

Apotropaia and Fecundity in Indo-European myth and iconography: Ferocious and Erotic Female Figures

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Abstract

This paper looks at the ferocious and erotic female figures from several Indo-European and contiguous cultures, texts and iconographies, including the Greek Gorgon, Medusa; the Irish Sheela na gigs and female figures in Old Irish text; the Indic goddess Kālī; Indic Lajjā Gaurīs found depicted in temples; Indic Ḍākinīs, often fierce and mostly erotic female figures whose roots lie deep in prehistory; the Sumerian Inanna and Ereshkigal; and some Southeast European Neolithic female figures.

In order to excavate the meanings of Medusa through time, we examine Greek and Latin texts, ranging in time from those of Homer, in the eighth century BCE, through those of the first centuries of this era. Iconographically, we look at different depictions which coalesce in the Classical-Age Medusa: the Neolithic goddess of birth, death, and regeneration, who is represented as bird, snake, or bird-snake hybrid; the Near Eastern demon whose severed head is, like that of Medusa, used in an apotropaic manner; and the Egyptian Bes. Medusa was both ferocious and erotic; she was beautiful enough to attract the sea- and earthquake god, Poseidon, with whom, according to Hesiod, she lay in a soft meadow in the midst of spring flowers. She was so ferocious that any person who gazed into her eyes would be turned to stone. An anomaly, she was both deadly and healing, and she was apotropaic and protective as well.

This paper gives several new cross-cultural reference points to a group of related female figures. In comparing written descriptions of these female figures, we will examine texts from the Sumerian “Descent of Inanna” and “Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi”; from the Old Irish tale, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel”; and the text describing the birth of Kālī from the Indic *Devīmāhātmyam*. The iconography of these female figures depicts a similar “crouching” or “bent-knee position.

Parallels to these terrifying, yet empowering, figures in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia are enigmatic Central Asian and East Asian representations of women exposing themselves, some of which go back to as early as the third millennium BCE. One particularly curious aspect of the motif of female sexual exposure is that it occurs both in East Asia and Europe in the context of war, either to frighten the enemy or to embolden one's own troops.