile, her breasts enlarge, and after the birth of a child she produces breastmilk. Isis, the only figure in the tondo to give birth, exemplifies this change in a woman's body to inform the Ptolemaic

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<sup>232</sup> Tran Tam Tinh, "Isis", *LIMC* V: 761-796, (1990). Elizabeth J. Walters, *Attic Grave Reliefs That Represent Women in the Dress of Isis*, (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1988).

female viewer of the appearance of a mother's physique. Sharon Kelly Heyob elucidates, "This maternal gesture [breast feeding] had particular symbolism in the old Egyptian religion because milk issued from the divine breast and brought to the one nursed life, longevity, salvation, and divinity."<sup>233</sup> This ancient belief carried through to the Ptolemaic era, and the exposed breasts of Isis harken back to this notion. Her visible breasts accentuate her fertility and, as the ultimate mother goddess, she is always fertile as she gives life and nourishes the Egyptians, Greeks, and the Ptolemies with her divine fluids, her tears: the Nile inundation.

By now, the discussion about the inundation of the Nile in relation to menstruation, rejuvenation, and fertility has implied an association between sex and agriculture. To the Greeks, the verbs applied to agrarian-related topics are also employed for sexual intercourse, similar to our modern jargon. The work of each action, sex and farming, eventually produces an organic product: children or crops. Sex that aims at procreating was referred to as "work", whereas other sexual interactions were termed as "play".<sup>234</sup> Anne Carson provides details about the Greeks and their implied agricultural references to sexual intercourse, as it was the duty of the husband to plant his seed, semen, in his wife. Carson writes, "As he must labor with his land to produce food, so the Greek husband labors with his wife to produce children, by means of the *πόνος* ('labor') or the *εργον* ('work') or the *κάμνος* ('toil') of the sexual act."<sup>235</sup> Aristophanes

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<sup>233</sup> Sharon Kelly Heyob, *The Cult of Isis among Women in the Graeco-Roman World*, (Leiden: Brill, 1975): 74-75.

<sup>234</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," 149.

<sup>235</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," 149.

specifies in his works that ἐργον was used to mean sowing or ploughing for sexual intercourse.<sup>236</sup> Not only was the uterus compared to the shape of a jug, the woman's body was equated to a ploughed and sowed field after sex (Fig. 45).<sup>237</sup>

It appears that sex was not a fun activity for the Greek male, but an arduous task to complete the goal of procreating. Aristotle reported that the male contributed as the κίνησις (motion) in the sexual act and the female provided the ὕλη (raw material) which the male would manipulate to create a child.<sup>238</sup> Similar to sex, the developing female body was likened again to terms used in agriculture, particularly the verb ripen. Throughout the stages of a woman's sexual life, the Greeks defined each phase as a different period of ripening, like that of fruits and vegetables.<sup>239</sup> King writes, "Unmarried girls – like those in *On Diseases of Virgins* – are 'ripe for marriage', 'tender ripe fruit', while innocent girls carried off in battle are 'plucked unripe', and unmarried, but deflowered girls are 'rotted fruit'."<sup>240</sup> As mentioned before, when females began menstruation they were immediately wedded; thereby their "ripeness" would last a short time before they lost their virginity.

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<sup>236</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place, 149. (Aristophanes *Pax* 440; *Ekkli.* 611). "Ancient betrothal formulas specify this ἐργον as that of "sowing" ... or "ploughing" ... while in comic contexts the verb "to hoe" ... is frequently used of sexual intercourse."

<sup>237</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 317. The Hippocratic writers believed the woman's body took the form of a worked field.

<sup>238</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," 154.

<sup>239</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 76.

<sup>240</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 77.

One example of a woman and her maturation considered before marriage comes from Theocritus' *Idyll* 18. Theocritus narrates the tale of the virgin Helen of Sparta while she is in her prime, before she is wedded and deflowered:

πιείρα μεγάλη ἄτ' ἀνέδραμε κόσμος ἀρούρα  
ἢ κάπῳ κυπάρισσος, ἢ ἄρματι Θεσσαλὸς ἵππος,  
ὧδε καὶ ἠ ῥοδόχρως Ἑλένα Λακεδαίμονι κόσμος·  
οὐδέ τις ἐκ ταλάρῳ πανίσδετα ἔργα τοιαῦτα,  
οὐδ' ἐνὶ δαιδαλέῳ πυκινώτερον ἄτριον ἰστῶ  
κερκίδι συμπλέξασα μακρῶν ἔταμ' ἐκ κελεόντων.  
οὐ μὰν οὐδέ λύραν τις ἐπίσταται ὧδε κροτῆσαι  
Ἄρτεμιν ἀείδοισα καὶ εὐρύστερνον Ἀθάναν  
ὡς Ἑλένα, τᾶς πάντες ἐπ' ὄμμασιν ἴμεροι ἐντί.  
ὦ καλά, ὦ χαρίεσσα κόρα, τὸ μὲν οἰκέτις ἤδη.

As a tall cypress rises high to adorn some fertile field or garden, or as a Thessalian horse adorns its chariot, just so is rosy Helen the ornament of Sparta. No one winds from her basket yarn as good as hers, or at the patterned loom cuts from the tall beams a closer weft once she has woven it with her shuttle; no one knows so well how to strike up the lyre in celebration of Artemis and broad-breasted Athena as Helen, in whose eyes is every form of desire. Beautiful and gracious girl, now you are [or ready to be] a housewife.<sup>241</sup> (Theocritus, *Idyll* 18.29-38)

The agrarian similes to a cypress tree and a Thessalian horse liken Helen's current state as untethered; she is free and wild. Theocritus describes the various chores of a wife: spinning, weaving, childbearing, and even singing, which will surely "tame" Helen's current sexually desirous state. Carson argues that Helen is caught in this unproductive virgin state before marriage; as a wife, Helen becomes useful with her chores.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Theocritus, Moschus, Bion, *Theocritus. Moschus. Bion*, Edited and translated by Neil Hopkinson, Loeb Classical Library 28, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015): 262-265.

<sup>242</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," 149 and 151.

Greek women were thought of as sexually deviant mortals, who needed to be tamed by men through household labor and sex. Carson writes, "...the Greek husband domesticates his wild bride and, just as he does for his land and beasts on it, brings to fruition what would otherwise remain savage and unproductive."<sup>243</sup> Women's sexual lasciviousness needed to be quenched to keep women domesticated, yet men themselves did not experience the same sexual rapaciousness. For Greek men, their "ripeness" lasted until their thirtieth year, allowing for plenty of sexual experience and dalliances.<sup>244</sup> The Tazza exhibits both men and women in these phases: we see the youthful Horus juxtaposed to the aged Nilus and the mature Isis and Horai (Fig. 3). As the central focus of the Tazza, the subjects of sex and farming are stressed in the Allegory of the Nile with the half-nude women, the cornucopias, the crops (specifically the wheat shaft held by Isis), and a yoke of some sort held by Horus (Figs. 6, 8, 10, and 12). These indicators of sex and agriculture reinforce the theme of fertility in the Tazza, as both are requirements for conception of humans and organic materials.

Finally, the motif of fertility is emphasized in the appearance of Isis, the goddess of women (Fig. 9). Isis, as an Egyptian and Greek goddess, appealed to many as she was the Queen of Heaven, the moon-goddess, mother of all pharaohs, goddess of corn, rain, wind, spinning, and weaving (Figs. 46, 47, and 48). More qualities would eventually be attributed to Isis throughout the Hellenistic and Roman eras (Figs. 50, 51, and 52).<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," 149.

<sup>244</sup> King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, 77.

<sup>245</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 1.

The Egyptians viewed Isis as the goddess of life, for Egyptian artists often depicted her holding the symbol for life, the *ankh*. It is quite apparent as to why this goddess was popular amongst everyone, especially females, as Isis specifically catered to their needs, particularly to the troubles of motherhood. As a lauded mother figure, Isis exemplified what females should emulate in their homes. Isis was not only mother to Horus and the pharaohs, but to all as she provided nourishment to the land and people via the Nile.

As previously mentioned, the inundation of the Nile was believed to be the tears of Isis as she annually mourned the loss of her brother-husband Osiris, the god of vegetation and death.<sup>246</sup> This yearly expression of bereavement refers to the origin myth of Isis and Osiris, where Osiris is murdered; hence Isis' tears and sorrow, but this myth also depicts Isis as a dutiful, loyal, and fertile wife. The earliest narration of this myth is located in the Pyramid Texts, the oldest Egyptian religious writings, inscribed on the walls of the pyramids at Sakkara.<sup>247</sup> Within the Pyramid Texts, Isis is referred to as the sister of Osiris and mourns with her other sister, Nephthys, over their dead brother Osiris, who was killed by their other brother Seth. In this rendition Isis is not the wife of Osiris. Instead, she aids in the embalming rites of his body, leading to Osiris' eventual resurrection.<sup>248</sup> This event would transform these ancient deities into gods of death. The embalming ritual was so significant that, during the Ptolemaic era, three texts were

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<sup>246</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 1 and 37.

<sup>247</sup> Although, this version only provides snippets of allusions to the myth in an unclear manner. Therefore, I will refer to the completed version, *De Iside et Osiride*, by Plutarch.<sup>247</sup> This adaptation also aids in our understanding of how the Ptolemies would have understood Isis, as Plutarch wrote within roughly the same era as the Ptolemies.

<sup>248</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 38.



created focusing on this ceremony: “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys”, “The Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys”, and “The Hour-watches”. These songs were either chanted as solos or duets and explained the ceremonial procedure of preparing the body for burial and the rising of Osiris.<sup>249</sup> In “The Songs of Isis and Nephthys”, Isis declares herself as the source of the Nile; she sings about her longing for Osiris and how her tears flood the lands of Egypt.<sup>250</sup> Plutarch’s mythological account, *De Iside et Osiride*, mentions this cosmic happening and retains much of the native Egyptian mythology, only sparingly omitting details or adding new elements to the overall myth.<sup>251</sup>

Plutarch commences *De Iside et Osiride* with an introduction of the gods: Osiris, Aroueris, Seth (Typhon), Isis, and Nephthys as children of Rhea.<sup>252</sup> Similar to the Greek deities, the Egyptian divinities also married their siblings; Nephthys wedded Seth, and Isis and Osiris had loved one another since their time in the womb. Seth, jealous of Osiris’ power, conspires to usurp the throne and kill Osiris. The details of the murder of Osiris differ between the Greeks and Egyptians. Plutarch explains that Seth lured Osiris into a chest and bolted it shut, and with Osiris inside, sent the chest off into the river. This act does not appear in Egyptian texts, but Heyob suggests it may have been the Greek version of drowning.<sup>253</sup> When the news of Osiris’ death reaches Isis, the goddess

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<sup>249</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 38.

<sup>250</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 39.

<sup>251</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 40. Chapters 12-20 (355D - 358E) in *De Iside et Osiride* particularly stays true to the original Egyptian myth.

<sup>252</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 40. The father of Osiris, Isis, Aroueris, Nephthys, and Seth (Typhon) is unclear and could possibly be Helios, Hermes, or Cronus.

<sup>253</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 41.

cuts off a lock of hair and dresses herself in mourning apparel. Isis sets off, traveling around the land, asking for the whereabouts of the chest. During this journey, it is revealed that Osiris was not faithful to Isis, for he had sex with Nephthys, who gave birth to their son, Anubis.<sup>254</sup> This does not deter Isis from her quest, and instead she employs Anubis to be her guardian on this mission to find Osiris' body. In a turn of events, Isis discovers the whereabouts of the chest, which now resides within a heath-tree that serves as a pillar for the King's house at Byblos. Isis disguises herself and becomes a part of the staff, as a nurse for the young prince of Byblos.<sup>255</sup> Eventually, her identity is discovered by the Queen, who helps Isis by delivering the pillar to her. Isis throws herself onto the wood and sobs uncontrollably. Unbeknownst to the goddess, her wailing kills the young prince, who was nearby. His older brother, also in attendance, looked on as Isis opened the chest and embraced Osiris' dead body.<sup>256</sup> Isis notices the older prince and becomes enraged that he witnessed such an intimate moment between the gods. With one fierce look, Isis kills the prince by frightening him to death.<sup>257</sup>

We have seen a parallel to these powers, an earsplitting shriek and a death-inducing glare, from Medusa. Both Isis and Medusa have the capability to kill with their voices and stares, making them a compatible pair for the Tazza (Figs. 2 and 9). Placing both these women on the Tazza not only reinforces the themes of fertility and family, but encourages a female-specific focus of the artifact as both goddesses relate to women.

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<sup>254</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 41.

<sup>255</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 41.

<sup>256</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 41.

<sup>257</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 41.

The myth concludes with Isis conceiving a child from a dead Osiris, promulgating Isis' power to create life from death, and giving birth to Horus in Buto. As she attends to her infant son, Isis places the box of Osiris aside. Seth finds the box, and in anger chops up Osiris' body into fourteen parts and spreads these pieces all over the Nile.<sup>258</sup> Isis, loyal as ever, takes it upon herself to find these missing fragments and bury them all together, so that Osiris may rest in peace. She finds every piece, except his genitals, and buries the pieces in the ground. Osiris rises from the underworld and seeks revenge on Seth by training his son, Horus, to battle and defeat Seth.<sup>259</sup> Long after the Pyramid Texts and the Ptolemaic songs and duets, Plutarch presents Isis as a loyal, mourning widow searching for her husband's remains.<sup>260</sup> During the Ptolemaic era, it was of the utmost importance for the Greek dynasty to unite the Egyptians and Greeks as one to ensure peace. To create this cohesive society, Ptolemy Soter I (c. 323-283/2 CE) adopted Isis into the Greek religion and created a new hybrid deity, Serapis. By combining Greek and Egyptian aspects, Serapis eventually replaced Osiris completely as Isis' companion.<sup>261</sup>

Although Serapis took over Osiris' cult, Isis was too well-regarded to be replaced by a new hybrid goddess. Because of the many traits of Isis, particularly her role as matriarch of the royal family, and similarities to the Greek goddesses Hera, Aphrodite,

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<sup>258</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 41-42.

<sup>259</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 42.

<sup>260</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 42.

<sup>261</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 9. Heyob explains, "Whether or not it was intended that Isis should be connected with this new god Sarapis in much the same way as she was with Osiris is not absolutely clear."

and Demeter, the Greeks warmly accepted Isis into their pantheon.<sup>262</sup> Because of her human-like nature, encompassing love, loyalty, sorrow, and compassion, Isis rose to popularity amongst the Greeks and soon out-paced Serapis as the dominant deity in Ptolemaic Egypt.<sup>263</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall explain the growing hype surrounding Isis: “The Ptolemies encouraged the cult of Isis to unify their kingdom and increase their prestige. They funded the construction of temples, notably the one at Phiale, and some Ptolemaic queens associated themselves with her.”<sup>264</sup> In the Ptolemaic dynasty, kings and queens were deified, like Egyptian pharaohs, and as incarnations of certain Greek or Egyptian deities.<sup>265</sup> Berenice I (c. 340-268 BCE), wife of Ptolemy Soter I, added Savior to her title as had her husband.<sup>266</sup> After Berenice I, fellow Ptolemaic queens followed suit like Arsinoë II (c. 316-260 BCE), who became the focus of a popular cult amongst the Greeks and Egyptians. Temples were dedicated to her, and Arsinoë II became the co-patron deity of the Nome with Souchos, the Egyptian crocodile god.<sup>267</sup> Berenice II (c. 267-221 BCE) assimilated herself with Aphrodite and Cleopatra I (c. 204-176 BCE)

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<sup>262</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 2 and 42. It was atypical of the Greeks to openly accept Isis into their religion, as they did not usually accept other deities, but the Greeks identified Isis and Serapis with their own deities. The spread of her cult outside of Egypt emphasized Isis’ role as wife and mother to Osiris and Horus.

<sup>263</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 36 and 44.

<sup>264</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 49.

<sup>265</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 28 and 30.

<sup>266</sup> Grace Harriet Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens; a Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt*, (Johns Hopkins University Studies in Archaeology, no. 14. Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins Press; H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1932): 108. Both Ptolemy Soter I and Berenice I were divinized and added to the list of deified rulers next to Alexander the Great.

<sup>267</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 28.

declared herself as Pharaoh, though she was acting regent (c. 180-176 BCE), and added the title Epiphanes (manifest) to her name.<sup>268</sup>

Despite the fact that these Ptolemaic queens aligned themselves with other Greek and Egyptian divinities, or as deities themselves, Isis remained the most popular divinity for other Ptolemaic queens.<sup>269</sup> The most famous example is Cleopatra VII, who believed she was the reincarnation of Isis on earth. In 41 CE, Plutarch describes Cleopatra and Mark Antony's first encounter in *Life of M. Antonius*, though the encounter is embellished by Plutarch, Cleopatra represents herself as Isis to Mark Antony.<sup>270</sup> Cleopatra widely spread her role as Isis throughout her kingdom and the ancient world through word of mouth, legal documents, texts, art works, and coins. A silver tetradrachm coin from Phoenicia dating about 34 BCE displays a bust of Cleopatra with the words, "Queen Kleopatra the new goddess" (Fig. 55).<sup>271</sup> Up until her death, Cleopatra remained vigilant in asserting herself as Isis. In *Life of M. Antonius*, Plutarch explains Cleopatra's suicide as she killed herself with the poison from an asp. The asp was a traditional Egyptian symbol of divine kingship; therefore, Cleopatra implies she

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<sup>268</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 28. Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 23. Pomeroy translates an official document citing both Cleopatra I and her son as pharaohs. "The Pharaoh Cleopatra [I] mother, the goddess Epiphanes [Manifest]". Cleopatra I made a bold move, as regent, to place her name first before her son's and to declare both of them as Pharaoh.

<sup>269</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 39.

<sup>270</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 39. (Plutarch, *Life of M. Antonius* 26-7). Stacy Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co, 2010). Margaret Melanie Miles, ed., *Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011). Joyce A. Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

<sup>271</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 39.

became immortal at her suicide by this snake.<sup>272</sup> Queens, like Cleopatra VII, identifying themselves with Isis, crafted a public image of themselves as dutiful wives to the pharaoh and exemplary mothers to the future pharaohs, as was Isis with Osiris and Horus.

Therefore, presenting Isis in the center of the tondo of the Tazza communicates to the young Ptolemaic woman what type of woman she should try to emulate: a strong, loyal, and dutiful wife, a loving and compassionate mother, thereby ensuring a resilient family for the Ptolemaic lineage (Fig. 8). And, Isis represents to the female viewer the type of divinity the young Ptolemaic girl is destined to incarnate as a Ptolemaic divine queen. It is tempting to propose that the Tazza may have been designated for Cleopatra VII as a coming-of-age gift, because of the central focus of Isis in the tondo and the extraordinary nature of this artifact. Perhaps the Tazza conveyed to the young Cleopatra her new identification with Isis and her upcoming role not only as a queen/pharaoh, but also as a wife and mother to her children, and mother to all of Egypt, like Isis.<sup>273</sup> Of course, for the time being, this hypothesis is speculative until we have physical evidence suggesting Cleopatra as the owner.

The Egyptians continued to worship the Egyptian version of Isis, while the Greeks warmly accepted the deity with new Hellenistic attributes, thereby uniting both nations under one religion (Figs. 9 and 47).<sup>274</sup> This new Hellenized version of Isis would endure for centuries after the fall of the Ptolemaic reign of Egypt and would eventually

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<sup>272</sup> Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 40. (Plutarch, *Life of M. Antonius* 85).

<sup>273</sup> A further discussion of Cleopatra, Isis, and the Tazza will be examined in the conclusion of this thesis.

<sup>274</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 9.

become a popular cult in Rome, lasting until the fourth century CE.<sup>275</sup> Isis remained a prevalent deity amongst the many other female deities in the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman pantheon because of her relatability to women. Heyob explains, “Isis in the Graeco-Roman world was above all else the faithful wife and indeed the divine patroness of family life and instructress in such domestic arts as weaving and spinning...She was esteemed as the model spouse...The tale of Isis and Osiris, whatever the discrepancies of detail, could serve as the pattern of family bonds of affection.”<sup>276</sup> These domestic qualities of Isis were useful to women who came to the goddess for help within their own home.<sup>277</sup> Isis appealed to the great masses as she was the goddess of the heavens, moon, and the star of Sothis, of justice, of healing, but it was her roles in fertility, marriage, and motherhood that attracted females to her cult. Lastly, Isis represented sexuality, but in the form of fidelity as a wife, unlike other sexually natured goddesses such as Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of sexual love, or Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 36.

<sup>276</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 44.

<sup>277</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 48.

<sup>278</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 43-44. Isis was not the only Egyptian goddess to represent fertility and motherhood. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 83. “While Isis represents the mother *par excellence*, Hathor is the goddess of fertility, sexuality and childbirth. Closely associated with Hathor, especially in the Late Period, was the household god Bes. Like her, he was concerned with sexuality and its aftermath, pregnancy and childbirth. He is shown with the squat body and short legs of a dwarf, although his face usually has the mane and ears of a lion.” Within my second chapter, I mention that the Archaic representation of Medusa has similar qualities to Bes. Rowlandson and Bagnall, *Women and Society*, 46. The goddess Taweret (Thoeris) was also an Egyptian goddess of marriage, childbirth, and infancy and as protector of women generally. So, why does Isis’ cult last or remain more popular than these other Egyptian gods? Because of her human-like emotions: sorrow, compassion, devotion, etc. that set her apart from these other divinities, this goddess relatable to humans as she too suffers and experiences emotions like those of females.

Women viewed Isis, like Hathor and Aphrodite, as a goddess of love who promoted procreation.<sup>279</sup> Through the process of syncretism, Isis incorporated functions and forms similar to those of Hathor and Aphrodite, thereby appealing to both Egyptians and Greeks, and subsequently they identified Isis with Aphrodite or Hathor.<sup>280</sup> We must pause and ask the question: Why is Hathor and/or Aphrodite not depicted on the Tazza with Isis? Both these goddesses, like Isis, have feminine qualities that pertain specifically to females. They perpetuate sex and aid in childbirth as well, so why not represent them? Unlike Hathor or Aphrodite, Isis attracted women more because of her human emotions and her role in the domestic sphere. As seen in Plutarch's narrative of the myth of Isis and Osiris, Isis is portrayed as a model wife and mother who openly displayed her raw emotional state during trying times. As a wife and mother, she was more relatable to women than Aphrodite, whose interest was in sexual love as opposed to married love or female functions. Hathor was concerned with childbirth, but did not include other aspects of motherhood. Therefore, Isis was all-encompassing of female functions from menstruation to marriage to duties of a wife to pregnancy and motherhood. In her, women found a goddess with whom they could wholly identify, making Isis the perfect choice of a female goddess to place prominently on the Tazza.<sup>281</sup>

## **Family**

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<sup>279</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 48-49.

<sup>280</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 49 and 53.

<sup>281</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 48.



Though the only female goddess depicted in the Allegory of the Nile, Isis is not alone in representing the theme of family to the young Ptolemaic female viewer. She is joined by her husband, Osiris (the sphinx), and her son, Horus. These three divinities formed the perfect model of a family, which Egyptians strived to emulate in their own families.<sup>282</sup> Within artistic renditions of the family, Horus, Isis, and Osiris were typically represented as a unit such as we see in the Tazza, with Horus at the top, Isis in the middle, and Osiris at the bottom, creating one unified line in the center of the tondo (Fig. 5).<sup>283</sup> One of the most important responsibilities of an ancient woman was her duty to bear children and perpetuate the household into the next generation.<sup>284</sup> Isis exemplifies this duty as she bears a son to Osiris, who becomes the next king of the heavens and produces divine children of his own, thus extending the Osiris-Isis lineage. As within many other ancient cultures, the struggle and pressure to produce an heir, a male, was common amongst Ptolemaic women. This concern about women's disease was addressed in medical texts from Hippocrates and Soranos.<sup>285</sup> Hanson argues, "...the *Corpus*, as well as Aristotle's biological works, view women as mothers, responsible for the reproduction of the family and the *polis*, and as passive and amorphous material bodies, existing to produce children."<sup>286</sup> As previously mentioned, Soranos differs from the Hippocratic writers and Aristotle in representing a broad study of the female anatomy

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<sup>282</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 1.

<sup>283</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 37.

<sup>284</sup> Rowlandson, *Women and Society*, 316.

<sup>285</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 316.

<sup>286</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 312.

and of diseases beyond childbearing, yet even in Ptolemaic society, this concern to bear an heir was of the utmost importance. To fully emulate Isis, the definitive wife and mother, a woman must bear a son as the goddess did. To do this, the Greeks and Egyptians created procedures to aid in the procreation of a male and administered examinations to define the sex of the unborn child.

Women in ancient Egypt and Greece were subject to various tests for pregnancy and to determine the sex of the child. For the Greeks, a woman's sexual desire jumpstarted the process of conception as her uterine mouth opens for reception of the seed, then closes for retention of the fertilized egg.<sup>287</sup> It is interesting to note here how the Gorgoneion is compared to a vulva and her slightly open mouth may likely represent the vagina or, possibly, this uterine mouth awaits the seed, then closes as Pegasus and Chrysaor develop in her neck.<sup>288</sup> The first volume of *On Diseases of Women* explains how a male may be produced during procreation. Hanson, referring to ancient Greek beliefs, writes, "When women have finished their menstrual evacuation, they are especially likely to conceive if they feel desire. Their seed is strong if they have intercourse when they should; the seed from the man is mixed in easily, and if it is stronger, the child resembles him."<sup>289</sup> The Greek husband aids the female in the procreation of an heir as he must have a strong seed for the baby to "resemble" him, as a male. Moreover, the Egyptians conducted an examination of the pulse, the condition of

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<sup>287</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 315.

<sup>288</sup> According to Vernant's hypothesis of the Gorgon face as a portrayal of female genitalia. Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 113.

<sup>289</sup> Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," 316.

the breasts, the color of the skin, and the urination on barley and emmer wheat to figure out if one was with child and to determine the sex of the baby.<sup>290</sup> The presence of barley and wheat cycles back to the relationship between sex and agriculture. Interestingly, Isis holds up two wheat shafts on the Tazza. The woman was expected to urinate on the grains every day and, if they sprouted, she was pregnant. If the barley sprouted before the emmer, the child was a boy; vice versa, the baby was a girl. If nothing came into fruition from the grains, the woman was not pregnant.<sup>291</sup>

Once pregnant, women turned to Isis and Horus for protection against bleeding and miscarriages. Specific spells, pertaining to Isis and Horus, were chanted over certain medical tools that were then applied to the woman's stomach or vulva for protection of the child.<sup>292</sup> It is tempting to hypothesize the Tazza as one of these objects applied to the woman's belly or vulva for protection of the fetus. Even though sufficient evidence does not exist, it appears the Tazza could have been placed on the woman's abdomen: the concave shape of the artifact, the magical material of sardonyx, and the apotropaic powers of the Gorgoneion on the exterior repelling evil forces from the child, and the interior closest to the baby, with Isis and Horus watching over and Isis nourishing the child with her breast and divine liquids point to such an idea for the Tazza's function.

I maintain that the Tazza was a protective device meant for a Ptolemaic female because of Ptolemaic stela paintings depicting the fears of childbirth. For this reason,

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<sup>290</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 79.

<sup>291</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 79.

<sup>292</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 82.

the Tazza would be an apt gift for a woman about to transition into a new phase of her life, possibly motherhood, as it provide safety to her through the apotropaic powers of the Gorgoneion and sardonix. The Gorgoneion, while a metaphor for fertility and rejuvenation, also represents the theme of family, as Medusa was the mother to Pegasus and Chrysaor. We learn from Hesiod's *Theogony* that Perseus sliced off Medusa's head and from her neck sprang Chrysaor and Pegasus.<sup>293</sup> Medusa demonstrates, in a violent grotesque manner, the difficulties and bloodiness of childbirth. Her neck is symbolic of her lower neck, the vagina, and, once cut into, bursts open to release her children, with blood spurting everywhere. The pain, suffering, and loss of blood in labor are connected here to the killing of Medusa, as women sympathetically might have related to the Gorgon in the misery and torture of parturition. The Gorgon was also identifiable with women, because of the high rates of mortality in childbirth in the ancient world.

Although Medusa was murdered, her body gives birth immediately after her death, creating a sympathetic character for women. During the Ptolemaic era, themes of deaths related to childbirth became prominent subjects in literature and funeral art. Many of the epitaphs from Book VII of the *Anthologia Graeca* discuss the deaths of babies, children, and young mothers, while Greek and Ptolemaic funeral stelae exhibit paintings of women dying during childbirth.<sup>294</sup> One example is the late fourth - early third-century BCE stele-shaped loculus slab from the Soldier's Tomb from the Ibrahimiya Cemetery at

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<sup>293</sup> Hesiod and Caldwell, *Hesiod's Theogony*, 46. (*Theogony* 271-280).

<sup>294</sup> Barbara Hughes Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989): 92-93.

Alexandria. This work shows a woman dying in parturition (Fig. 53). The style is from the First Style of Ptolemaic painting and parallels fourth-century Attic prototypes. A crimson cloth trimmed with light purple lies across the knees of a partially nude female falling onto a couch, with the support of a small girl holding the female's left arm, as she slowly meets her demise.<sup>295</sup> Though the stele is badly damaged, one can make out the position of the woman's body, the garment, and the top of her head displaying the difficulty and fatality of childbirth.<sup>296</sup> This tomb commemorates the final acts of this female in her mortal life, as she sacrifices herself in giving birth to her child, a haunting forewarning painting to those with child.

Another stele, from the Third Style of Ptolemaic painting, presents a young woman, seated and leaning forward, her hand outstretched towards a kneeling baby (Fig. 54). B.H. Fowler suggests this woman may have died and left an infant behind her.<sup>297</sup> Though we do not see the woman dying, as in the first stele, we see the after effects of childbirth, a dead mother longing to hold her baby. These chilling and cautionary tomb paintings, created during the Ptolemaic era in Alexandria, continued to limn the subject of death and childbirth, as countless women and children were dying during the birthing process. Some tombs even illustrate men saying goodbye to the deceased child.<sup>298</sup> This tragic occurrence happened to all people. No matter what class or social standing a

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<sup>295</sup> Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*, 93-94.

<sup>296</sup> Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*, 94-95.

<sup>297</sup> Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*, 95-96.

<sup>298</sup> Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*, 95.

person might be, miscarriages, stillborn children, and fatal outcomes during childbirth could occur to any family, even the great Ptolemies.

### **Female Viewership**

With its apotropaic powers, through sardonyx and the Gorgoneion, combined with the female-centric motifs of menstruation, rejuvenation, fertility, and family, the Tazza Farnese served as a protection device for a woman transitioning into a new phase of her life, likely motherhood (Fig. 1). The Tazza, I argue, as an extravagant work of art, was intended as a celebratory gift for a *parthenos* of the Ptolemaic court to protect her in this new role as a wife and soon-to-be mother, but also demonstrates metaphorical motifs in the engraved figures to remind her of her duties as a woman in Ptolemaic society (Figs. 2 and 3). These fears of death from child labor were not only echoed in stelae tombs, but also in the Tazza, as it quelled these worries by depicting the bodily changes a woman's form takes during menstruation, fertility, and child birth in the interior and exterior figures, particularly Isis and the Gorgoneion. The young Ptolemaic *parthenos* may have turned to the Tazza in comfort and reassurance during one or more of these transitions, to look upon Isis for guidance and to the Gorgoneion for sympathy (Fig. 2 and 9).

Such a young woman could even find herself in the face of the Gorgoneion, terrified and panicked with these oncoming changes of losing one's virginity, carrying and delivering an infant, and succeeding in producing an heir. J.P. Vernant remarks that the face of the Gorgon is the double of the female. The image depicts the strange effect of looking into a mirror, as the Greeks saw only their heads frontally in mirrors creating a

decapitated form, and one's gaze was captured in the Gorgoneion.<sup>299</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, around the late fifth-century the representation of Medusa as a young beautiful woman appears, coincidentally about the same time as the rise of the mirror in Greek society.<sup>300</sup> In the ancient world, the mirror was considered a woman's object, as it evoked the radiance, beauty, and delicate complexions of women. Females employed mirrors to see and gaze at themselves. Vernant demonstrates, "To gaze at yourself is to project your own face before you, opposite your own, doubled into a figure you observe as one does another, yet knowing it is yourself."<sup>301</sup> While their forms kept changing throughout puberty, women referred to mirrors to see these developments, to "observe as one does another", but the girl is now viewing herself as a woman.<sup>302</sup> The mirror and Gorgoneion relate to one another through the concept of the aegis as a shield.

When Athena gave Perseus her shield, she knew that the image of the Gorgon's face would impregnate itself onto the smooth surface of the bronze shield (Fig. 38). The image of the Gorgon on the shield still retained its powers that issue forth from the mirror-like shield. Vernant argues there is no disconnect between the image and the real.<sup>303</sup> He writes, "Superimposed on the mask of Medusa, as though in a two-sided mirror, the strange beauty of the feminine countenance, brilliant with seduction, and the horrible fascination of death, meet and cross."<sup>304</sup> The fantastic feminine emotions, with

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<sup>299</sup> Vernant, "Death in the Eyes," 149.

<sup>300</sup> Vernant, "In the Mirror of Medusa," 149.

<sup>301</sup> Vernant, "In the Mirror of Medusa," 142.

<sup>302</sup> Vernant, "In the Mirror of Medusa," 142.

<sup>303</sup> Vernant, "In the Mirror of Medusa," 148.

<sup>304</sup> Vernant, "In the Mirror of Medusa," 150.

the subtle alluring temptations, and the frightening gaze of Medusa appear in the Tazza (Fig. 2). As a woman looks into the Tazza, coincidentally shaped like mirrors, the girl sees herself within the image and identifies with Medusa. Aristotle's *De Insomniis* discusses the reaction mirrors produce when a menstruating female gazes into the glassy surface. According to Aristotle, the mirror tarnishes and forms a bloody cloud on the surface from the females' menses. This stain is nearly impossible to remove from new mirrors; thus the mirror carries a part of the female within it.<sup>305</sup> Vernant explains, "By just regarding themselves in newly polished metal, the women project their reflections there. Although it is a simple, look-alike image of themselves, it nevertheless impregnates the surface with a crimson haze."<sup>306</sup> Like the Gorgon, females "impregnate" the surfaces of mirrors, when menstruating, leaving behind a permanent mark on the surface. When viewing the Tazza, the interior figures are predominately a yellowish-white onyx, contrasting starkly with the mahogany-colored background of the sard, but the Gorgoneion is multicolored primarily of brown and red hues, and blends into the sardonyx seamlessly. Perhaps this is a reference to menstruation, as the Gorgoneion, functioning like a mirror, presents the image of a female back to herself with a crimson tint. The young Ptolemaic woman seeks solace in the Gorgoneion, as Medusa represents menstruation, fertility, rejuvenation, and the troubles of childbirth and reflects these

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<sup>305</sup> Vernant, "In the Mirror of Medusa," 148. (Aristotle, *De Insomniis*, 459b-26).

<sup>306</sup> Vernant, "In the Mirror of Medusa," 148.



bodily changes in her russet-colored image to the female viewer, who views the Gorgon as “another, yet knowing it is” herself.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Vernant, “In the Mirror of Medusa,” 142.

## Conclusion: A New Reading of the Tazza Farnese

*“Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives many; the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden...” – Plato*

In his review of La Rocca's *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, in 1985, John van de Grift claimed that a definitive study examining the idiosyncratic and syncretistic qualities of the Tazza had yet to be written.<sup>308</sup> Since 1985, the scholarship on the Tazza, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, does not investigate these unique and syncretic aspects of this cameo. Often fixated on the interior figures, scholars and viewers alike overlook the inner significance of the sardonyx and its protective powers, the Gorgoneion, the function, and the ancient viewership in favor of other popular features of this artifact.

I hope that this thesis has done van de Grift's words justice in presenting a comprehensive study of the Tazza Farnese. In this thesis, I argued that the Tazza was an ornate miniature shield with protective properties and metaphors of menstruation, fertility, family, and rejuvenation in the form of allegories and divine beings intended for a female owner. The implied references to flowing liquids and cyclical occurrences, the iconography of the Gorgoneion and her original representation as a goddess of fertility and nature, the depiction of Isis and her connection to women, and the theme of menstruation echoed in the Allegory of the Nile and in the decapitated head of Medusa

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<sup>308</sup> van de Grift, "Review of *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra*," 712.

informed my argument that this work was meant for a female viewer in the Ptolemaic court.

Of all the published works exclusively focused on the Tazza, only two are written by female scholars, excluding myself. Marina Belozerskaya and Julia C. Menes, unlike male scholars, both dedicate their research and findings to different aspects of the Tazza.<sup>309</sup> Belozerskaya's book, *Medusa's Gaze: The Extraordinary Journey of the Tazza Farnese*, delves into the historical journey of the Tazza from Alexandria to the artifact's current home in the Museo Nazionale di Napoli. Although not a scholarly work, as Belozerskaya embellishes areas of history, it does present the idea that the Tazza was likely owned by Cleopatra VII. Belozerskaya asserts that the Tazza was an item of Cleopatra's dining ware, which the queen displayed prominently on her table when she dined with Caesar, to emphasize the luxury and wealth of Ptolemaic Egypt. Belozerskaya's argument seems far-fetched, as she does not provide proper evidence or ancient documentation to support such a proposal.

In her Master's Thesis, Menes proposes the style of the Tazza as Roman, not Hellenistic. Her examination of the shape (similar to a Roman patera), the trade routes of sardonyx, and the Gorgoneion's similar imagery to that of Roman-period Gorgoneia have led her to believe that this artifact was created during the Roman Empire. Menes is to be

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<sup>309</sup> Julia C. Menes, "The Tazza Farnese: A Reinterpretation," M.A., University of Missouri - Columbia, 2004. Marina Belozerskaya, *Medusa's Gaze: The Extraordinary Journey of the Tazza Farnese*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

commended for proposing these features of the Tazza as evidence for a Roman date and style, yet Plantzos makes a more compelling argument, through his stylistic analysis of other Ptolemaic sumptuous works, for a Hellenistic date and style. Neither of these female scholars approaches the Tazza as a protective device displaying themes of menstruation, reproduction, and fertility or propose that it was intended specifically for a young female viewer.

Reading through the heavily male-dominated scholarship of the Tazza, the proposal, or even a mere suggestion, that this artifact may have been made for a female is not once argued or mentioned. Male academics cannot be at complete fault for this, as it would not come naturally to a male scholar to interpret or sense a theme of menstruation because this biological cyclical process is not a part of his own life. Yet, fertility is examined thoroughly within the numerous discussions on the Allegory of the Nile, so why is there no connection drawn to ancient female viewers? I hope I have presented a convincing argument so that in the future scholars take note of this thesis' findings and in future investigations of the Tazza consider females as possible recipients, patrons, or even artists of this sumptuous work.

Other avenues of the Tazza to be explored are: the problematic iconography of Horus, the Tazza as a wedding gift, and Cleopatra VII as the owner. Throughout my research, the odd representation of Horus constantly appeared and begged the question: why is he depicted with a mustache? Other writers have attempted to answer this question, suggesting that Horus is actually Triptolemos, Augustus, or even a Gaul. I did

not find a satisfying answer nor another representation of Horus as such in the *LIMC*. This aspect of the Tazza, if thoroughly explored, and answered through stylistic analysis, may lead us one step closer in answering a definitive identification of the youth, a date, and style for the Tazza.

Another topic for further research is the likelihood the Tazza was intended as a wedding gift. Throughout Chapter Three, I argued that the theme of family and the duties of a female were displayed in the interior figures of Isis, Horus, and Osiris (the sphinx). All three divinities represented the ideal family and Isis exemplified the perfect wife and mother figure. Within the Greek aretalogies, Isis proclaims that she brought man and female together and was the goddess of marriage.<sup>310</sup> The Greek wedding ceremony dramatizes the taming of the wild *parthenos* into a submissive civilized *gynē*.<sup>311</sup> This can be seen in the comparison of the Gorgoneion and Isis on the Tazza. On the exterior, the Gorgon displays her undomesticated nature with her unkempt, flowing, snake-filled hair and her fearful expression; whereas Isis appears groomed, regal, and stoic as she sits elegantly on the sphinx. Unlike Isis, Medusa is not wedded; therefore she is always untamed. The Tazza emphasizes the wild nature of the young Ptolemaic woman in the Gorgoneion and displays the domesticated exemplary wife within Isis.

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<sup>310</sup> Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 50. M 27 aretalogy, "Here Isis repeats her claim that it was she who brought man and woman together".

<sup>311</sup> Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place," 151.

During the Greek nuptial ceremonies, brides received various gifts, one of which may have been the Tazza. The bride was expected to consecrate her childhood toys to Artemis and receive replacements gifts symbolizing her new working life as a wife.<sup>312</sup> Vase paintings depict wedding processions of guests bringing the bride domestic utensils such as spindles, pestles, sieves, winnowing baskets, loaves of bread, and other vessels.<sup>313</sup> When the wedding feasts begin, the Greek bride is veiled and seated next to her groom. At the climax of the ceremony, the *anakalyptēria* (unveiling), the bride unveils herself to the groom, and henceforth she is considered to be married.<sup>314</sup> The groom lavishes his bride with presents, commonly known as “unveiling gifts”, after this momentous revelation.<sup>315</sup> For such an important moment in one’s life, a gift such as the Tazza would be more than appropriate for a groom to give his bride because of its luxurious material, eloquent craftsmanship, and its symbolization of a female’s changing life from a *parthenos* to a *gynē*. Further research into Ptolemaic wedding ceremonies and inventories of gifts and dowries must be done to support this idea.

To declare the Tazza as a coming-of-age gift for Cleopatra VII, within this thesis, was a palpable temptation given the sumptuous nature of the work and the thematic

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<sup>312</sup> Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place,” 151-152. John Howard Oakley and Rebecca H. Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*, (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993). Lefkowitz, “The Last Hours of the Parthenos,” 32-38. John H. Oakley, “Nuptial Nuances: Wedding Images in Non-Wedding Scenes of Myth,” In *Pandora: Women in Classical Greece*, ed. Ellen D. Reeder, (Baltimore, MD: Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery in association with Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 1995): 63-73.

<sup>313</sup> Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place,” 152.

<sup>314</sup> Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place,” 163.

<sup>315</sup> Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place,” 163.

element of Isis. Because of Cleopatra's status in the Ptolemaic dynasty, as the next ruler of Egypt, the Tazza might be conceived as a gift for Cleopatra to protect her in her new role as queen. As discussed in my third chapter, Cleopatra considered herself the reincarnated version of Isis and acted as such throughout her life. Placing Isis as the central figure in the tondo could explain the Tazza as a gift to a future divinity, to a young girl who would transform into this powerful goddess, Isis. Because no ancient sources or evidence exists on the Tazza, we may never know if Cleopatra owned this magnificent artifact. However, recent archaeological finds of Egyptian mummies and discoveries of ancient texts, found in the papyrus wrappings of these bodies, provide us with hope of one day answering this and many more questions about the Tazza.<sup>316</sup>

In Alexandria, during the Ptolemaic era, ancient Greek scribes copied original texts of treaties, inventories, plays, poetry, histories, etc. onto papyrus scrolls for extra copies to store in the great Alexandrian library. When the scribe misspelled a word or incorrectly copied the text in any way, the entire papyrus roll had to be discarded and the scribe would start over anew. These rejected papyrus scrolls were recycled and used as casings for the mummification process of non-elite citizens. Today, archaeologists have been able to uncover texts once thought lost for eternity, such as the Milan Papyrus containing Posidippus' *Lithika*. These discoveries allow scholars to reassess previous

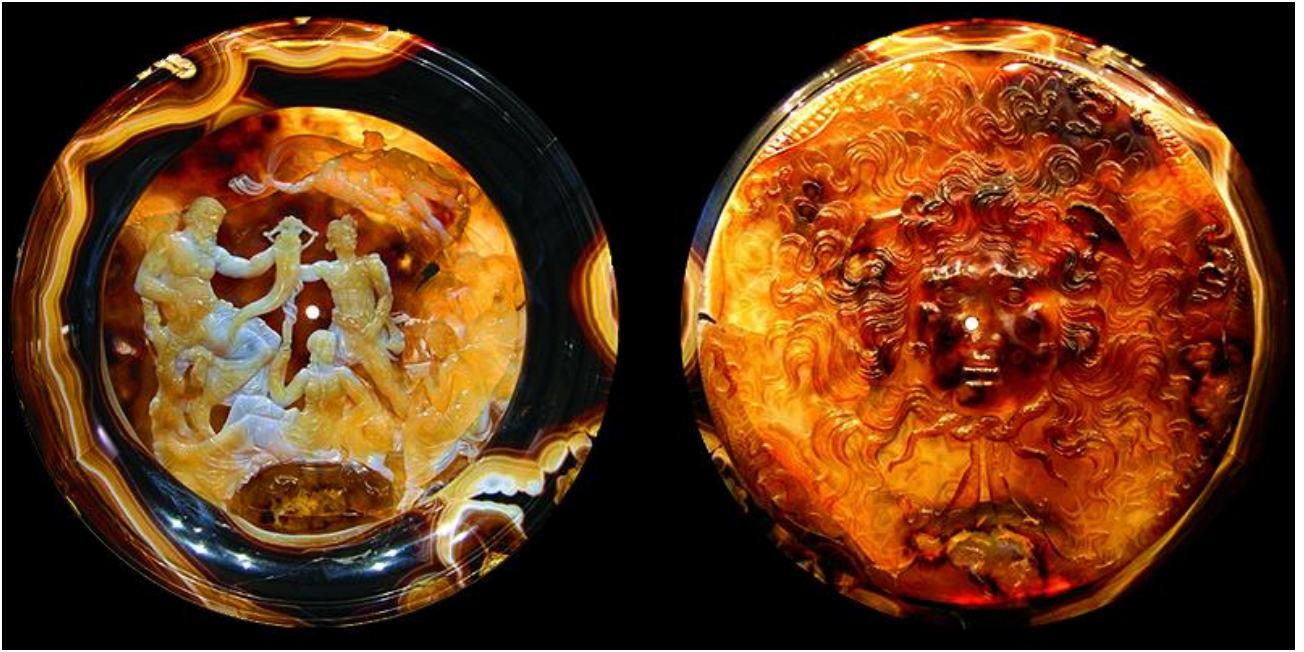
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<sup>316</sup> Joan Breton Connelly, *The Parthenon Enigma*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014): 126-148. Connelly's Chapter Four commences with the process of finding ancient literature on scrap pieces of papyrus, used for mummification of non-elite citizens in ancient Egypt. Connelly, herself, was able to find the central elements to her argument in *The Parthenon Enigma* through the play *Erechtheus* by Euripides, which was found with one of these mummies.

findings and create new research once thought impossible. Perhaps in the near future, one of these unassuming mummies is wrapped in papyrus containing a wedding list or inventory of Cleopatra that lists the Tazza Farnese, therefore confirming a date, style, patron, and owner of this enigmatic artifact.

With the supporting evidence of ancient sources, we possess some of the intelligence held by the ancients to notice the subtle references, which now seem so glaringly obvious, to menstruation, to fertility, to family, and to rejuvenation found within the engraved figures. Through the examination of the material, shape, function, and iconography of the Gorgoneion and interior figures of the Tazza, we may now perceive what has been carefully hidden within this mysterious work. With this thesis, I hope I have shown that the Tazza is not what it seems, and that its first appearance has deceived many, as Plato suggests with all things in life.





**Figure 1**

Tazza Farnese (front and back), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: [www.renbronze.com](http://www.renbronze.com) & Google Images.



**Figure 2**

Tazza Farnese (exterior), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: Kenneth D. S. Lapatin, and J. Paul Getty Museum, *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome*, 153.



**Figure 3**

Tazza Farnese (interior), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: Carlo Gasparri, *Le gemme Farnese: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli*, 11.



**Figure 4**

Tazza Farnese, Gorgoneion, engraving from the Bourbon Museum. Image credit: Carlo Gasparri, *Le gemme Farnese: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli*, 82.



**Figure 5**

Drawing of the interior of the Tazza Farnese (after A. Furtwängler. *Die antiken Gemmen* II [Berlin, 1900], with letters assigned to figures by J. Pollini. Image Credit: Reproduced in F. S. K, “The Tazza Farnese Reconsidered”, 249.





**Figure 6**

Tazza Farnese (interior), detail of Nilus, Image credit: Carlo Gasparri, *Le gemme Farnese: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli*, 76.



**Figure 7**

Tazza Farnese, black and white detail of Nilus, Image credit: Eugenio La Rocca, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, TAV. III.



**Figure 8**

Tazza Farnese (interior), detail of Isis on top of Osiris (sphinx), Image credit: Carlo Gasparri, *Le gemme Farnese: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli*, 74.





**Figure 9**

Tazza Farnese, black and white detail of Isis, Image credit: Eugenio La Rocca, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, TAV. VI.



**Figure 10**

Tazza Farnese (interior), detail of Horus, Image credit: Carlo Gasparri, *Le gemme Farnese: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli*, 77.



**Figure 11**

Tazza Farnese, black and white detail of Horus, Image credit: Eugenio La Rocca, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, TAV. V.



**Figure 12**

Tazza Farnese (interior), detail of Horai, Image credit: Carlo Gasparri, *Le gemme Farnese: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli*, 78.



**Figure 13**

Tazza Farnese, black and white detail of Horai, Image credit: Eugenio La Rocca, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, TAV. VIII.



**Figure 14**

Tazza Farnese (interior), detail of Etesian winds, Image credit: Carlo Gasparri, *Le gemme Farnese: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli*, 79.





**Figure 15**

Tazza Farnese, black and white detail of the Etesian Winds, Image credit: Eugenio La Rocca, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, TAV. IV.



**Figure 16**

Tazza Farnese, black and white detail of Osiris, Image credit: Eugenio La Rocca, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, TAV. VII.





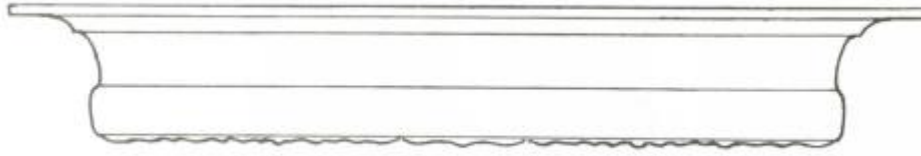
**Figure 17**

Tazza Farnese (right interior), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: Author's photo.



**Figure 18**

Tazza Farnese (left interior), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: Author's photo.



7. Napoli. Museo Nazionale. Tazza Farnese: profilo

**Figure 19**

Profile of the Tazza Farnese, Image credit: Eugenio La Rocca, *L'Età d'oro di Cleopatra: Indagine sulla Tazza Farnese*, 11.



**Figure 20**

Tazza Farnese (side profile/exterior), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: Author's photo.





**Figure 21**

Tazza Farnese (side profile), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: Author's photo.



**Figure 22**

Tazza Farnese (bottom side profile), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: Author's photo.



**Figure 23**

Tazza Farnese (bottom exterior), sardonyx, 20 cm. diameter, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli: No. 27611, 100-31 BCE. Image credit: Author's photo.



**Figure 24**

Tazza Farnese (interior) in a bronze serpentine stand from 1885, Image credit: Carlo Gasparri, *Le gemme Farnese: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli*, 108.





**Figure 25**

Phiale, silver, 3.16 X 14.6 diameter, 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
Image Credit: Brooklyn Museum, Detroit Institute of Arts, and Hypo-Kulturstiftung,  
*Cleopatra's Egypt: Age of the Ptolemies*, 225.



**Figure 26**

Rhyton in the form of a gazelle, banded agate with gold muzzle, H: 65 mm, L: 156 mm, diameter: 59 mm, c. 300-100 BCE. Image credit: Kenneth D. S. Lapatin, and J. Paul Getty Museum, *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome*, 149.



**Figure 27**

The Gemma Augustea, sardonyx, H: 187 mm, W: 223 mm, diameter: 3.5-14 mm, c. 12 BCE- 14 CE. Image credit: Kenneth D. S. Lapatin, and J. Paul Getty Museum, *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome*, 145.



**Figure 28**

Oval amethyst, with flat face, frontal head of bearded Dionysos with ivy wreath, 25 X 12, Private Collection. Image Credit: Dimitris Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, pl. 82, 665. 1, 5:1.



**Figure 29**

Oval cornelian with convex face and flat back, Galene, 16 X 13 X 5, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: no. 1892.1554. Image credit: Dimitris Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, pl. 67, 475. 4:1.



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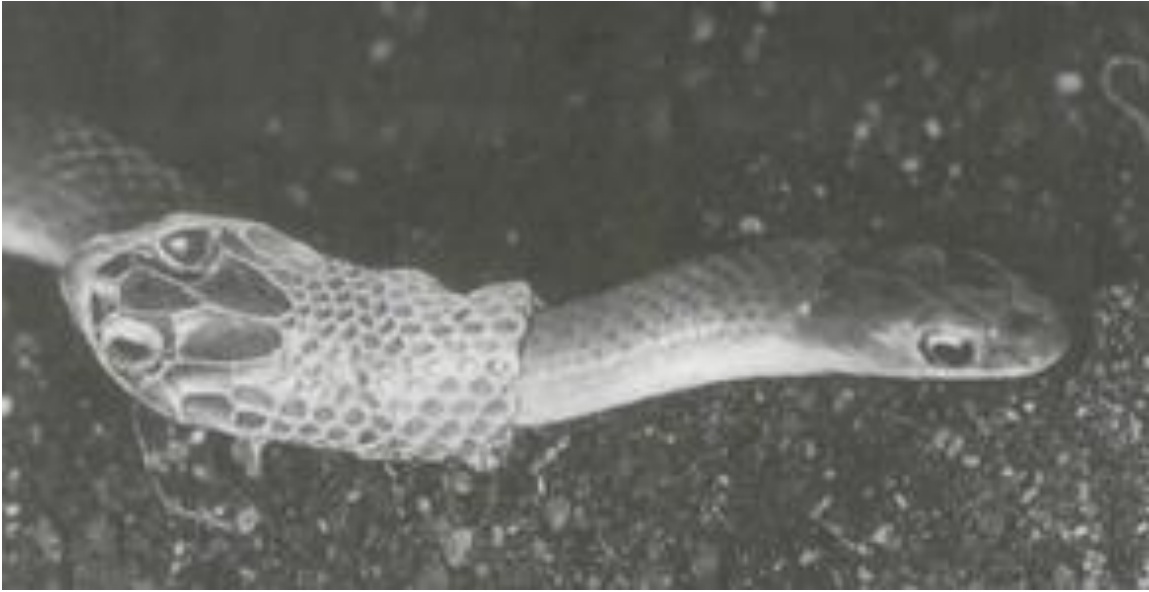
**Figure 30**

Oval amethyst with convex face, Aura on a *koitos*, 35 X 30, Hermitage, St Petersburg: no. 112. Image Credit: Dimitris Plantzos, *Hellenistic Engraved Gems*, pl. 78, 630. 3:1.



**Figure 31**

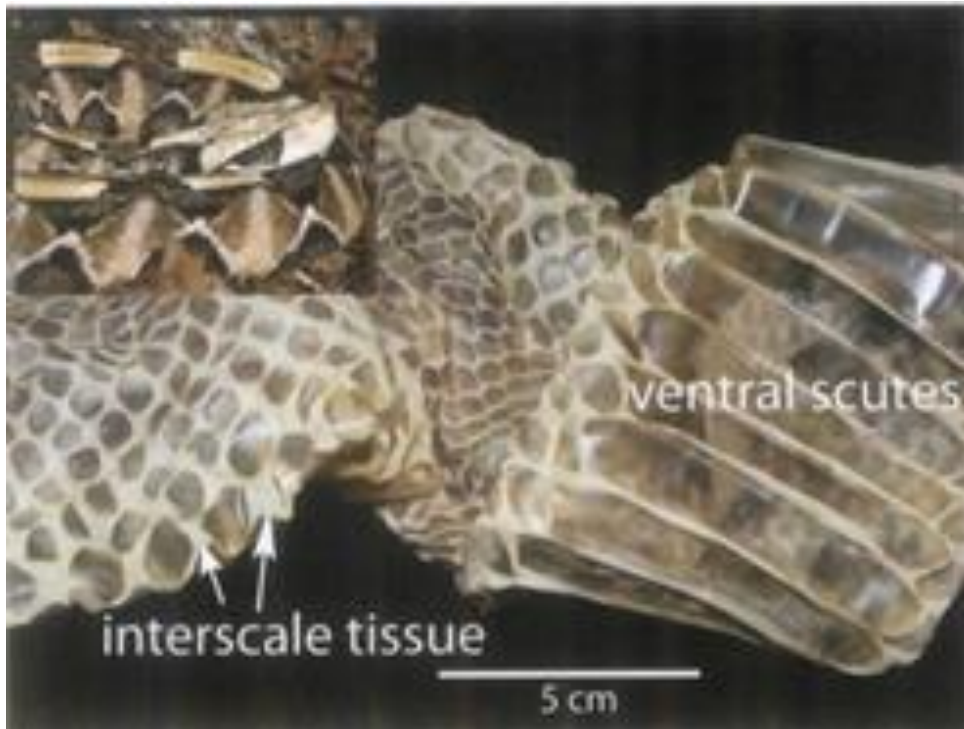
Facing head of Medusa with wings in her hair, snakes knotted beneath her chin, sardonyx, 29 mm. Image Credit: John Boardman, *Engraved Gems; the Ionides Collection*, pl. 98.



**Figure 32**

A snake in the process of ecdysis. Image credit: Carl H. Ernst and George R. Zug, *Snakes in Question: The Smithsonian Answer Book*, 31.





**Figure 33**

The interscale tissue and ventral scutes of a snake skin. Image credit: Harvey B. Lillywhite, *How Snakes Work: Structure, Function, and Behavior of the World's Snakes*, 7.



**Figure 34**

Heracles and Geryones, Image credit: George Henry Chase, *The Shield Devices of the Greeks in Art and Literature*.



**Figure 35**

Hephaestus polishing the armor of Achilles as Thetis looks on, two-handled amphora, ceramic, red-figure, H: 34.2 cm, the Dutuit Painter, 480 BCE, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: no. 13.188. Image Credit: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 36**

Kalyx Krater depicting Achilles battling Memnon, ceramic, the Tyszkiewicz Painter, 490-480 BCE, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: no. 97.368. Image credit: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 37**

Attic red-figure kalyx krater, detail of Athena wearing the aegis, from side A which depicts Achilles and Memnon in combat over Melanippos, flanked by Athena and Eos. Attributed to the Tyszkiewicz Painter, H: 0.425m, Diam: 0.513m, c. 480-480 BCE, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Image credit: DASE.





**Figure 38**

Shield with a head of Medusa, terracotta, gilded and painted, Tomb of the Erotes, Eretria, Greece, diameter 9.2 cm, 310-240 BCE, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: no. 97.325.

Image credit: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 39**

Gorgoneion, Silver medallion, 3<sup>rd</sup>-century BCE, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: no. 60. 1154. Image credit: *LIMC IV*, Gorgo, Gorgones, no. 135.



**Figure 40**

Gorgon appliqué, gold, H: 3.6 cm, W: 3.5cm, c. 336-316 BCE. Image credit: Kenneth D. S. Lapatin, and J. Paul Getty Museum, *Luxus: The Sumptuous Arts of Greece and Rome*, 71.





**Figure 41**

Medusa Rondanini, marble, Late Hellenistic / Early Augustan copy, Glyptothek Munich, Germany, Image credit: Matthias Kabel/ Google Images.



**Figure 42**

Gorgoneion from the interior of an Attic Kylix, ceramic, black-figure, H: 12.3 cm, 510-500 BCE, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: no. 01.8057. Image credit: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Figure 43**

Gorgon (west pediment), Temple of Artemis at Corfu, limestone, c. 580 BCE, Archeological Museum, Corfu. Image Credit: DASE.



**Figure 44**

Perseus and Medusa, Temple C, Selinus (Selinunte), c. 560-550 BCE, Image Credit: DASE.



**Figure 45**

Illustration from a ninth-century codex of Mustio, *Gynaecia*, derived from Soranos' *Catechism for Midwives*, Bibl. royale Brux. Lat. 3701-15, fol. 16v. Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman." in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, 338.





**Figure 46**

Section from the "Book of the Dead" of Nany, Osiris and Isis, ca. 1040-945 B.C.E. Image credit: Artstor.



**Figure 47**

Egyptian wall painting of Isis, Abydos Temple, New Kingdom. Image Credit: DASE.



**Figure 48**

Egyptian statuette of Isis Nursing Horus, 2nd half 1st c. BCE. Image credit: Artstor.





**Figure 49**

Egyptian statue of Isis, basalt, image credit: *LIMC V*, Isis, no. 7.



**Figure 50**

Statue of Isis, white marble, 2<sup>nd</sup>-century BCE, Greco-Roman Museum, Alexandria: no. 11311. Image credit: *LIMC* V, Isis, no. 22.



**Figure 51**

Statue of Isis nursing Horus, limestone, 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, Staatliche Museum, Berlin.  
Image credit: *LIMC* V, Isis, no. 231.



**Figure 52**

Statue of Isis, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Naples: no. 5313. Image credit: *LIMC* V, Isis, no. 305e.



**Figure 53**

Painted limestone funerary stele with a woman in childbirth, late 4<sup>th</sup>-early 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE, limestone and paint, H: 29 in Other: 4 3/8 in., Image Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 04.17.1.



**Figure 54**

Young woman and naked baby, Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, Image Credit: Barbara Hughes Fowler, *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*, 95.



**Figure 55**

Kleopatra VII, Silver tetradrachm, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Phoenicia, c. 34 BCE, Image Credit: Jane Rowlandson and Roger S. Bagnall, eds. *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt: A Sourcebook*. 39.

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