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FEMALE POWER THAT PROTECTS: EXAMPLES OF THE APOTROPAIC AND DECORATIVE FUNCTIONS OF THE MEDUSA IN ROMAN VISUAL CULTURE FROM THE TERRITORY OF THE CENTRAL BALKANS

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Abstract – The motif of Medusa had significant importance in Roman visual culture, reflecting the comprehension of ancient people about this frightful being. Visual material from the territory of the Central Balkans suggests a widely known understanding and belief of the protective as well as apotropaic functions of Medusa. The motif of Medusa i.e. the Gorgoneion, was one of the well known and most represented motifs in architecture, funerary art and *artimino* and a widely appreciated decoration of jewellery, signifying the importance of Medusa's protection for people, especially for women.

Key words – Medusa, Gorgon, protection, Roman, visual culture, art, Central Balkans, women.

The subject of this paper, whose popularity was maintained through antiquity and even in Christian times, is Medusa i.e. Gorgon. This difference in her appellation possibly originates from the myth in which the god Poseidon be-kissed Gorgon, and she gained the epithet Medusa (Μέδουσα – protectress or guardian), as a shortened, female form of one of Poseidon's epithets – *Eurymedon*.¹ Her image in works of art went through changes and the myth itself was rationalised over the time. Among the three sisters (Gorgons), Medusa, Sthenno and Euryale, only Medusa was mortal.² This weakness brought her eternal fame, immortalised in architecture, works of art or objects of everyday use. According to the myth, with the help of the goddess Athena, and by avoiding Medusa's gaze that had the power to petrify, Perseus cut off Medusa's head and placed it on Athena's aegis. Thus, with this act and from Medusa's liaison with the god

Poseidon, Chrysaor (the man with the golden sword) and Pegasus (the divine winged horse) were born.³ Her deterrent depiction on the aegis of the goddess Athena had the purpose to scare and reject evil, as well as her enemies. Owing to its apotropaic character, this demonic being can be associated with prehistoric goddesses of nature. Thus Medusa's function is similar to goddesses such as the Mother of Gods, Rhea, Cybele, Demeter or the maternal Artemis.⁴ As an emblem of the sun-disk, she represented a procreative and fertilizing energy and

¹ Howe 1954, 209–221, 214.

² Hes. Theogony 277.

³ Hes. Theogony 278–281. About other sources, depictions and the origin of the myth of Perseus' fight with the Gorgons see: Phinney Jr. 1971, 445–463.

⁴ Frothingham 1911, 349–377.

The article results from the project: *IRS – Viminacium, roman city and military legion camp – research of material and non-material culture of inhabitants by using the modern technologies of remote detection, geophysics, GIS, digitalization and 3D visualization* (no. 47018), funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

became an embodiment of both the productive and destructive forces of the Sun and the atmosphere.⁵

Representations of Medusa with her sisters, Perseus and Pegasus as well as her individual images are well known in antique artistic tradition.⁶ Medusa's depiction underwent various transformations from the archaic to the late antique period and this could be interpreted as some kind of evolution of her image.⁷ Some of the first images of Medusa (from the 8th to the 4th century BC) reflect the demonic Gorgon image, a frightening being with a wide head, an accentuated chin, a big mouth and her tongue sticking out. With wings, snakes and short horns, Gorgoneion resembled an apotropaic mask. The origin of the Gorgoneion can be traced back to cult ceremonies and the usage of religious masks with an apotropaic function. These masks were used during some ritual dances, probably of a chthonic character, in which the person with the mask evoked the divine protection, with the belief that chthonic demons would frighten and repudiate ghosts or negative living persons present in their life.⁸ In such a manner Medusa is depicted on a unique bronze crater from a prince's grave discovered at the site of Trebenište near Ohrid (Republic of Macedonia), and dated to the end of the 6th century BC. The authentic archaic style of Medusa's representation demonstrates all the characteristics of this demonic and frightening creature.⁹

Within certain eschatological-philosophical movements, her role was interpreted in various ways. According to Orphism, Medusa was present at the entrance to Hades, and since Pythagoreanism teaching considers Hades to be located on the Moon, Medusa was considered to be associated with the Lunar cult. Her role was to encourage humans on their journey over the ocean up to the blessed island.¹⁰ According to Stoicism, Medusa was considered the personification of fear, the one that dazzles, while Perseus and the goddess Athena were considered the personifications of courage and wisdom, who conquer all fears.¹¹

In the myth of Perseus and Gorgon, Perseus used the decapitated head of Medusa against the reinless and wild people who caused evil to his mother and wife, as well as against the goatish escorts of Dionysus, the so-called Satyrs. That would indicate that Gorgon's stare was aimed at killing lustful, animal instincts in people, especially in men, restraining their masculinity, but that it did not affect women.¹² This could lead us to the conclusion that Medusa could be regarded as a feminine protectress, allowing stronger associations between her and the aforementioned goddesses with the same characteristics.

During Classical and especially Hellenistic times, with the rationalisation of the myth, Medusa's image began to be transformed and finally evolved into a representation of a beautiful woman, with discretely rendered snakes in her hair or just with implied short horns on top of her head.¹³ In architecture with a funerary character, Medusa had the seminal character of the one who observes, protects and intimidates possible destroyers of the graves, or, in combination with other motifs such as Cupids, birds, garlands, festoons or cornucopias of fruits, symbols of abundance, apotheosis and fertility, she can be considered an emblem of life i.e. the afterlife and victory over death.¹⁴ Gradually, Medusa's seminal role in profane architecture was lost and, thus, it could be said that she possessed a rather decorative function, known by more than her pretty female image only to rare artists and commissioners who were familiar with the meaning and significance of her role in mythology.¹⁵

The Medusa in Roman art and visual culture from the Central Balkans

During the Roman epoch, in architecture as well as in craft art, Medusa's face was rendered in the form of a beautiful female face with discreet snakes in her hair and wings on the top of her head. Regarding her aforementioned role, the most common use of this motif was in funerary art, namely on stelae and sarcophagi (Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). Usually, she was represented in the tympanum of stelae of an architectural type. She was depicted alone or accompanied by dolphins, genii, hippocampi or birds (doves). They represented psychopomps, guides for souls to the afterlife. Monuments decorated with such motifs were popular in Roman pro-

⁵ Frothingham 1911, 349.

⁶ The most popular Medusa representations from the Archaic period are known from the tympanum of the Artemis temple on Corfu (beginning of the 6th century BC), on the metope of the Selinunte temple (first half of the 6th century BC) and on the black-figure amphora from Eleusina (670 BC.).

⁷ More about the evolution of her image in: LIMC IV 1988, 319–330.

⁸ Croon 1955, 13.

⁹ Грбић 1958.

¹⁰ Morford, Lenardon 1999, 273.

¹¹ Fulg, *Myth.* I, 21.

¹² Howe 1954, 220–221; Јеремич 2009, 194–201.

¹³ LIMC IV 1988, 324, 330.

¹⁴ Frothingham 1915, 22.

¹⁵ Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, 47; LIMC IV 1988, 329; Jeremić 2017, 254–260.



Fig. 1. Part of the funerary stela with Medusa depictions, from Viminacium (National Museum, in Požarevac, photo: B. Milovanović)

Fig. 2. Sarcophagus with depiction of Medusa, from Proconesus (Viminacium site) (National Museum, in Požarevac, photo: B. Milovanović)

Fig. 3. Perseus with Medusa's head, detail of the stone sarcophagus from Viminacium, Pećine site (after: Пилиповић 2007, 172, с.л. 25)

Сл. 1. Део надгробне стеле са приказом Медузе из Виминацијума (Народни музеј у Пожаревицу, фото: Б. Миловановић)

Сл. 2. Проконески саркофаг са приказом Медузе из Виминацијума (Народни музеј у Пожаревицу, фото: Б. Миловановић)

Сл. 3. Персеј са главом Медузе, детаљ са каменој саркофага из Виминацијума, локалитет Пећине (према: Пилиповић 2007, 172, с.л. 25)

vines: Italy (Ravenna, Rome and Bologna), Noricum and Pannonia (Celeia, Poetovium, Bassianae, Mursa, Aquincum, Savia and Intercisa), during the 1st and 2nd century.¹⁶ The same motif can be found on monuments from Moesia Superior: Singidunum (Belgrade), Viminacium (Kostolac), Ratiaria (Archar) and Vicianum (Vučitrn), during the 2nd and 3rd century.¹⁷ In the territory of the Roman province of Dacia, the number of monuments with this motif is smaller, while in Macedonia none have been found.¹⁸ The well known role of Medusa is also typical for these monuments – the protection of the graves and souls of mortals in order to achieve an eternal dwelling. On the so called “Proconesus” sarcophagus from Viminacium, Medusa's head with wings and snakes beneath the chin is depicted above garlands held by genii (Fig. 2). The sarcophagus is embossed in marble, probably of Proconnesian origin, and in a style similar to workshops from the vicinity of Odessos.¹⁹ In funerary art, references to the myth of Perseus can be found as well, and Medusa's decapitated head is depicted in Perseus' raised hand, in the right niche of the longitudinal side of the sarcophagus from Viminacium, representing a part of a complex iconographical program (Fig. 3).²⁰

In a similar way, Medusa's head decorated the lid and coffin of the sarcophagus from Viminacium (Figs. 4 and 5).²¹ The origin of the sarcophagus can be associated with Syrian production in which Medusa masks on sarcophagi made of lead were produced under the influence of the Greek classical type of Medusa, made by famous by the Greek artist Myron, and subtle Hellenistic details.²²

Among the objects of craft art, the motif of Medusa usually decorates military equipment (armour and belts) and weapons (shield boss-umbo). When the goddess

¹⁶ Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, 46–47.

¹⁷ Kondić 1965, 182, 231, br. 35; Dautova Ruševljan 1983, 46–47; Mirković 1986, no 73, no 84, no 89, no 106, no 200; Спасић 1996, 219–226; Petrović 1995.

¹⁸ Florescu 1930, fig. 26, 28, 39; Dragojević-Josifovska 1982.

¹⁹ Борђевић 1989–1990, 133–134; 144–145, с.л. 14.

²⁰ More about this in: Пилиповић 2007, 88–92, кат. 11, с.л. 25.

²¹ Голубовић 2001, 135–158; 143, кат. бр. 12, с.л. 13.

²² Mouterde, 1929, 238–251, no. 2; no. 5; Bertin 1974, 43–82, no inv. AO 10227; no inv. AO 17268; no inv. MNE 358; no inv. AO 24445; Chéhab 1934, 338–350, no 22, 23; Chéhab 1935, 51–72, no 24, 25.



Fig. 4 and 5. Head end and longitudinal side of the lead sarcophagus with the depiction of railings and heads of Medusa, from Viminacium (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

Сл. 4 и 5. Чеона и подужна страна оловној саркофага са представом ограда и с главама Медузе из Виминацијума (документација Археолошкој институције)

Athena put Medusa's decapitated head on her armour, Medusa became not only the goddess' protectress, but probably the protectress of every highly positioned military officer who had the honour and possibility to wear this parade armour on special occasions in order to attract admiration and induce intimidation. Medusa's image decorated Agamemnon's shield as well, on which she is depicted always in a front facing position aiming to reinforce the effect of her eyes.²³ Her role of guardian and protectress was of great importance on this defensive armour, the gorgoneion was clearly meant as an apotropaism, a horror to avert horror.²⁴

On the funerary stele of Cornelius Rufus, discovered in Viminacium, in the upper niche, a Roman soldier is depicted in short armour – a *lorica* with *ptyrges*. Medusa's head is depicted on the armour and the belt. Cornelius Rufus was a *decurio augur*, i.e. an alderman who was in charge of the cult. The scene within the niche of the stele with the depiction of a soldier in parade uniform and a woman, who is sending him off, may refer to the mythological encounter of Menelaus and Helen in front of Troy's city walls.²⁵ Unfortunately, this type of parade armour is not archaeologically confirmed and our knowledge is based on relief representations from tropaia, such as those from Gardun and Pula.²⁶ Medusa's head rendered with tousled hair and snakes beneath the head, can be seen as the decoration of the parade armour depicted on a bust made of silver, which represents the emperor Hadrian in military equipment (Figs. 6, 6a). The miniature silver sculpture is a copy of Hadrian's marble busts that are kept in the Louvre, the Vatican and the National Museum in Rome.²⁷ This finding comes from a private collection, in which many artefacts from Serbia are assembled,

thus giving rise to the possibility that this miniature originates from Viminacium, the city that gained the status of municipium precisely during Hadrian's reign.²⁸ Except on armour, Medusa's head often decorated shield bosses, umbos, as is the case with a marble shield which has the frame decorated with vegetative motifs, while in the centre, in the location of the umbo, Medusa's head is depicted with a laurel wreath and stylised wings on her head (Fig. 7). The elliptical shield was probably part of a statue, primarily of goddesses such as Minerva or Roma, one of whose attributes was the shield. This finding originates from Sirmium and it was found on the floor of a building, probably of a sacral type, and is dated to the period between the 1st and 2nd century.²⁹ There are six more representations of Medusa from Sirmium. Two of them are associated with Minerva as well, on the armour of a goddess bust from the Imperial palace and on a terracotta from the site of Jupiter's sanctuary, other two are of funerary character, stelae of Matidia from the western necropolis and a sarcophagus from the site of Beljnjača (Šid), now kept in the Sava Šumanović Gallery, and two more represent stylised Medusa images on bronze

²³ Hopkins 1934, 341.

²⁴ Howe 1954, 212–213.

²⁵ Mirković 1986, 110–111, n. 73; Milovanović 2013, 163–166, sl. 1.

²⁶ Sanader, Tončinić 2010, 33–112; 107, kat. 113; Starac 2006, 111–112, kat. 71.

²⁷ Popović 2006, 10.

²⁸ Popović 2006, 10–11, Cat. 1; Mirković 1968, 59–60; Mirković 1986, 48.

²⁹ Popović 2012, 76–78.



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Fig. 6. Bust of Emperor Hadrian;
a) motif of Medusa, from the parade armour on the bust,
from the Petrović-Vesić Collection
(after: Popović 2006, 10–11, Cat. 1)

Сл. 6. Биста цара Хадријана;
а) мотив Медузе са парадног оклопа на бисти,
из колекције Петровић-Весић
(према: Поповић 2006, 10–11, Кат. 1)

shackles.³⁰ Although two fragmented frescoes, from site 21 in Sirmium, were considered to be representations of Medusa, a recent study suggests a different identification.³¹

On a partly preserved bronze handle from Vinča, which belonged to a coffin, the head of Medusa is held by a dolphin on the side, of which only the beak is preserved (Fig. 8). Medusa's face is moulded in bronze with thick strands of hair, while on the top of her head two wings are accentuated. Based on its stylistic manner, the representation is dated to the 3rd century.³²

On a circular bronze sheet from Roman Singidunum, with several openings intended for fastening and in the technique of embossing on a matrix, an image of Medusa is depicted, with large eyes and stylised curls. This object is from the layer dated to the 3rd century and probably had the function of decoration of a wooden coffin (Fig. 9).³³

In the territory of present day Serbia, the only mosaic depiction of Medusa's head, of the Hypnos-Somnus type, a medallion originating from the large triclinium of the villa with peristyle, in Mediana (Fig. 10).³⁴ Here, Medusa is represented as Gorgoneion, with a pretty and wistful face in the tradition of classical Roman mosaic art, thus achieving an ornamental as well as prophylactic character.³⁵ The apotropaic character of this motif can be perceived through the accompanying

elements of the emblem – a pigeon and fish depicted on an oval plate, indicating the combination of pagan and Christian elements, specific to a period of religious syncretism, typical of the 4th century, which is confirmed by numismatic findings dating this representation to the period between 340 and 350. If this kind of medallion was located on the floor of a triclinium which had only one passage, as is the case here, the head would be turned toward the participants of the feast in the triclinium.³⁶ A similar Gorgoneion is depicted on a

³⁰ About representations of Medusa from Sirmium in: Давидовић 2009, 92–100,

³¹ Cf. Поповић 2008, 25, 26; Rogić et al. 2017, 86–95.

³² Крунић 1997, 57–82, кат. 56.

³³ Крунић 1997, 189–229, кат. 368.

³⁴ Јеремић 2009, 148, сл. 6.

³⁵ The Gorgoneion from Mediana is part of a larger mosaic which, according to the reconstruction, could have had three medallions (only the Gorgoneion is preserved), the other two medallions may have been decorated with images of Medusa's two sisters or other scenes related to the myth of Perseus. The representation of Medusa with a round face in semi profile was developed between the 1st century BC and late 4th and 5th century AD, while the largest number of these depictions belong to the period from the 2nd to 3rd century AD. More about this representation in: Јеремић 2009, 194–201; Јеремић 2017, 251–260.

³⁶ Јеремић 2009, 194–201; Јеремић 2017, 259–260.



Fig. 7. Medusa's head as an umbo on a marble shield, Sirmium (after: Popović 2012, 77, fig. 8b)

Fig. 8. Bronze handle from Vinča with Medusa depiction (after: Крунић 1997, 57–82, каиш. 56)

Fig. 9. Depiction of Medusa on circular bronze sheet from Singidunum, canabae (after: Крунић 1997, 225, каиш. 368)

Сл. 7. Глава Медузе као умбо на мермерном штитишту, Сирмијум (према: Поповић 2012, 77, fig. 8b)

Сл. 8. Бронзана грика из Винче са представом Медузе (према: Крунић 1997, 57–82, каиш. 56)

Сл. 9. Представа Медузе на кружној ојлашти из Сингидунума, канабе (према: Крунић 1997, 225, каиш. 368)

fragmented mosaic from room K (possibly a triclinium) at the late antique domus in Skelani (*Municipium Malvesatium*), dated to the middle of the 4th century.³⁷

The Gorgoneion from Mediana, with the function of protecting the gateway, can be linked to twelve representations of Medusa's head on the preserved parapets of a bronze railing that most probably stood in the apse of the triclinium of the villa with peristyle at Mediana (Fig. 11).³⁸ The heads are depicted *en face*, with wide, polygonal faces, full lips, a wide nose, accentuated eyes and eyebrows, as well as hair made of snakes that surround the whole face, and with stylised wings represented above the forehead. The overall impression is that the artistic rendering of these heads contributed to the unpleasant and repellent look and, in combination with the lions' heads also depicted on the parapets, it could be supposed that both motifs had the role of protectors of this gateway, although it is not certain what the location of the railing was in the period between the second decade and middle of the 4th century, when it was placed in the apse of triclinium, the most sacred part of this sacral space.³⁹

The youngest object, which belongs to the early Byzantine period, is a relief Medusa's head which is depicted on a round object with serrated edges, made of cast bronze, which was discovered in a room next to the southern street of the Upper Town in Caričin Grad (Fig. 12).⁴⁰ The Medusa's head is of the classical shape, with grotesque features. The face is modelled plastically, the eyes are accentuated with round empty spaces,

while the hair is shaped with rich curls of snakes that are surrounding whole face. Regarding the character of this representation, two earlier assumptions were that Medusa's head, with her usual apotropaic function, was placed above the entrance in a *villa urbana*,⁴¹ or that this object could have been a part of a shield boss (umbo).⁴² Both assumptions are unlikely because of the smaller dimensions of the object. As the most recent study shows, this object probably represents the lid of a container, possibly of an inkwell, since objects of this kind could have been decorated with mythological scenes.⁴³ The decoration of the lid suggests the notion that in the early Byzantine visual culture pagan motifs were still openly used. In this case Medusa's image was probably used because of the decorative characteristics of her representation.

Its decorativeness made Medusa's image one of the favourite motifs in the decoration of fine arts, i.e. jewellery. On the other hand, the apotropaic power of Medusa, so important for Romans, generated some sort

³⁷ Гавриловић Витас, Поповић 2015, 197–220.

³⁸ Vasić 2003–2004, 79–109.

³⁹ Vasić 2003–2004, 90, 104–105; Popović 2006, 83–84.

⁴⁰ Петковић 1939, 148, сл. 8; Petković 1948, 47, Pl. X, 3; Кондић, Поповић 1977, 187, Т III, сл. 1; Guyon, Cardin 1984, 1, Fig. 6.

⁴¹ Petković 1948, 47, Pl. X, 3.

⁴² Петковић 1939, 148, сл. 8.

⁴³ Bavant, Ivanišević in print, Cat. 2033.



Fig. 10. Mosaic representation of Medusa from villa with peristyle, in Mediana (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

Fig. 11. Motif of Medusa as decoration of bronze railing from Mediana (after: Korać et al. 2009, 212)

Сл. 10. Мозаичка представљава Медузе из виле са перистилом са Медијане (документација Археолошког института)

Сл. 11. Мотив Медузе као декорација на бронзаној огради из Медијане (према: Korać et al. 2009, 212)

of personal cult, a belief in her protection, for those who used to wear jewellery adorned with this motif. Medusa was often represented on cameos for rings, earrings or medallions. However it could be said that when her image decorated jewellery, Medusa became a protectress, especially of women, since, according to the myth, her petrifying gaze did not affect women. The majority of these cameos kept in the National Museum of Belgrade and the National Museum of Požarevac, was discovered in the territory of Moesia Superior and it is supposed that they originate from a Viminacium workshop (Figs. 13, 14).⁴⁴ The schematism and simplified rendering of the cameos indicate a serial production and make the dating more difficult. Dating can only be done indirectly, based on the characteristics of the jewellery in which cameos were incorporated. Accordingly, most of these specimens are dated to the period between the end of the 2nd and first half of the 4th century.⁴⁵ From the stylistic manner of Medusa's carving, two groups are recognisable. The first is characterised by a higher relief, the details of her face and hair schematically rendered with the use of zigzag lines and parallel carvings, linearly ornamented snakes in the hair and wings on the head, suggesting the work of a local artist. The second group is charac-

terised by the desire of the artists to imitate Hellenistic models from the 2nd and 1st century BC. Here, the details of face and hair serve to create an impression of grace or melancholy in Medusa's image.⁴⁶ A cameo with a Medusa motif from a golden medallion (C-352) was discovered at the site of Pirivoj (Viminacium; Grave 134) in 2003 and, according to discovered coins of the Nicaea mint, is dated to the second half of the 3rd century (Fig. 15).⁴⁷ The cameo is made of bluish-white opal and Medusa's head is depicted in a higher relief. Her hair is rendered with linear carvings and the whole stylised manner of the image suggests that this cameo

⁴⁴ Поповић 1989, 12, кат. 17–29; Поповић 1991, 54, кат. 2–3; Поповић 1996, 58, 154; Поповић 1997, 35, сл. 3; 44, сл. 12; Spasić-Đurić 2003, 17.

⁴⁵ Поповић 1989, 12.

⁴⁶ Поповић, 1989, кат. 18–23 and 29; кат. 24–27.

⁴⁷ The cameo was found in the grave of an inhumed deceased woman (G-134) together with a large amount of other jewellery, such as necklaces, pendants, medallions, earrings, rings, etc. Except the medallion with the cameo, which was a pendant in the third row of a necklace, all other pieces of the jewellery were placed on the right side of the chest of the deceased person. Data taken from the documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade (project Viminacium).



Fig. 12. Relief depiction of Medusa from Caričin Grad (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

Fig. 13. Medallion with cameo decorated with Medusa motif, from the National Museum, Belgrade (after: Поповић 1997, 44, с.л. 12)

Сл. 12. Релјефна представа Медузе из Царичиног града (документација Археолошког института)

Сл. 13. Медалјон са камејом украшеном мотивом Медузе из Народног музеја у Београду (према: Поповић 1997, 44, с.л. 12)



Fig. 14. Medallion with cameo decorated with Medusa motif, from the site of Margum (after: D. Spasić-Đurić 2003, 17)

Fig. 15. Medallion with cameo decorated with Medusa's image, from Viminacium (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

Сл. 14. Медалјон са камејом украшеном ликом Медузе из Маргума (према: D. Spasić-Đurić 2003, 17)

Сл. 15. Медалјон са камејом украшеном Медузиним ликом из Виминацијума (документација Археолошког института)



Fig. 16. Earrings with cameos decorated with Medusa's image, from Viminacium (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

Fig. 17. Earrings with cameos decorated with Medusa's image, from Aquae (after: Јањић 2016, 67, кат. 8)

Сл. 16. Наушнице са камејама декорисаним ликовима Медузе из Виминацијума (документација Археолошког института)

Сл. 17. Наушнице са камејама декорисаним мошћивом Медузе из Аква (према: Јањић 2016, 67, кат. 8)

could belong to the first group, although an impression of melancholy can be seen on Medusa's face. A pair of earrings made of gold include cameos made of white opal (C-465) decorated with Medusa images, discovered at the site of Kod Koraba (Viminacium, Grave 76) in 2007 and dated to the first half of the 3rd century, based on discovered coins of Severus Alexander (Fig. 16).⁴⁸ Medusa's head is depicted *en face* and in high relief. Her facial features are accentuated with sharp carvings while the hair is depicted with crossed lines around the head. A pair of gold earrings, dated to the 3rd century, from the Aquae (Prahovo) necropolis, is decorated with cameos rendered in onyx, also bearing images of Medusa. Both faces are depicted with softened, feminine facial characteristics and with an impression of melancholy (Fig. 17).⁴⁹

Being a female protectress and affecting immoral behaviour, it is not surprising that the motif of Medusa was widely used as the decoration of jewellery, objects that were of special importance in lives of Roman women. It should not be overlooked that Medusa's head surrounded by snakes in her hair, was a widely accepted symbol of divine feminine wisdom.⁵⁰ Thus, the authors would consider the notion that, besides its usual amulet function, it could be supposed that respectable matrons gladly wore Medusa's image in order to repel unwanted public gaze and represent themselves as dignified and

as living their everyday life according to a set of high moral principles.

Fragment of the opaque brown glass with a tinge of white possess a Medusa's head *en face* with snakes that are flowing down the face and with their heads above the Medusa's forehead, depicted in relief. The background is fragmented and it is hard to distinguish whether there was some sort of appliqué that decorated the glass vessel or if it was phalera, part of some military decoration (Fig. 18).⁵¹ One should not neglect the possibility that it was a part of some jewellery, given that expensive precious stones were replaced with cheaper glass. Thus, it could be supposed that this fragment of relief rendered glass was a substitute for a cameo embedded into a medallion. Although it is unknown the real function of this glass object, as the site is unknown, based on the stylistic treatment and the material, the object could belong to the wider chronological

⁴⁸ The earrings were found on the right side of the skull within the inhumation grave of a deceased woman (G-76) with other pieces of jewellery such as a bronze ring and pearls made of jet and gilded paste. Data taken from the documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade (project Viminacium).

⁴⁹ Јањић 2016, 67, кат. 8.

⁵⁰ Walker 1983, 629, 1002.

⁵¹ Popović 2006, 95, Cat. 41.

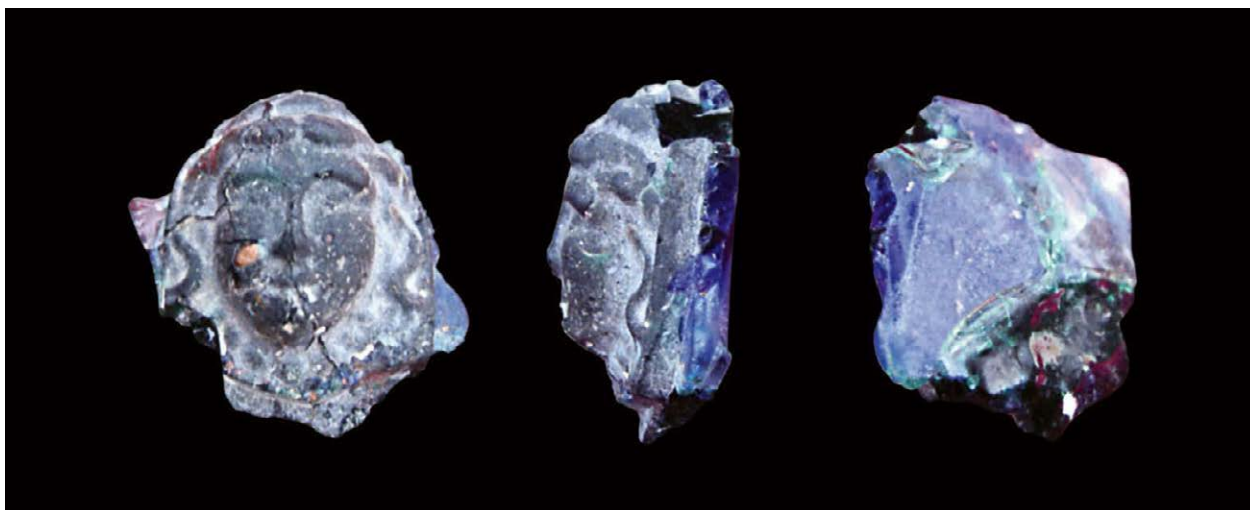


Fig. 18. Fragment of opaque brown glass – appliqué decorated with Medusa's head (After: Popović 2006, 95, Cat. 41)

Сл. 18. Фрагменти тамног, браон стакла украшеног Медузином главом (према: Поповић 2006, 95, Кат. 41)

framework from the end of the 1st to the end of the 3rd century.⁵²

The popularity of motifs such as Medusa suggests strong associations with the iconography of various artistic media or with the decoration of objects with a utilitarian character. Thus, the motif of Medusa often decorated oil lamps, which would suggest that Medusa's characteristics were an important part of cult practices, both in terrestrial and sepulchral spheres of life i.e. the afterlife, depending on the ritual function of the lamp itself.⁵³

Echoes of Medusa in Serbian folk tradition

The motif of Medusa continued to be present in the visual culture of later times, inspiring numerous artists since the Renaissance, it was important symbol in pop culture and design, as well as in various feminist movements. In the territory of the Central Balkans, her image is strongly associated with Christianity and reuse of her depiction from ancient spolia. In Serbian folk tradition two legends contribute to the fact that Medusa's image continues to be visually and symbolically present as the decoration of the walls of two orthodox monasteries – Rukumija and Nimnik (near the modern city of Požarevac which is located in the vicinity of ancient Viminacium).⁵⁴ Namely, during restoration works on the monastery, at the beginning of the 19th century (1825), two tympana of funerary steles with a depiction of Medusa were reused as spolia on the facades of the monasteries of Rukumija and Nimnik (Figs. 19 and

20).⁵⁵ In the Serbian old folk song named: “*Бої никоме дужан не остијаје* (God owes no one)”, which is recorded thanks to the work of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the tragic fate of a girl named Jelica is described in a story that tells that her brothers Pavle and Radul tied her to a horse's tail and, thus, she was pulled apart.⁵⁶ According to the legend, at the place where her arm (“*рука*” in Serbian) fell off, the monastery Rukumija was built. The depiction of Medusa's head between two pigeons within the tympanum and horsemen within the akroteria of a Roman stele made of marble, are not by accident included in the south-western wall of the monastery, just below the cornice. The head of this female face was accepted as a personification of the unfortunate Jelica,

⁵² The object is part of the private collection of Petrović-Vesić, which was collected during the 20th century and comprises various objects from several locations (Sremska Mitrovica, Požarevac, Niš, Paraćin or Zaječar). For the majority of objects the context of finding is not known, see in: Popović 2006.

⁵³ About the associations in iconography in: Кузмановић Нововић 2013, 72–73; cf. Крунић 2011, кат. 189; About the usage of oil lamps in rituals and the cult of death in: Црнобрња 2006, 101–108.

⁵⁴ Цуњак 1996; Обрадовић 2007.

⁵⁵ Миловановић 2009, 99–107. It is supposed that these tympana belonged to steles that originated from the Viminacium necropolises, where some identical specimens were discovered. The proximity of these monasteries and the ancient site of Viminacium confirm this fact, as well as plenty of building materials from the ancient times which were used for building or paving these monasteries.

⁵⁶ Караџић 1985, 20–23.



Fig. 19. Tympanum of Roman stelae as spolia in the Rukumija Monastery (photo. B. Milovanović)

Fig. 20. Tympanum of Roman stelae as spolia in the Nimnik Monastery (photo. B. Milovanović)

Сл. 19. Забаци римске сџеле као сџолија у манасџиру Рукумија (фоџо: Б. Миловановић)

Сл. 20. Забаци сџеле као сџолија из манасџира Нимник (фоџо: Б. Миловановић)

while the horsemen were comprehended as her brothers. Another fragmented tympanum of a Roman stela with Medusa's head is included in the lower part of the southern wall of the monastery of Nimnik. This monastery's name is associated with the legend of a girl who was tortured by Hajduks (Balkan bandits, brigands) in order to force her to reveal the secret of the location of the former monastery of St. Nicolas. As she was replying in, the Vlach language, that she knew nothing "IO NU SCIU NJIMIK", they killed her and, subsequently, the St. Nicolas monastery acquired the name of Nimnik.⁵⁷ The memory of the unfortunate girl was revived with the gentle and subtle face of Medusa. This being, of an apotropaic character, was accepted into the Christian world, owing to the folk tradition, as a triumph of justice, repentance and the punishment of a culprit, by aligning pagan and Christian religious ideas.

Conclusion

Based on what has been said, it can be concluded that Medusa's image, during the Roman and even later times, retained its primary character, apropos its apotropaic characteristics.

Medusa was a being of magical nature, whose origin dates back to prehistoric times, when she was worshiped as a goddess of nature and has since been connected with aspects of fertility and protection.⁵⁸ Thus, snakes, as ever present symbols of fertility, remain dominant in the visualisation of Medusa's image, sometimes realistically represented or just suggested with stylised curls of her hair.⁵⁹ In the myth and then as an emblem of her aegis, Medusa continued to be associated with the goddess Athena.

Represented in architectural mosaics and sepulchral monuments, as well as in *artiminori* and craft art of a military character, Medusa had the role to frighten and distract all enemies and evil-minded people. Although her image has experienced transformations from demonic to the nice and melancholic face during the antiquity, the presence of Medusa's motif in Christian times could be considered in various ways; the decorativeness of the representation, the popularity of the motif or, sometimes, even the continuous belief in her protection. Associations between ancient and Christian images can easily be recognised, as in the case of the use of many Gorgoneions in the depiction on the railing from the lead sarcophagus from Viminacium and the Gorgoneions represented on the railing from Mediana. Also the use of clearly Christian symbols within compositions with Medusa is known, not only in the mosaic from Mediana, but in other examples as well. Depictions of snake-like Gorgons are painted on the vault of the Mausoleum of Claudius Hermes (S. Sebastiano) and on the ceiling of the cubiculum of the Telus hypogeum in the Via Dino Compagni. Within these spaces, the motif of Medusa corresponds with figures of Pastor Bonus and Orans. In such a fluid context, which represents the evolutive process of pagan motifs, it is easy to recognise modifications of antique classical figures which result from contact with Christian images.⁶⁰ The reuse of Medusa's

⁵⁷ Обрадовић 2007, 293–294.

⁵⁸ Frothingham 1911, 349–377.

⁵⁹ About Medusa with snakes in: Jeremić 2017, 255.

⁶⁰ Fiocchi Nicolai et al. 2002, 103, 120, figs. 116, 117.

image in Christian monuments, as is the case in Serbian folk tradition, is also known, even in the Christian capital of Constantinople. Two massive stone blocks carved with colossal heads of Medusa were probably reused for the bases of two columns in the northwest corner of the Basilica Cistern, one of them upside down and the other on its side, most likely deliberately positioned so. Although their origin is unknown, the provenance of these intricately carved column pedestals could be associated with ruined monumental structures. The columns with the colossal heads of a pair of Gorgons could have come from a *nymphaeum*, a kind of monumental Roman fountain that existed in the city, including a *Nymphaeum Maius* that stood in the Forum of Theodosios.⁶¹ The reasons for such a reuse of ancient monuments within a Christian context can be traced in theological interpretations of the phenomena of using ancient spolia in early Byzantium, as a sign of the victory of the Church over paganism and the glorification of the new religion in the city, whose citizens would be reminded of the defeat of pagan ideology. Although pagan statues were powerful manifestations of ancient culture, they could be Christianised regarding their artistic values as well as their allegoric significance.⁶²

However, Medusa's face, as a lovely woman depicted on jewellery carried by women, had an additional feature, most of all associated with the protection of the gentle female being and often could be considered as signifying the guarding of chastity and rectitude of the respectable Roman matrons. Among the numerous graves discovered at the Viminacium necropolises, jewellery decorated with the image of Medusa is exclusively associated with female burials, i.e. it was found within

women's and girls' graves, while there is not one from younger children's graves. This could lead to the opinion that Medusa's image was not intended as child protection, unlike various objects of an apotropaic character, such as a phallus, shells, bells or pearls with an evil eye.⁶³ Thus, this special method of protection was important for Roman women, suggesting the relationship between the subject, the one who observes and the object, the one who is observed. This relationship was not only present in the everyday life of a woman, but was based on the myth of Perseus and Medusa. Every female image, whether it was an empress, an ordinary woman or a goddess, depended on the perception of the viewer. Thus, the viewer had active, dominant role, while the objects of the observation were passive. This kind of a relationship, in terms of a male gaze toward a female appearance, loses its masculine dominant sense in the case of Gorgon–Medusa, whose gaze could petrify them, thus reflecting a fear of the female generative power – *gynophobia*.⁶⁴ Since images and acts of female beautification could be considered as the paradigm of this access to the objectification of a woman as an object of male desire within the patriarchal Roman social structure, it is not surprising that matrons tried to refuse objectification and sought the protection of a powerful symbol, such as Medusa.⁶⁵ On the other hand, social norms regarding the look of respectable matron were strict and fashionable hair styles, made with hair pins, nets, veils or bands, suggest various ways of controlling their hair and curls, possibly with the aim of eliminating any resemblance with the frightful Medusa image.⁶⁶

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⁶¹ More about this in: Bogdanović 2008, 2/4.

⁶² Saradi 1997, 401–402.

⁶³ Milovanović 2017, 95–122.

⁶⁴ Irwin 2007, 13–23.

⁶⁵ Devereaux 1990, 337–347.

⁶⁶ Bartman 2001, 3.

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ЖЕНСКА МОЋ КОЈА ШТИТИ: ПРИМЕРИ АПОТРОПЕЈСКОГ И ДЕКОРАТИВНОГ КАРАКТЕРА МЕДУЗЕ У РИМСКОЈ ВИЗУЕЛНОЈ КУЛТУРИ НА ПРОСТОРУ ЦЕНТРАЛНОГ БАЛКАНА

Кључне речи. – Медуза, Горгона, заштита, римска визуелна култура, уметност, централни Балкан, жене.

Медуза или Горгона имала је током античког периода у римској визуелној уметности заштитнички, али и изразит декоративни карактер. Њено порекло треба тражити међу праисторијским богињама природе, те стога није неуобичајена њена блискост са богињама као што су Богиња Мајка, Реа, Кибела, Деметра или материнска Артемида. Медуза је од архајског до касноантичког периода доживела бројне трансформације које се могу третирати као јединствени примерак еволуције лика. Демонско биће широке главе са наглашеном брадом, великим устима и исплаженим језиком прераста током хеленистичког периода у жену изузетне лепоте са дискретно назначеним змијама у коси или са само нагавештеним роговима на глави.

У појединим есхатолошко-филозофским правцима различито је тумачена њена улога. Према орфичарима, Медуза се налазила на вратима пакла и третирана је у оквиру месечевог култа. Према питагорејцима имала је улогу да храбри људе на њиховом путу преко Океана до острва Блажених. За стоичаре, Медуза је била персонификација страха којег побеђује митски јунак Персеј.

Горгонин поглед имао је за циљ да убије похотљиве, животињске нагоне код људи, док је код мушкараца обуздавао њихову мушкост, али није имао ефекта на жене. Током римске епохе, у архитектонској и ситној, занатској уметности Медуза је искључиво представљана као лепа жена са дискретним змијама у коси и с крилима на глави. Најзаступљенија је на споменицима фунерарног карактера (стеле и

саркофази), на којима је задржала првобитни карактер „оне која посматра”, штити и застрашује све потенцијалне уништитеље гроба. Глава Медузе на мозаику из улаза у триклинијум виле са перистилом у Медијани има функцију заштите пролаза. Међу предметима ситне занатске уметности, Медуза углавном краси војничку опрему (оклоп) и оружје (умбо штита). У тим ситуацијама, лик Медузе имао је за циљ да штити војника од свих недаћа, а пре свега од погибије. Апотропејска моћ Медузе била је за Римљане толико значајна да је представа главе Медузе постала део некаквог личног култа, јер је ношена у оквиру накита, па је често била декорација камеја и гема на прстењу, наушницама и медаљонима. Лик љупке жене на накиту намењеном женама има једно додатно својство, које је пре свега везано за заштиту нежног женског бића, јер, као што се сазнаје из мита о Персеју, Медуза је застрашивала мушкарце, а никако жене, те се стога може третирати и као заштитница жена.

У народној традицији Срба забележене су две легенде захваљујући којима је лик Медузе наставио свој визуелни и симболички живот на зидовима православних манастира Рукумија и Нимник (код Пожаревца) – два забата надгробних стела са главом Медузе употребљена су као спотије на фасадама наведених манастира. Биће апотропејског карактера је тако, преко народне традиције, прихваћено у хришћанском свету као тријумф правде, покајања и кажњавања криваца, усаглашавајући паганско са хришћанским религиозним идејама.