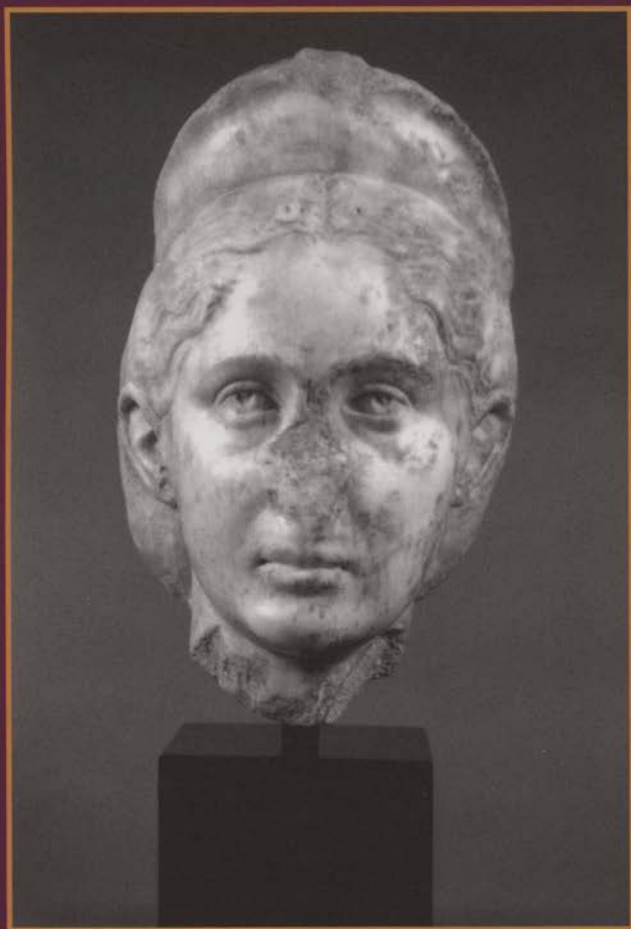


# MVSE

VOLUMES THIRTY-SIX, THIRTY-SEVEN & THIRTY-EIGHT

*2002 – 2004*



Annual of the  
Museum of Art and Archaeology

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA

## A UNIQUE GORGON BIRD IN MISSOURI

William R. Biers

Gorgons were some of the most well-known monsters in Greek myth; their gaze would turn anyone into stone. They often appear in art, and the myth of the hero Perseus slaying the Gorgon Medusa was frequently illustrated. The monsters probably had their origin in the Near East, from where the Greeks adopted them. The Greeks gave them a distinctive representation as they did with many designs and creatures imported from Near Eastern sources.<sup>1</sup> The Gorgon in Greek art is female and is usually depicted with her face frontal to the viewer, with an open grinning mouth displaying pointed teeth, and often with entwined snakes as her hair. The frontal face or mask, called a gorgoneion, shows up in many contexts, including on warriors' shields and even on the pediment of temples such as the sixth-century B.C.E. temple at Selinus in Sicily, and is generally seen as apotropaic, designed to ward off evil.<sup>2</sup>

Several representations of the Gorgon's frontal face are in the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri. Gorgons were popular with Attic artists, and one example from the collection is illustrated in Figure 1. The Gorgon's head is painted in the tondo of the interior floor of a black-figure cup of the end of the sixth century B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> Battle scenes with Herakles



Fig. 1. Gorgoneion in tondo of black-figure cup. Attic, end of sixth century B.C.E., pottery. Museum of Art and Archaeology, acc. no. 57.4.



Fig. 2a. Gorgon bird, front view. Middle Corinthian, 595/590–570 B.C.E., pottery. Museum of Art and Archaeology, acc. no. 87.106.

attached to the body while other details such as the feet are handmade and attached. Two suspension holes are pierced through on either side of the neck, and the body is covered with black dots. There are remains of black decoration on the back of the head, and there are also traces of black on the Gorgon's face: on the forehead fringe, the eyebrows, and the center of the eyes. The vase is in fact a container with a filling hole in the head and belongs to a group of so-called plastic vases that were produced in Corinth and elsewhere in antiquity.<sup>5</sup> One of the characteristics of Corinthian plastic vases is the way they were manufactured, often combining different parts to make different representations. This is the case here, where the wheel-made bird body can change the vase's identification from a bird with a bird's head, to a siren with a woman's head, or to something else, a bird with the head of a Gorgon as seen in this example.<sup>6</sup>

decorate the outside of the cup, appropriately probably since the Gorgon mask is often associated with warfare. Whether it is to be seen in this case as a device to ward off evil is something to consider, especially since the drinker would see it immediately upon emptying the cup.

Gorgons are often shown in earlier Corinthian art, and the museum has in its collection what appears to be a unique example of a Gorgon head on the body of a bird (Figs. 2a, 2b).<sup>4</sup> The wheel-made spherical body has a small, originally squared-off tail and two added strips of clay for the feet.

The head was made in a mold and



Fig. 2b. Gorgon bird, back view.



Fig. 3. "Gorgo-panther," front and back view. University of Sydney, Nicholson Museum NM 54.43. Photo courtesy of the Nicholson Museum.

While the placement of a gorgoneion on a bird's body in Corinthian plastic vases appears to be unique, a gorgoneion on an animal body is known. Figure 3 illustrates one of at least three preserved examples of what has been called a "gorgo-panther," in which the gorgoneion has been added to the body of a feline.<sup>7</sup> A comparison of the measurements of the Gorgon head with that of the Missouri "Gorgon bird" suggests that both heads came from the same mold and thus from the same workshop in Corinth that may have specialized in plastic vases. Another "Gorgo-panther" was on the Swiss market in 1967 (Fig. 4).<sup>8</sup> A third was on the New York market in 1987.<sup>9</sup> A gorgoneion from a Corinthian vase from Lindos is now in Istanbul (Fig. 5).<sup>10</sup> Again, the appearance of the head suggests that it came from the same mold as the Missouri example. Unfortunately, only the head of the vessel is preserved so we cannot know what sort of creature was represented.

These vases with Gorgon heads were containers. Such vases are generally believed to have contained perfumes or perfumed oils, and a research project at the



Fig. 4. "Gorgo-panther." After *Kunstwerke der Antike, Münzen und Medaillen A.G., Auktion 34* (Basel, 1967) pl. 26.



Fig. 5. Gorgoneion from a plastic vase. Istanbul Archaeological Museum, acc. no. 3195. Photo courtesy of the Museum and the General Directory, Ankara.

University of Missouri that analyzed trace substances from plastic vases came up with some interesting results from the Gorgon bird.<sup>11</sup> Traces of cedrol and cedrene were identified in the interior fabric of the vase. These are constituents of cedar oil, which is an insect repellent. Cedar wood is commonly used in modern times in chests to deter insects. One can speculate that the use of a Gorgon's head on a vase containing insect repellent might be an appropriate way to indicate the contents, the gorgoneion being seen as apotropaic in the sense that it is guarding against insects.<sup>12</sup>

It might be noted, also, that in the examples cited,

the gorgoneion is placed at a right angle to the body, directly confronting the viewer. Might it be possible, also, to suggest that at least in some cases a shopper in an ancient market place would be able to tell what was in a particular plastic vase by its shape? Transport amphoras containing wine show that form could indicate content. The shape of the amphoras varied, depending on their origin, so that the shopper in antiquity could identify the product of a given place by the shape of its container.<sup>13</sup> Whether this characteristic is shared by plastic vases is pure speculation, and only further research into their ancient contents might shed light on this suggestion.

## NOTES

1. For Gorgons in general, see *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 4, 1 (Zurich/Munich, 1988) pp. 285–362; *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition (Oxford, 1996) p. 643. For the Near Eastern connection, see W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass./London, 1992) especially pp. 82–87 and fig. 6 (p. 86) for Gorgons and illustrations of the Perseus myth.
2. For the pediment of Temple C at Selinus in Sicily, see A. W. Lawrence, *Greek Architecture* (revised by R. A. Tomlinson) 5th edition (New Haven/London, 1996) p. 84, fig. 116. For a full figure of a Gorgon on a temple on Corfu, *ibid.*, p. 78, fig. 103.
3. William R. Biers, Lisa V. Benson, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (Fascicule 1, USA Fascicule 36, Mainz, 2002) p. 25, no. 43 (acc. no. 57.4) pls. 23.5–6 and 24, fig. 8.2.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 12, no. 25 (acc. no. 87.106), pl. 12.1–2. J. Chamay and J.-L. Maier, *Céramiques corinthiennes, collection du docteur Jean Lauffenburger* (Geneva, 1984) pp. 144–145; *Catalogue Sotheby's*, London (July 13, 1987) p. 64, no. 180; *Muse* 22 (1988) p. 36, illus. H. 0.071 m; max. preserved L. 0.065 m; max. W. 0.043 m.
5. For a general treatment of plastic vases of the archaic period, see R. A. Higgins, *British Museum Catalogue of the Terracottas in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (London, 1959; reprinted 1975) pp. 1–54. A survey of Corinthian plastic vases is to be found in D. A. Amyx, *Corinthian Vase-Painting of the Archaic Period*, vol. 2 (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1988) pp. 512–533.
6. Monsters made by combining different parts are also seen in Corinthian painting. See Amyx's section entitled "Make-a-Monster (A Do-It-Yourself Kit)," *ibid.*, pp. 661–662. For illustrations of the various types of Corinthian plastic vases, see J. Ducat, "Les vases plastiques corinthiens," *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 87 (1963) pp. 431–458. For the Missouri example, see W. R. Biers, "Mass Production, Standardized Parts, and the Corinthian 'Plastic' Vase," *Hesperia* 63 (1994) pp. 510–511.
7. University of Sydney, Nicholson Museum NM 54.43, gift of Dr. Walter Hess. C. A. Lawler, *Treasures from the Nicholson Museum* (Davis Jones' Art Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 1979) p. 13, no. 64, L. 0.077 m. Thanks go to Senior Curator Michael Turner for permission to illustrate the "gorgo-panther" and for help and information.
8. *Kunstwerke der Antike, Münzen und Medaillen A.G, Auktion* 34 (Basel, 1967) p. 49, no. 104, pl. 26, H. 0.062 m; Th. Karagiorga, *Gorgie Kephale* (Athens, 1970) pp. 67, 86, 136, pl. 11 *gamma*.
9. *Ancient Art*, Ariadne Galleries Inc. (New York, 1987) no. 82, H. 0.06 m.
10. Istanbul Archaeological Museum 3195. Chr. Blinkenberg, *Lindos, Fouilles de l'Acropole, 1902–1914 1: Les petits objets* (Berlin, 1931) p. 475, no. 1939; G. Mendel, *Musées Impériaux Ottomans: Catalogue des figurines grecques de terre cuite* (Constantinople, 1908) p. 21, no. 231A, max. preserved H. 0.05 m. I thank Dr. Seniz Attik and Dr. Billur Tekkok for their assistance.

11. K. Gerhardt, S. Searles, W. Biers, "Corinthian Figure Vases: Non-Destructive Extraction and Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry," in W. Biers and P. McGovern, eds., *Organic Contents of Ancient Vessels: Materials Analysis and Archaeological Investigation* (Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology, Research Papers in Science and Archaeology 7, Philadelphia, 1990) p. 47, fig. 7; p. 48, fig. 9; W. Biers, K. Gerhardt, R. Braniff, *Lost Scents: Investigations of Corinthian "Plastic" Vases by Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry* (Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology, Research Papers in Science and Archaeology 11, Philadelphia, 1994) p. 47, no. 11, fig. 4.
12. Unfortunately cedrol and cedrene were also found in another shape, a hare, bringing up the possibility of reuse and refilling of these plastic vases. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 41–42, no. 5, fig. 2.
13. For the various shapes of transport amphoras from different areas as found in the Athenian Agora, see V. Grace, *Amphoras and the Ancient Wine Trade*, rev. ed. (Princeton, 1979). Also in general, I. K. Whitbread, *Greek Transport Amphorae: A Petrological and Archaeological Study* (British School at Athens, Fitch Laboratory Occasional Paper 4, 1995) especially pp. 34–37.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Erin Walcek Averett finished her Ph.D. at the University of Missouri in May 2007 (Dissertation: “Dedications in Clay: Terracotta Figurines in Early Iron Age Greece, ca. 1100–700 B.C.E.”). She was visiting instructor at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, in 2006–2007 and is currently adjunct instructor at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, as well as assistant director of the Athienou Archaeological Project (Athienou, Cyprus).

John Tristan Barnes is currently a Ph.D. student in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Missouri. His MA thesis focused on traveling Minoan fresco artists in the eastern Mediterranean during the Middle and Late Bronze Age.

William R. Biers is professor emeritus, University of Missouri. His most recent research has focused on trace content analysis of Greek perfume vases.

Irina Hans (see dedication on pages 5–6).

Benton Kidd is associate curator of ancient art in the Museum of Art and Archaeology. He is currently working on publication of the stucco from the excavations at Tel Anafa, Israel.

E. Marianne Stern, an independent scholar and practicing glass blower, is the author of numerous publications in the fields of classical archaeology and ancient glass. Her latest book, *Roman, Byzantine and Early Medieval Glass: Ernesto Wolf Collection*, appeared in 2001. Her volume (with Gladys D. Weinberg) on the glass vessels from the Athenian Agora is scheduled to appear in 2008.