Folia Humanistica et Socialia
ISSN 3004-1260

3. évf. 1. szám (2025), PPKE BTK
https://doi.org/10.69705/FHS.2025.3.1.3

From Humbaba to Medusa: A Historical and Iconographic Overview

Eliza Gujabidze
ELTE BTK Doctoral School of History, PhD student

Humbabától Meduszáig: Történeti és ikonográfiai áttekintés.
Absztrakt: Ez a tanulmány áttekintést nyújt a görög művészetre gyakorolt mezopotámiai hatásokról, különös tekintettel a *Gilgames-eposz*ból ismert Humbaba hatására a Gorgókra, elsősorban Meduszára. Konkrét leletek és történeti források, köztük vázák, maszkok, pecséthengerek és feliratok alapján a jelen munka azt vizsgálja, hogyan értelmezték és interpretálták a motívumokat és a szimbolikus ábrázolásokat a Mediterráneum keleti részén. Az elemzés kiemeli a narratív témák, a vizuális kompozíciók és a protektív szimbolika párhuzamait, utalva arra, hogy a görög adaptációk hipotetikusan inkább a keleti művészeti és mitológiai hagyományokból való szelektív átvételeket tükrözik, mint független találmányokat.

Abstract
This study provides an overview of Mesopotamian influences on Greek art, especially the influence of Humbaba imagery from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* on the Gorgons', particularly Medusa's. Based on specific examples of artefacts and historical sources, including vases, masks, cylinder seals and inscriptions, the present paper explores how motifs and symbolic representations were understood and interpreted across the Eastern Mediterranean. The analysis highlights parallels in narrative themes, visual compositions and protective symbolism, suggesting that Greek adaptations may hypothetically reflect selective borrowings from broader Eastern artistic and mythological traditions rather than independent invention.

1. Introduction

The primary aim of this paper[1] is to explore how the Mesopotamian figure of Humbaba might have influenced Greek conceptions and iconography of the Gorgons, particularly Medusa, through the transfer of cultural motifs across civilisations. These motifs likely spread via interconnected Mediterranean trade routes, migration and artistic exchange, facilitating the transmission of symbolic elements between cultures.

By examining the possible journey of Eastern iconography into Greek artistic traditions, this study highlights how motifs of protection and divine authority might have been reimagined to fit distinctly Greek forms. While the terrifying gaze of the Gorgon shares some similarities with Humbaba's apotropaic features, Greek representations appear to transform these elements to align with local contexts and meanings.

This paper does not aim to draw direct comparisons between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Perseus–Gorgon myth. Instead, it focuses on how cultural motifs develop as they cross cultures. This process suggests a broader principle of storytelling: while characters and details change as they spread, core narrative structures and symbolic motifs remain similar across different cultures.

[1] I am grateful to my supervisor, Ádám Vér for his guidance and to Bendegúz B. Balázs for the proofreading.

2. Early Interactions and Historical Context

The earliest references to Greeks as Ionians ("Yauneans")[2] appear in Akkadian cuneiform texts: Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and administrative records. These documents are primarily related to Assyrian kings, often recording battles and the political dynamics of city-states. Archaeological findings suggest that early interactions between Greeks and the Oriental world occurred much earlier (Dalley & Reyes, 1998, 94–103; Dezső & Vér, 2013). Still, those connections rapidly increased during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BCE), whose large-scale campaigns from 743 BCE significantly tightened links with the Mediterranean region.[3]

Tiglath-Pileser III annexed most of the Phoenician coastal regions, and this expansion may have made it easier for the Neo-Assyrian Empire to establish both direct and indirect trade connections with the Greek islands. Moreover, Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur,[4] Tiglath-Pileser III's governor in Ṣimirra (a Phoenician city located in what is now Syria), mentions Greek raids on Phoenician cities, describing them as acts of piracy, providing early textual evidence of such activities.[5]

Sargon II (721–705 BCE) mentions Ionians living in the middle of the Western Sea[6] and the attacks against them,[7] since they had previously inflicted considerable harm on the island of Tyre and the province of Que (Cilicia), which at that time were Assyrian allies. It seems that the Neo-Assyrian Empire had certain obligations towards these territories. As a result, in 715 BCE, Ionians found themselves at a disadvantage in a battle against the united forces of Assyrians and Phoenicians. Sargon II's strategic reforms and the coordinated efforts of the Assyrian–Phoenician forces rendered Ionian attacks less effective (Dezső & Vér, 2013, 335–336). It seems that, while some Greek groups engaged in acts of piracy, others maintained trade and cultural contact with the Phoenician ports under Assyrian control, indicating a complex dynamic of both conflict and exchange (Lanfranchi, 2000, 9–12).

Archaeological evidence from the Archaic period (8th–6th centuries BCE) reveals the presence of elite societies in Hellas, suggesting that these raids were fuelled by the need to collect valuable goods and resources to sustain and improve social status. The precondition of this period could be tracked during the Greek Dark Age (12th–11th centuries BCE) as Hellas faced an economic crisis marked by the breakdown of trade, agriculture and population (Kämmerer, 2011, 153–191). Perhaps, when Hellas began to recover, its elite communities gained power and wealth, which may have stemmed from

[2] On Yauna (Ionia) and the Yauneans (Ionians), see Radner & Vacek, 2022.

[3] For the text edition of the related cuneiform source, see Tadmor & Yamada, 2011, no. 35, ii 18–24.

[4] For more information on him, see Yamada, 2008; Rollinger, 2017; Na'aman, 2018.

[5] Yamada, 2008. For the text edition of the related cuneiform source, see Luukko, 2012, no. 25.

[6] For the text editions of the related cuneiform sources, see Luukko, 2012, no. 25; Frame, 2021, no. 1, 117b–120a; no. 8, 15–18; no. 9, 25; no. 13, 34; no. 43, 21; no. 76, 14.

[7] For the text edition of the related cuneiform source, see Frame, 2021, no. 2, 436b–441a.

such pirate-like behaviour. It should also be mentioned that the Greeks may have attacked coastal regions due to their alliance with Phrygia, which opposed Assyria (Lanfranchi, 2000, 19–22, especially 21). All this highlights that approaching the Oriental environment was not difficult for Greek societies, and such raids only provided them with more exotic goods.

Another source of cultural influence may have been Yadnana (modern Cyprus),[8] as the island underwent significant Phoenician colonisation (Barnett, 1956, 87–97; Bourgiannis, 2018). This influence grew stronger under Sargon II, as evidenced by a stele erected in his honour around 707 BCE in Cyprus (Radner, 2010, 432; Cannavò, 2015, 180). Sargon II's royal inscriptions[9] also mention seven kings of Cyprus who were obliged to bring gifts to the empire. Sennacherib's inscription on the Taylor Prism[10] mentions Lulî, king of Sidon, who fled from the Assyrian army to Cyprus, suggesting that Cyprus was politically more or less independent. The connection between Cyprus and the East continued during the reign of Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) as evidenced by his reference to Paphos and its king, who sent tributes to the Assyrian king.[11] These interactions emphasise the strong relations between Cyprus, Phoenicia and the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

Greek culture absorbed Eastern artistic motifs and elements (Richter, 1953, 28–45), which may have spread from Phoenicia to Cyprus, and from there to the broader Greek world, mostly during the Neo-Assyrian period when Assyrian influence over these regions was active and strong. The motifs often highlight specific thematic elements that are deeply rooted in the art history of Oriental culture, including heroic poses, contest scenes depicting human and/or animal figures—for example, heroes battling bulls. Other prominent motifs are sphinxes, griffins, demons, watering ceremonies, palm trees and palmettes, often alongside human figures shown in profile.

3. Humbaba and Medusa: Parallels and Symbolism

The Epic of Gilgamesh presents an interesting narrative about Gilgamesh's confrontation with Humbaba, also known as Huwawa, marking a pivotal moment in his heroic journey. Gilgamesh decides to face Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest, where Humbaba is portrayed as a supernatural being of immense power (George, 2003, 144), who is one of the more memorable characters in the epic, frightening others with his appearance and strength.

Medusa, on the other hand, is known from various Greek myths. Her most distinctive feature was her hair made of live snakes, which made her appearance so terrifying that anyone who looked at her turned to stone. Perseus's legendary triumph

[8] During the Late Bronze Age, Cyprus was known as Alašiya. For further discussion on the kingdoms of Cyprus, see Radner, 2025.

[9] For the text edition of the related cuneiform sources, see Frame, 2021, no. 1, 117b–120a; no. 8, 15–18.

[10] For the text edition of the related cuneiform source, see Grayson & Novotny, 2012, no. 22, ii 38–40.

[11] For the text edition of the related cuneiform sources, see Leichty, 2011, no. 1, v 66; no. 5, 54–73a.

over the Gorgon can be (and often is) compared to Humbaba's defeat by Gilgamesh, as both stories involve heroes facing and overcoming dangerous creatures.

The supernatural domains of Humbaba and Medusa are characterised by unpredictability and mystery. Both figures embody a danger that cannot be even faced—a narrative motif they share, and one that was widely adapted in iconography, which will be explored in more detail later.

3.1. Humbaba in Written Tradition

To trace the exact origins of Humbaba's iconography and identify the sources from which it was derived, we must first examine the textual sources. The Gilgamesh epic primarily focuses on Gilgamesh's journey and accomplishments, but also provides information about Humbaba, emphasising his role as the guardian of the Cedar Forest. Humbaba's primary role in the epic is to create a challenge for Gilgamesh through his mere presence. Although Gilgamesh is often compared to the gods and does not struggle in a physical sense when confronting Humbaba, his true challenge lies in the realisation that such immense evil and power could exist within the same world he inhabits, which the hero must overcome to demonstrate his strength and growth.

The epic does not go into detail about Humbaba's physical appearance, including his facial features, but describes him as follows: "(…) whose shout is the flood-weapon, whose utterance is Fire, and whose breath is Death (…)" (Dalley, 1989, 61 and 63).

3.2. Medusa in Written Tradition

The figure of Medusa, one of the most interesting characters in Greek mythology, changed considerably across ancient literary sources. The first occurrence of the Gorgon[12] is in Homer's *Iliad* (V. 738–742; VIII. 348–349; XI. 36–37)[13] and *Odyssey* (XI. 614–640).[14] In both cases, the focus is on her head and its terrifying appearance, symbolising terror and divine power. In the *Iliad*, Athena's aegis bears the Gorgon's face (V. 738–742), while Hector's glare is compared to that monstrous visage (VIII. 348–349), and it also appears on Agamemnon's shield (XI. 36–37). In the *Odyssey* (XI. 614–640), the creature is presented as an awful and terrifying being.

In Hesiod's *Theogony* (270–294),[15] the Gorgons are described as three sisters who live beyond Oceanus, near the edge of Nyx. Among them, only Medusa is mortal, which allows for her later encounter with Perseus and the myth of her slaying. Hesiod also recounts the moment of her death, after which Pegasus and Chrysaor sprang from her

[12] The name Γοργώ itself is derived from the Greek adjective γοργός, meaning 'grim, face or terror' (see West, 1990, 182).

[13] For the text edition, see Murray, 1924–1928, I, 248–249, 362–363, 482–483 respectively.

[14] For the text edition, see Murray, 1919, I, 444–447.

[15] For the text edition, see Evelyn-White, 1914.

blood, showing how her death also becomes an act of creation, as the author links destruction and creation to the same mythic moment.

A later source, Apollodorus's Bibliotheca (II. 4: 2–3)[16] gives more details on Perseus' adventure and the Gorgons. Besides their names (Stheno, Euryale and Medusa) and Medusa's mortality, it mentions that "the Gorgons had heads twined about with the scales of dragons, and great tusks like swine's, and brazen hands, and golden wings, by which they flew" (Frazer, 1921). In order for Perseus to defeat them, he receives divine equipment to assist him: Hermes's winged sandals, Athena's reflective shield and curved sword *(harpe)* as well as the *kibisis*, a magical bag in which he could carry Medusa's head that, even in death, retains its terrifying, deadly power.

The Roman poet Ovid, writing six centuries later, in Metamorphoses (IV. 770–803),[17] reshapes the myth into a more dramatic and emotional story (Lowe, 2024, 110). Ovid's Medusa was once a beautiful woman who, after being violated by Poseidon in Athena's temple, was cursed by the goddess. Her hair turns into serpents, and her gaze becomes fatal to anyone who meets it. Ovid's retelling introduces a profound sense of pathos, recasting Medusa as both a tragic victim and a formidable mythical figure.

The story of Medusa and the Gorgons underwent numerous modifications over time. These changes reflect how ancient Greek storytellers worked to fit the myth logically and coherently into their larger narratives, adapting it to different genres, audiences and cultural needs. Across these accounts, Medusa changes from a symbol of fear into an individual with a story and emotions.

3.3. Humbaba in Iconography

Besides the information given on Humbaba in the examined textual source, there is a large collection of his representations, including, for instance, depictions on cylinder seals and face masks. His iconography appears to have remained consistent and persistent, following a steady course for several centuries. This suggests the possibility that, beyond the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, other written sources may once have existed that provided a deeper insight into Humbaba's role and the meaning of his iconography—details not mentioned in the narrative itself but seemingly known to ancient society. Humbaba's appearance may also have been shaped by religious beliefs, local traditions and mythological contexts, presenting him as more than just a figure in opposition to Gilgamesh. However, the depictions from earlier periods do not present him as a powerful being; rather, they emphasise his vulnerability and helplessness.

The earliest attempts to establish Humbaba's imagery may have originated in southern Mesopotamia, likely around the late 3rd millennium BCE (Graff, 2012, 23–24). Regarding Humbaba images, two groups can be distinguished: narrative and iconic (Graff, 2012, 16–21). Narrative images appear in combat scenes, in which Humbaba is

[16] For the text edition, see Frazer, 1921.

[17] For the text edition, see Innes, 1955, 115.

depicted in full-body form.[18] In such scenes, he is often shown kneeling, captive and helpless. Humbaba's body is usually represented either naked or wearing a skirt, often with a stylised beard. Earlier delineations show him in profile, while Neo-Assyrian cylinder seals present him with a frontal gaze.

On the other hand, iconic images representing Humbaba's head and face and are also well established in artistic traditions. He is typically depicted with a wrinkled face and eyes wide-open.[19] These features remain consistent even in highly stylised versions.[20] In abstract or artistic depictions, key characteristics persist, maintaining his distinctive appearance. However, cylinder seals from the Old Babylonian period depict Humbaba's head without wrinkles.[21]

3.4. Medusa in Iconography

The development of the Gorgon in Greek art has been examined by several scholars, tracing her transformation from a monstrous apotropaic figure to a more humanised one. The earliest Proto-Corinthian (720–625 BCE) and transitional (625–610 BCE) depictions share a number of characteristic features: an exaggerated mouth, spiral-shaped locks of hair and a disproportionately large head in relation to the body, all intended to create a striking and appropriate effect. The early Corinthian (610–580 BCE) examples are similar, with the only difference lying in the rendering of the locks (Payne, 1931, 81–84).

Regarding body position, a specific type of representation should be mentioned: the "Running Gorgon", with two versions. One is characterised by a pronounced sense of movement and often portrayed with wings and a dynamically positioned body. In the early examples of this "Running Gorgon" (Payne, 1931, 80, 82 and 84, figs. 23e and 24c), Medusa's head is enormous and attached directly to the shoulders, without a visible neck. Over time, the form becomes increasingly humanised (Payne 1931, 84, 86–87, fig. 27d–e; pl. 43, 2, no. 1414). The other version is similar to the previous one in connection with Medusa's posture, but it resembles kneeling more closely, since the depicted scene is usually that of Perseus killing the Gorgon.

Concerning the Gorgon's development in Greek art, three main stylistic phases can be outlined: the "archaic type", "middle type" and "beautiful type". The "archaic type" is characterised by a grotesque face with tusks, a protruding tongue and serpents. In the "middle type", the features become softer, less grotesque and more natural, while in the "beautiful type", the Gorgon's face appears almost entirely human as seen in later Greek

[18] For an early example on an Akkadian cylinder seal, see, for instance, Ornan, 2010, 416, fig. 12.

[19] For iconic Humbaba images, see Woolley & Mallowan, 1976a, 81–87, 180, no. 197 and pl. 86 (BM 127443); Graff, 2012, 114, no. 143 (BM 128821).

[20] For an example, see Douglas van Buren, 1930, 219–220, no. 1070, fig. 271.

[21] For Humbaba's head on Old Babylonian cylinder seals, see Collon 1986, nos. 288 (BM 89327), 389 (BM 113881), 390 (BM 129529), 451 (BM 134773).

and Roman art. This transformation could be interpreted as evidence of a genuine stylistic and conceptual development in Greek art (West, 1990, 183–185) Although Medusa's mythological narrative lacks a direct Oriental presence, its visual representation may have been influenced by Eastern artistic models (West, 1997, 454).

Overall, it is worth noting that the Gorgon's character appears to develop over time; however, her core iconographical features remain largely unchanged, most notably her eyes, which seem to be the most important and distinctive element of the figure. In artworks, the eyes remain consistent, as if ancient artists would not dare alter them; other features, such as the shape of the face, the size of the head and the hairstyle, could vary.

As mentioned earlier, Medusa originally had her own narrative context. From the beginning, she mainly served to frighten enemies; over time, her role in Greek mythology evolved: it became more complex and informative, moving beyond a purely fearsome figure to one with a richer narrative presence.

During the Archaic period (circa 800–480 BCE), Gorgon depictions were used in a variety of protective or apotropaic settings, including on pediment bases, homes, ships, coins and other artefacts. These gorgoneia are often notably round in shape, which may indicate that they were inspired by shield designs (Ogden, 2008, 36).

3.5. A Comparison of Humbaba and Medusa

A closer examination reveals that both Humbaba and the Gorgon were represented in two distinct forms: either as full-body figures or solely as heads. In the case of Medusa, the image was likely influenced by both the facial features and full-body depictions of Humbaba. It has been suggested that Greek artists adopted and transformed the image of Humbaba—particularly as it appeared in Neo-Assyrian depictions—which played a significant role in shaping Greek artistic conventions and inspiring the full-body representations of the Gorgon (Graff, 2012, 16).

Neo-Assyrian depictions of Humbaba correspond with earlier artworks from Mesopotamian regions, illustrating a recurring theme of a powerful figure being overtaken by heroes. Cylinder seals depicting Humbaba's death (Collon, 2001, 173–174, figs. 338 and 339) capture the moment of his defeat, emphasising his vulnerability. Humbaba is portrayed kneeling, with Enkidu stepping on his knee and Gilgamesh on his body—both gestures reinforcing his submission. This visual motif of the defeated figure physically restrained by the heroes, also appears, for example, on an olpe vase depicting Perseus killing Medusa (Bothmer, 1985, 150–152, no. 31). In this scene, Medusa, like Humbaba, is shown kneeling and trapped, symbolising vulnerability. This shared visual motif of submission underscores the defeated state attributed to both figures.

Both Greek and Eastern depictions use similar visual elements to highlight the helplessness of powerful figures when overcome by heroes, revealing a shared iconographical theme between Humbaba and Medusa. Although Greek artists began to

incorporate Oriental motifs in their work, they were unable to fully adapt them. Additionally, the context in which the Gorgon is represented lacks the narrative elements of the ancient literature that typically define such depictions. For instance, regarding the "Running Gorgon" style, Medusa is often depicted in motion with dynamic gestures, twisted postures and extended limbs, conveying terror, tension and the intensity of pursuit. If the kneeling scene of Medusa ultimately derives from Oriental prototypes, there is little reason to assume the Greeks would have altered it. The posture of kneeling or collapsing was already a universally intelligible visual sign of defeat and submission, effectively expressing weakness and loss of power across cultures. Rather than rejecting this borrowed motif, Greek artists absorbed and reinterpreted it, adapting the static, hierarchical compositions of the East into their own aesthetic of movement and drama.

By preserving the essential gesture but infusing it with fluidity and energy, they naturalised a foreign image within a distinctly Greek visual language. By comparing Humbaba's iconography with the "Running Gorgon" style, we can see how ancient artists across cultures used visual strategies—kneeling, twisting or running postures to convey defeat, struggle and heroism, extending the narrative beyond textual sources and creating powerful visual storytelling.

This "Running Gorgon" motif is also found on a Cypriot cylinder seal (Graff, 2012, 206, fig. 5.1) and the western pediment of the Temple of Artemis at Corfu (Hopkins, 1934, 346). The demon on the former has long, ray-like hair and bird-like legs—it can represent either Gilgamesh and Humbaba or Perseus and Medusa, but the Corfu piece definitely depicts the latter pair.

The representation of the Gorgon in Greek art gradually adopted elements from the East, as these motifs slowly spread from East to West. This influence likely led to the creation of several different versions of the Gorgon's body. Raaflaub (2017, 17–37) explains that when an external cultural influence enters a new society, it adapts to fit its context, often transforming significantly from its original form. For example, on the Eleusis Amphora, Medusa is depicted with an emphasis on feminine features rather than a monstrous form. In contrast, a relief pithos shows the Gorgon as a centaur, while other depictions show her with wings and straight hair. These variations highlight how the Gorgon's image developed as Eastern motifs were incorporated into Greek art over time.

Besides these full-body depictions, Greek artists widely focused on the Gorgon's head, which developed its own distinct iconography. As Hopkins (1934, 341–358) suggested, the design of Medusa's head—particularly its snake motifs—genuinely originates with Greek artists and is interpreted as representing sea creatures, waves and other marine symbols. One key distinction between the Gorgon and Humbaba lies in their facial features. Medusa's image often includes additional elements such as a

protruding tongue and a distinct row of teeth and hair, which are absent in the portrayal of Humbaba.

4. The Spread of Humbaba's Facial Iconography Overseas

Humbaba's face masks were widely present in the Oriental world, likely due to the popularity of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which existed in multiple versions and was spread across various cultures. Facial depictions with wrinkles, wide-open eyes and straight or curly hair appeared consistently in artistic production, with little variation. Objects depicting faces/heads with similar iconographical features can be found in different regions, especially outside Phoenician borders.

Significant examples of face masks were uncovered in the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta, excavated by British Museum archaeologists in the 20th century (Burr Carter, 1987). These terracotta masks, dating to the 7th–6th centuries BCE, were mould-made and life-sized. Guy Dickins (1929, 176–186) rendered masks from Orthia into seven types (A–G) and several subcategories. While a detailed discussion of each type is beyond our scope, some notable examples include masks depicting an elderly woman, warriors and Gorgons. These masks likely had symbolic meanings and may have served various functions: ritualistic, performative or protective.

The design of many of these masks reflects elements often associated with Humbaba's iconography, particularly the spiral wrinkles that cover the entire face, especially in grotesque types. Graff (2011, 177) studied similar face masks from across the Mediterranean, dating from the late 12th or early 11th centuries to the 5th or 4th centuries BCE. These include examples from Enkomi, the Phoenician cities of Amrit and Akhziv, Kauron, Cyprus and other Mediterranean regions. The purpose of such masks appears to be deeply rooted in symbolism, ritual practice or protective functions.

The widespread presence of face masks across different cultures suggests that they held significant meaning in specific contexts. Moscati (2001, 406–418) highlights the life-sized masks found at Gezer and Tell Qasile in Palestine, as well as those from the Artemis Orthia sanctuary in Sparta, and suggests that they may have been used for cultic purposes—possibly worn by priests or devotees during religious ceremonies. As Cullinan (1976, 21–24) points out, demonic imagery was well developed in Phoenician art, appearing in both masks and jewellery. These often featured wrinkled faces, broad noses, animal ears and horns, as can be seen in examples found at Amathus[22] and the west side of Phoenician sites in Carthage[23] and Tharros.[24]

Wrinkle-faced and grotesque motifs appear to originate in Mesopotamia, but as cultures increasingly interacted over time, tracing their exact development becomes complex. Masks from Phoenicia and the wider Mediterranean may not have been

[22] See Murrat et al., 1900, 112–113, no. 14 and fig. 164.
[23] See Graff, 2012, 208, fig. 5.5.
[24] See Graff, 2012, 211, fig. 5.11.

directly linked to Humbaba, yet the widespread presence of similar iconographical features suggests the possibility of shared cultural influences across these regions. It would be speculative to assume that such features developed independently in each location. Rather, it is more plausible that these areas were influenced by common Eastern or Oriental motifs, transmitted through trade, migration or other forms of cultural exchange. These interactions likely facilitated the diffusion of artistic styles and symbolic representations, particularly those depicting protective or supernatural beings. While certainty remains elusive, it could be suggested that the imagery of Humbaba's mask might have served as a model or inspiration for some of these later representations.

One notable exception is the set of face masks from Enkomi, which exhibit striking similarities to both Humbaba and Medusa imagery.[25] These facial or head representations closely resemble Humbaba's early iconography. As with the Gorgon, if we accept that Medusa was derived from Eastern motifs, her head or facial representations differ iconographically from Humbaba's, but symbolically convey a similar narrative—particularly in the context of protective imagery and mythological storytelling.

A useful comparative example is the depiction of Medusa on Ajax's shield on the Boulogne amphora,[26] tied to the narrative of his suicide.[27] The image of the Gorgon's head reflects a dual symbolism: while Medusa's death at the hands of Perseus signifies the defeat of terror, the same image appears on shields and protective items to symbolise strength and apotropaic power. This duality is not contradictory itself but demonstrates how Greek artists adapted ancient symbols of destruction into culturally specific representations. In doing so, they transformed Eastern motifs—such as the fearsome face of Humbaba—into distinctly Greek forms, such as the head of Medusa or the Gorgons, which developed into complex mythological symbols in their own right.

5. Conclusions

By analysing specific examples selected from a larger group, I have aimed to highlight the key details that connect Humbaba and Medusa. The transformation of Humbaba's image from early Mesopotamian depictions to later Greek interpretations reveal a clear influence of Eastern motifs on Greek mythology and art. Through trade and cultural exchange, these were adapted and integrated into Greek tradition, influencing the visual and symbolic representation of Medusa in Greek art. This connection suggests two possible phases of cultural interaction: the first may have been the earlier transmission

[25] See Graff 2012, 177, fig. 5.14 (Π11526 and Π1152 [Archaeological Museum, Heraklion]).

[26] Vase dated to the 6th century BCE (see Moore, 1980, pl. 53, fig. 13).

[27] A famous episode of the Trojan War is when Ajax commits suicide out of shame and despair after realising that, in his delusional rage, he has slaughtered animals instead of his enemies and chooses death to preserve his remaining honour.

of ideas during the initial phases of Phoenician–Cypriot and Phoenician–Greek contacts. The second involves a more direct influence during the Neo-Assyrian period, when cultural exchange among regions became more intensive.

The rise of Humbaba's character, driven by the popularity of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, likely contributed to the spread of the symbolic representation of his face in art, including face masks. Although the Gorgon's face masks may not share the same iconographical features as Humbaba's, they maintain a similar symbolic meaning: both are symbols of protection and fear. This connection highlights how the core ideas and motifs—rather than specific visual representations—spread across different cultures. The spread of these motifs, seen in the development of various demonic face masks in regions of the Mediterranean, reflects the influence of cultural transmission. As these motifs developed, they took on new forms, maybe even new ideas and purposes. In the case of both Humbaba and the Gorgon, we see how motifs associated with their facial features continued to influence various artistic traditions, despite differences in their wider iconography.

Bibliography

Barnett, R. D. (1956). Phoenicia and the Ivory Trade. Archaeology, 9(2), 87–97. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41663364

Bothmer, D. von (1985). The Amasis Painter and His World: Vase-Painting in Sixth-Century B.C. Athens. The J. Paul Getty Museum & Thames and Hudson.

Bourgiannis, G. (2018). The Phoenician Presence in the Aegean During the Early Iron Age: Trade, Settlement and Cultural Interaction. Rivista di Studi Fenici, 46, 43–88.

Burr Carter, J. (1987). The Masks of Ortheia. American Journal of Archaeology, 91(3), 355–383. https://doi.org/10.2307/505359

Cannavò, A. (2015). Cyprus and the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period. In Kyprios Charakter: History, Archaeology & Numismatics of Ancient Cyprus. kyprioscharacter.eie.gr/en/t/AL

Collon, D. (2001). Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals V: Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Periods. (Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals 5). British Museum Press.

Collon, D. 1986. Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals III: Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian Periods. (Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals 3) London: British Museum Publications.

Dalley, S. (1989). Myths from Mesopotamia. Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others. (The World's Classics). Oxford University Press.

Dalley, S., & Reyes, A. T. (1998). Mesopotamian Contact and Influence in the Greek World: 1. To the Persian Conquest. In S. Dalley (ed.), The Legacy of Mesopotamia. Oxford University Press, 85–106.

Dezső, T., & Vér, Á. (2013). Assyrians and Greeks: The nature of contacts in the 9th–7th centuries BC. Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae, 53(4), 325–359. https://doi.org/10.1556/aant.53.2013.4.1

Dickins, G. (1929). The Masks. In Dawkins, R. M. (ed.), The Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta: Excavated ad Described by Members of the British School at Athens, 1906–1910 (pp. 163–186). (The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies. Supplementary Paper 5). Macmillan.

Douglas van Buren, E. (1930). Clay Figurines of Babylonia and Assyria. Yale University Press.

Evelyn-White, H.-G. (transl.). (1914). Theogony. In Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homerica. Harvard University Press & William Heinemann. https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0130

Frame, G. (2021). The Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II, King of Assyria (721–705 BC). (The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period 2). Eisenbrauns.

Frazer, J. G. (transl.). (1921). Apollodorus: The library. I–II. Harvard University Press & William Heinemann. https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0022

George, A. R. (2003). The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition, and Cuneiform Texts. I–II. Oxford University Press.

Graff, S. (2012). Humbaba/Huwawa [PhD dissertation]. New York University.

Grayson, A. K., & Novotny, J. (2012). The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC), Part 1. (The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period 3/1). Eisenbrauns.

Hopkins, C. (1934). Assyrian Elements in the Perseus-Gorgon Story. American Journal of Archaeology 38(3), 341–358. https://doi.org/10.2307/498901

Innes, M. M. (transl.) (1955). Ovid: Metamorphoses. (Penguin Classics.) Penguin Books.

Kämmerer, Th. R. (ed.). (2011). Identities and Societies in the Ancient East-Mediterranean Regions: Comparative Approaches. Henning Graf Reventlow Memorial Volume. (Alter Orient und Altes Testament 390/1). Ugarit-Verlag.

Lanfranchi, G. B. (2000). The Ideological and Political Impact of the Assyrian Imperial Expansion on the Greek World in the 8th and 7th Centuries BC. In S. Aro & R. M. Whiting (eds.), The Heirs of Assyria: Proceedings of the Opening Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project Held in Tvarminne, Finland, October 8–11, 1998 (pp. 7–34). The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project.

Leichty, E. (2011). The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC). (The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period 4). Eisenbrauns.

Lowe, D. (2024). Art Horror: The Gorgons and Medusa. In D. Felton (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Monsters in Classical Myth (pp. 106–119). Oxford University Press.

Luukko, M. (2012). The Correspondence of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II from Calah/Nimrud. (State Archives of Assyria 19). The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project.

Moore, M. B. (1980). Exekias and Telamonian Ajax. American Journal of Archaeology, 84(4), 417–434. https://doi.org/10.2307/504070

Moscati, S. (2001). The Phoenicians. I. B. Taurus.

Murray, A. T. (1919). Homer: The Odyssey. I–II. (Loeb Classical Library). Heinemann & Macmillan.

Murray, A. T. (1924–1928). Homer: The Iliad. I–II. (Loeb Classical Library). Heinemann & Macmillan.

Na'aman, N. (2018). Qurdi-Aššur-lamur as Governor in Phoenicia and South Syria. Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves Utilitaires, (1), 42–45, no. 26.

Ogden, D. 2008. Perseus. (Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World). Routledge.

Ornan, T. (2010). Humbaba, the Bull of Heaven and the Contribution of Images to the Reconstruction of the Gilgameš Epic. In H. U. Steymans (ed.), Gilgamesch: Ikonographie eines Helden / Gilgamesh: Epic and Iconography (pp. 229–260). (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 245). Academic Press & Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Payne, H. (1931). Necrocorinthia: A Study of Corinthian Art in the Archaic Period. Clarendon Press. https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.8577

Raaflaub, K. A. (2017). Zeus and Prometheus: Greek Adaptations of Ancient Near Eastern Myths. In B. Halpern & K. S. Sacks (eds.), Cultural Contact and Appropriation in the Axial-Age Mediterranean World: A Periplos (pp. 17–37). (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 86). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004194557_003

Radner, K. (2010). The Stele of Sargon II of Assyria at Kition: A Focus for an Emerging Cypriot Identity? In R. Rollinger, B. Gufler, M. Lang & I. Madreiter (eds.), Interkulturalität in der Alten Welt. Vorderasien, Hellas, Ägypten und die vielfältigen Ebenen des Kontakts (pp. 429–449). Harrassowitz Verlag.

Radner, K. (2025). The Many Kingdoms of Cyprus. Assyrian Empire Builders. University College London. http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/aebp/Essentials/Countries/Cyprus/

Radner, K., & Vacek, A. (2022). The Settlement of Yauna, 'Ionian' Identity and the Greek Presence on the Syrian Coast in the Second Half of the Eighth Century BC: A Reassessment of Two Letters from the Nimrud Correspondence. The Journal of Hellenic Studies, 142, 65–99. https://doi.org/10.1017/S007542692200012X

Richter, G. M. A. (1953). Handbook of the Greek Collection. Harvard University Press.

Rollinger, R. (2017). Assyria in Classical Sources'. In E. Frahm (ed.), A Companion to Assyria (pp. 570–583). Wiley Blackwell.

Tadmor, H., & Yamada, Sh. (2011). The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC), and Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), Kings of Assyria. (The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period 1). Eisenbrauns.

West, D. R. (1990). Some Cults of Greek Goddesses and Female Daemons of Oriental Origin: Especially in Relation to the Mythology of Goddesses and Demons in the Semitic world [PhD dissertation]. University of Glasgow.

West, M. L. (1997). The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth. Clarendon Press.

Woolley, C. L., & Mallowan, M. E. L. (1976). Ur Excavations. VII: Old Babylonian Period. (Ur Excavations 7). British Museum Publications Ltd.

Yamada, Sh. (2008). Qurdi-Assur-Lamur: His Letters and Career. In M. Cogan & D. Khan (eds.), Treasures on Camels' Humps: Historical and Literary Studies from the Ancient Near East Presented to Israel Eph'al (pp. 296–311). The Hebrew University & Magnes Press.