

Masks and Magic: The Frontal Face on Greek Vases as a Representation of Apotropaic Power

On Greek vases, across artistic periods, the face in side profile is preferred. Images of the frontal face which look out directly at the viewer of a vase are rare, appearing most often in the *gorgoneion*, the snarling gorgon-head. Apart from the gorgon-head, there are other scattered instances of the mask-like frontal face: Dionysus and his associates are typical among these remains. As it happens, both the gorgon and Dionysus have a shared ability for apotropaism, or a “turning away” of evil. The gorgon Medusa is famous for her petrifying gaze, the very thing which is conveyed by her frontal face. Dionysus can drive mad and transform wrongdoers (Pentheus of Euripides’ *Bacchae* and the pirates of his Homeric hymn are victims of such abilities), and further, he is associated with the laughter-inducing, evil-averting phallus.

However, if one were to amass the corpus of frontal faces and remove all instances of both the *gorgoneion* and Dionysus (and his retinue of satyrs and bacchantes, who also appear frontally), there would be yet another selection of characters, albeit small. Certainly, such a small sampling may be attributed to simple artistic flair rather than any kind of pattern, though it does raise a question - the question I intend to address - what can be said of these other frontal figures and their potential magical abilities?

Since the gorgon is known in literature and myth for her power that is transmitted through the direct gaze, it follows that the representation of other frontal faces should convey a similar bewitching ability on behalf of the depicted characters. This paper will combine the analyses of Greek iconography and textual evidence to determine that the frontal face as it appears on Greek vases indicates the presence of a character with magical and especially apotropaic properties. The frontal face will be used as a framework to find that certain figures,

particularly those not often clearly associated with apotropaic magic, share similar transfixing capabilities and apotropaic devices with the like of Dionysus and the gorgon.