

**SEA MONSTERS IN ANCIENT GREECE: AN ETIOLOGICAL AND  
ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS**

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by

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## ABSTRACT

Sea Monsters in Ancient Greece: An Etiological and Iconographic Analysis

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Ancient Greek culture was characterized by a complex relationship with the sea. The significance of the sea to Greek society, in conjunction with a developing mythology, inspired the creation of a score of monsters, grouped along with whales, sharks, and large fish under the term *ketos* (plural *kete* or *ketea*)-Latinized as *cetus*, which inhabited the Mediterranean Sea. The ideological attitude towards these creatures reflected the relationship that was held with the sea. Artistic representations of sea monsters upon various ceramic vessels displayed this phenomenon through the various methods in which these creatures were stylized. The utilization of a more monstrous, fantastical appearance allowed the conveyance of the overly terrifying nature that characterized *kete*. This was synonymous with the terrors that were presented by the unknowingly vast nature of the sea and with the extremity that characterized the heroic identity of antiquity. The opposing applications of *kete* within ancient Greek artistic representation support the conclusion that these creatures shared a particular cultural ideology. *Kete* were often utilized as symbolic representations of the terrors and wonders that existed within the ancient perception of the sea.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship that the ancient Greeks had with the sea was one that manifested itself in much of Greek culture. Notable examples of this relationship can be seen in the Homeric epics, which illustrate important sea-faring rituals and mythological themes. So far-reaching was this sea-culture that the conception of sea monsters as artistic themes developed in conjunction with the religious mythology of the time. The ancient Greeks eventually developed the specific term *ketos* (plural *kete* or *ketea*)-Latinized as *cetus*- in order to denote creatures of the sea, such as whales, sharks, large fish, and sea monsters. Much is known about these sea creatures, owing to the development of biological interest during the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and the etymology of the term itself. References to these entities can be found in a multitude of sources, such as the Homeric epics and hymns, the works of Herodotos, and Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*. Many memorable entities such as the sea monster that was slain by the hero Perseus, the goddess Ceto, and even the grand fish from the biblical tale of Jonah have been identified as *kete*.

When thinking of the elements that compose this subject, much emphasis is placed upon the individual characteristics of sea monsters, such as morphology or mythological significance and inspiration. A subject that is often not highlighted is the cultural concepts that these creatures symbolized. Indeed, the significance of this group of entities will remain largely unknown if its relation to the overall world view of Greek culture is left undiscussed. One could expect to find certain aspects of monstrous themes littered throughout the whole of ancient Greek culture. However, specific interest should be given to articles created for the specific exploitation of these entities.

A focus on this interest allows for the consideration of a number of questions. Of chief importance is the degree of symbolism that *kete* embodied as the objects of cultural fascination and importance for the whole of Greek culture. This question is directly correlated with the identification of individual references to scenery describing these monsters and the extant creatures or phenomenon that might have inspired their conceptualization. Such a study requires an investigation of the different regions of the Mediterranean that were thought to be inhabited by these sea monsters and various artifacts that were inspired by a fascination with these creatures of the sea. The etiology of sea monsters, as creatures inspired by entities of the natural world, and their artistic existence is a theme that is correlated with determining ancients' cultural ideology of sea monsters.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERARY EVIDENCE

#### ***Ketos*: etymology**

The meaning of the word *ketos* saw much change throughout antiquity. When used in reference to a sea monster, the earliest example of this term can be found within the works of Homer, roughly within the 8-7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The poet outlines descriptions of extraordinary beasts such as Charybdis, Scylla, and the Sirens, wherein he utilizes the term as a non-specific noun that refers to any form of sea monster.<sup>1</sup> Though utilized as literary objects of terror, Homer's writings allow the specific form of the creatures denoted by this term to be vague and left to interpretation. Hesiod, writing in the 8-7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., in his *Theogony*, positions a goddess named Keto within the divine lineage who, along with the sea divinity Phorkys, acts as the progenitor of a myriad of terrestrial and aquatic monsters.<sup>2</sup> Any reference to her name would have been synonymous with, or at least elicited imagery of, sea monsters for any individual with knowledge of this literature.

This form is made clearer, however, by the word's usage in other mythological contexts. *Kete* as specific, characterized entities appear in mythology only within the contexts of the heroes Perseus and Herakles. The descriptions of the Ethiopian *Ketos*, which is combated by Perseus, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Marcus Manilius' *Astronomica* contain imagery of a creature that is biologically similar to known species of whales. A reference to the grand size of the creature, alone, is not sufficient to imply inspiration from a specific creature. A whale, tuna fish, or even a

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<sup>1</sup> *Odyssey*, 12.73-110, A.T. Murray, Ph.D. Translation.

<sup>2</sup> Hesiod, and Glenn W. Most 2006, 270-336.

distant ship can be perceived as large creatures within the correct contexts. However, Ovid's description of Perseus striking the creature on "the back encrusted with barnacles, now at the sides of the body, now where the tail is slenderest, ending fishlike" is largely reminiscent of cetaceans.<sup>3</sup>

The behaviors described by Manilius, in particular, are exemplary of whales. Manilius introduces the monster as it approaches, utilizing its teeth to propel itself, with waves emanating from its own advance. It is not difficult to associate this description with the feeding mechanics of baleen whales, "which open up their massive jaws and skim the surface for krill and copepod crustaceans to feed upon".<sup>4</sup> This association is further supported by both ancient authors' descriptions of water being spewed by the beast, which is similar to the way in which one of these whales "uses its massive tongue to expel the water from its mouth, leaving the food items stuck on the bristled inner edges of the baleen where they can be swallowed".<sup>5</sup>

The term began to be used in literature, from as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., as a biological entity in the context of natural history. Aristotle, in his *Historia Animalium*, groups dolphins and whales, as well as other creatures possessing blowholes and air-breathing abilities, together as *kete*.<sup>6</sup> By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., this term was an identifier for multiple forms of sea creatures. Usually reserved for any aquatic animal of large size, sharks, tuna, sawfish, and rays became associated with the term. The ubiquity of this definition developed so far as to include creatures

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<sup>3</sup> Ov. Met. 4.706

<sup>4</sup> Jaffe 2013, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Arist. Parts of Animals 3.6 (669a, 7-9).

that were capable of inhabiting land for even momentary periods of time, such as seals and turtles.<sup>7</sup>

Encounters with whales and other sea creatures, in an era where zoological understanding of their existence was not well developed, may have thus served as the templates for these scenes. Exaggeration of their behaviors and characteristics could have led to the transformation of these creatures into mysterious, terrifying monsters. The proliferation of this concept may have then resulted in the addition of “less physically accurate attributes that serve to make the sea monster into something more abstract and frightening, like its serpentine coils and movement”.<sup>8</sup>

A simpler conceptualization of this idea is represented by the Charybdis. A terrifying monster, Charybdis, as described by Homer, “sucks down the black water. Thrice a day she belches it forth, and thrice she sucks it down terribly. Mayest thou not be there when she sucks it down, for no one could save thee from ruin, no, not the Earth-shaker”.<sup>9</sup> It is such an insurmountable obstacle that Odysseus would prefer to sacrifice six of his comrades to Scylla, rather than brave the powerful torrents of Charybdis. It is parsimonious to attribute inspiration of this creature to the phenomenon of whirlpools, as they behave in identical patterns to the described monster. An account by Paul the Deacon, writing in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, is particularly consistent with the behavior of maelstroms.

Not very far from this shore ... toward the western side, on which the ocean main lies open without end, is that very deep whirlpool of waters which we call by its familiar name "the navel of the sea." This is said to suck in the waves and spew them forth again twice every day... They say there is another whirlpool of this kind between the island of Britain and the province of Galicia, and with this fact the coasts of the Seine region and of Aquitaine agree, for they are filled twice a day with such sudden inundations that anyone who may by chance be found only

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<sup>7</sup> Papadopoulos and Ruscillo 2002, 106-107.

<sup>8</sup> Jaffe 2013, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Odyssey*, 12.73-110, A.T. Murray, Ph.D. Translation.



a little inward from the shore can hardly get away...a number of ships, shattered at first by a tempest, were afterwards devoured by this same Charybdis.<sup>10</sup>

The identification of sea monster inhabited areas is subject to a superstitious phenomenon. As will be further exemplified in this discussion, a sea monster could be potentially encountered within any body of water that was considered relatively deep, though the degree of this depth is presumably subjective. This fear is represented within *The Iliad* when Odysseus and Diomedes enter the sea only as far as the hip-joint and thigh would allow, due to the beastly dangers that await beyond the shallow waters.<sup>11</sup> However, specific significance was given to a select number of regions that were associated with sea monsters.

Many will note the Strait of Messina, located between the eastern edge of Sicily and the western border of Calabria, as being the iconic passage between Scylla and Charybdis. A number of other sites were prevalently referenced; Chief among these were the waters surrounding Mount Athos, associated with sea monsters by Herodotos, and the region of Lakedemonia, which included the administrative capital of Sparta (Fig. 1.).<sup>12</sup> When noting the wreckage of Darius' fleet at Mt. Athos in 429 B.C., and the varied deaths among the men, Herodotos specifically writes:

But here a violent north wind sprang up, against which nothing could contend, and handled a large number of ships with much rudeness, shattering them and driving them aground upon Athos. 'Tis said the number of the ships destroyed was little short of three hundred and the men who perished were more than twenty thousand. For the sea about Athos abounds in monsters beyond all others, and so a portion were seized and devoured by these animals.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Paul the Deacon 1907, i.6.

<sup>11</sup> Vermeule 1979, 183.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Herodotos, and George Rawlinson, 1875.

The region of Lakedemonia is similarly associated with sea monsters during both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. During any introduction of Menelaos' kingdom, the shores of Lakedemonia are described to be monster ridden.<sup>14</sup>

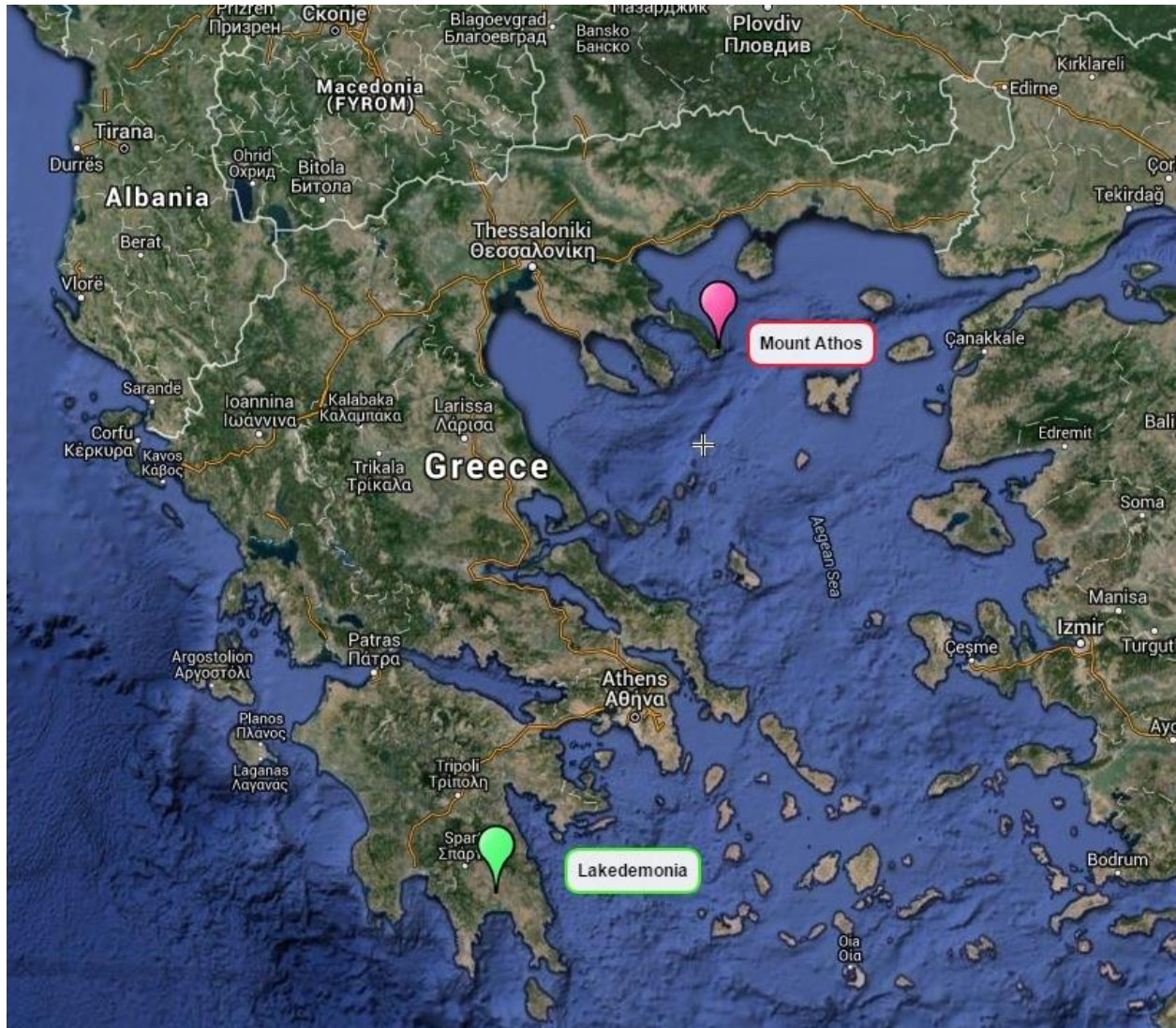


Fig. 1. A map highlighting the relative position of Mount Athos and the region of Lakedemonia in the Aegean. (This image was created by Steven Ramos).

<sup>14</sup> Morris 1984, 1-2. See also Papadopoulos and Ruscillo 2002, 209.

## CHAPTER III

### ICONOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

#### **Depicting sea monsters**

##### *First style: a whale-like monster*

The morphology of sea monsters within ancient Greek iconography can be grouped into three unique stylistic variations, described in length and within an archaeological context by John K. Papadopoulos and Deborah Ruscillo.<sup>15</sup> The conceptualization of sea monsters, as well as all monstrous entities, directly originates from an imaginative perception of living creatures. This correlation is represented in the variation between the three styles, as specific reference to the natural world is portrayed in each example.<sup>16</sup> The first method that was utilized in order to depict *kete* is simplistic and exemplary of this observation, as it requires the least amount of fantastic imagination. This method is wholly based on the morphology and constitution of a large fish.<sup>17</sup> The inspiration for this style of *ketos* is likely to have derived from sightings and descriptions of whales, or at least large fish.

*Kete* that are represented in this manner are nearly indiscernible from similar representations of fish. It is for this reason that *kete* in this style are often characterized by monstrous behavior, such as swallowing sailors, in order to differentiate them from similarly depicted sea creatures. A krater from Pithekoussai is highly representative of this trend (Fig. 1). This piece displays a

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<sup>15</sup> Papadopoulos and Ruscillo 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Papadopoulos and Ruscillo 2002, 216.

rendering of sailors who have been thrown into the sea by the capsizing of their ship.<sup>18</sup> Figures of drowned sailors are accompanied by a number of individuals who are surrounded by fish of varying sizes. Alongside these *kete*, which can be identified as the creatures that are actively consuming the ill-fated sailors, are depictions of smaller, non-monstrous, fish.

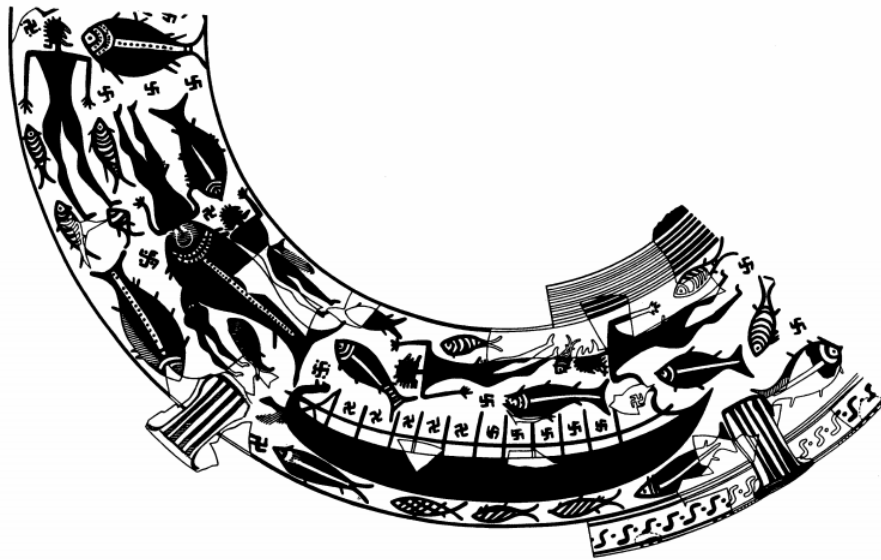


Fig. 1. Depiction of sailors, and a capsized ship, surrounded by fish of varying sizes. The proposed *kete* are devouring sailors.

Figures such as this are informative of the fearful relation to the sea. In the ancient mindset, the sea existed as a theme that was able to convey a duplicity of emotions. The sea was able to be viewed as a vital element of Commerce, travel, and trade; it was the source of a variety of edible creatures as well as a frontier that many navigated; it was also attributed with a thematic fear of the unknown and mysterious.<sup>19</sup> Even a hero might step into the ocean, as was exemplified in an earlier reference to *The Iliad*, with a careful consideration of the dangers that were characteristic of the sea. Odysseus himself illustrates his fear of being persecuted by a sea monster during book

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<sup>18</sup> Brunnsvik 1962; Langdon 2008 fig 06.

<sup>19</sup> Lindenlauf 2003.

five of *The Odyssey* when, through the anger of Poseidon, his makeshift vessel is destroyed in the open sea.<sup>20</sup> The portrayal of these creatures as monstrous even in the belief of heroes is reflective of their representation as manifestations of the terrors of the sea and the unknown qualities that exist within it.

Second and third style: imaginative monsters

The second variation of sea monster representation is highly dependent on serpentine characteristics. *Kete* that are depicted in this manner are, just as is the case within the first category, not complex in composition. A large serpentine creature which is occasionally embellished by fish-like qualities, such as fins, is exemplary of this style. A stark difference between the second and first styles of representation is the amount of mythological presence that is conveyed by each. Whereas the creatures represented in the first style can be compared to whales and fish, *kete* that are imagined in the second style support less, although still recognizable, resemblance to creatures that exist within the natural world.

An illustration of Herakles demonstrates the characteristics of the second style as the hero heroically grasps the sea monster's tongue (Fig. 2).<sup>21</sup> The creature depicted in this image is contrastive with the foes of the first style. This beast's body incites nothing in relation to a whale and is characterized by the gaping of its serpentine jaws. A second image, from a hydria, ca. 520-510 B.C., depicts an anonymous hero in a struggle against a *ketos* (Fig. 3).<sup>22</sup> The monster in this image is similarly constructed and requires little distinction in personality in order to be contrasted from the other aquatic creatures which are represented alongside it.

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<sup>20</sup> *Odyssey*, 5.408-450, A.T. Murray, Ph.D. Translation.

<sup>21</sup> Boardman 1987, pl. XXV: 15.

<sup>22</sup> Papadopoulos and Rusillo 2002, 216.

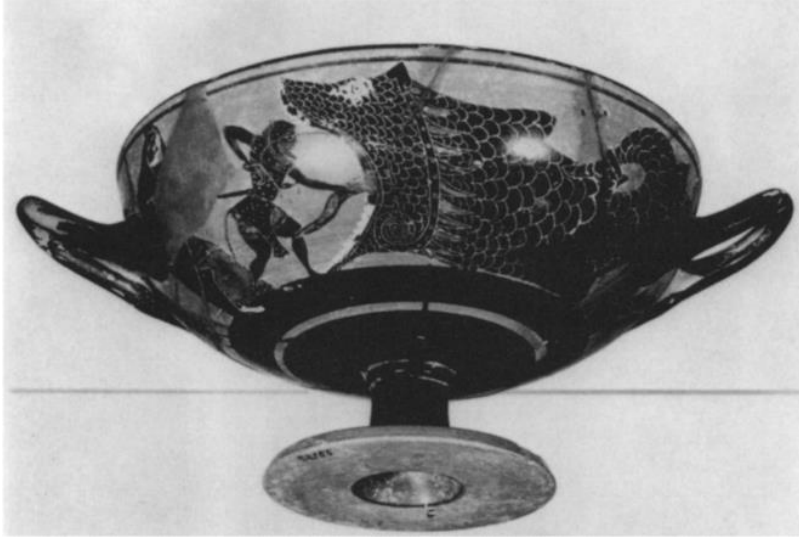


Fig. 2. Athenian black figure cup, ca. 520 B.C. Herakles is shown combating a sea monster. Taranto, Museo Nazionale, inv. 52155.

The outstanding quality within this image is the manner in which its body is qualified by a coiled composition, a defining characteristic of the second style. Once more, gaping jaws become a prevalent feature against the heroic advance of an unnamed character. Despite the contrast seen in this image between the sea monster and the surrounding creatures, various familiar traits can be seen on this *ketos*. Profoundly, the appearance of its fins is reminiscent of known qualities that are descriptive of whales.<sup>23</sup> It is this maintenance of familiarity that marks the second style as distinct from the third.

The sharpest imaginative effort seems to be found within the third style. This style fused the qualities of certain land animals with the fish-like characteristics that marked the first two styles. The result of this artistic fusion was often a creature that, despite possessing a head that could be associated with a terrestrial quadruped such as a dog or a lion, resembled a second style

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<sup>23</sup> Leatherwood et al 1983, 13.

depiction.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, this combination of morphologies would have allowed for the greatest amount of variety within representations.

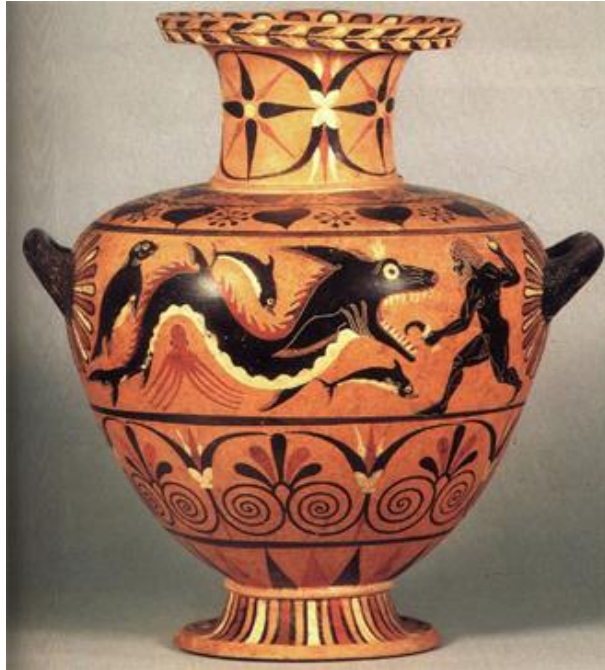


Fig. 3. Caeretan hydria, ca. 520-510 B.C., An unknown hero is depicted in a struggle against a sea monster.

Any individual artist would be able to apply the bodily parts of a variety of animals, such as the distinctive muzzle of a dog or the beak of a bird, to an already established body. This trend allowed artists to display the same monstrous images as the first two styles even by representing only the heads of the creatures (Fig. 4).<sup>25</sup> This is a phenomenon that is exemplified by a Corinthian black-figure amphora, which represents the combat between Perseus and the Ethiopian *ketos*. The depiction on this image is similar to others that portray this scene: the representation of a hero challenging a monster. However, this image is able to ignore representing the majority of the creature's body through depiction of a head that is a composite

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<sup>24</sup> Papadopoulos and Ruscillo 2002, 219.

<sup>25</sup> Pfuhl 1923, fig 190.



of aquatic and quadrupedal qualities. A distinctively canine snout is juxtaposed with cranial fins in a form that, along with a developed context, represents a *ketos* in such a way that is not found within either of the other styles.



Fig. 4. Corinthian black-figure amphora from Cerveteri. A depiction of Perseus combating the Ethiopian *Ketos*, with Andromeda in the background, is present.

An additional representation of this scene fully represents the removal from reality this trend supports by distinctly displaying a creature that is far more quadrupedal in appearance than it is aquatic (Fig. 5).<sup>26</sup> This exaggerated transformation is complimented by an equivalent exaggeration of heroism placed upon the image of Persues. A significant association with mythological heroes can be found when analyzing the context of second and third style depictions. These image are uniquely contrastable from first style depictions because overt monstrous behavior is not required in order to identify the sea monsters of these types. This is due to the stark way in which they are differentiated through body construction. The notable qualities of these representations include bodies that are composed of different animals.

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<sup>26</sup> *Theoi* P.28.3.





Fig. 5. Apulian red figure amphora, ca 325 B.C., Perseus combats the Ethiopian *Ketos* with a surrounding of identifiable characters.

As is the case in both of the latter styles, the heads of these *kete* are usually constructed as possessing large, gaping jaws that are lined with many sharp teeth. The characteristically monstrous attributes that exist within the second and third styles are thus an effective format in which to represent a creature that is meant to challenge the heroic nature. This is not to say that sea monsters, in their more monstrous forms, and heroes were dependent upon one another in order to be depicted. Heroes may be apparent in their own context, while sea monsters have been found depicted without opposing a heroic figure. An early 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. depiction of a creature that is undoubtedly Scylla is representative of the latter (Fig. 6).<sup>27</sup> In describing the scene wherein Odysseus must choose between Scylla and Charybdis, Homer begins by detailing the treacherous composition of the former:

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<sup>27</sup> *Theoi* P.27.4.

Therein dwells Scylla, yelping terribly. Her voice is indeed but as the voice of a new-born whelp, but she herself is an evil monster, nor would anyone be glad at sight of her, no, not though it were a god that met her. Verily she has twelve feet, all misshapen, and six necks, exceeding long, and on each one an awful head, and therein three rows of teeth, thick and close, and full of black death.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, there is nothing resembling Odysseus in this image. And this is for a sound reason, as such an iconic, and surely well-known, embodiment would be a rigid thing for an artist to subject to liberal representation. Moreover, the fact that the image is so well described in literature and oral tradition implies that no association with a hero would be required for an audience to link the depiction and the monstrous mysteries of the sea.



Fig. 6. Lucanian Red Figure Krater, ca 450-425 B.C., Scylla is depicted holding a fish-knife, without an accompanying hero to distinguish her.

However, as specific as this might appear, criteria for consideration among the category of ancient heroes was inclusive enough to allow for a diverse membership. The most obvious heroes are those that possess one or more divine parents or those that were combatants of either side during the Trojan War, such as Perseus and Achilles. This conception of honorable means is

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<sup>28</sup> *Odyssey*, 12. 85-95, A.T. Murray, Ph.D. Translation.

represented by Hector declaring, “Nay, but not without a struggle let me die, neither ingloriously, but in the working of some great deed for the hearing of men that are yet to be,” as he prepared to perish before the ire of Achilles.<sup>29</sup>

However, several other qualities, such as the struggling quest of Jason and the divine favor granted to Pelops by Poseidon, allowed for diverse origins and actions.<sup>30</sup> The most prevalent definition of heroic identity focuses upon the qualities of extreme action and personality. Indeed, a unifying trait within the whole range of classical heroes is action which supersedes human normality, despite intention or consequence. This action usually manifests itself in the hero’s pursuit of individual, lasting glory.<sup>31</sup> It is this that allows Herakles to rise as a venerated hero that is essentially unmarred by his moral flaws. The myth of Herakles displays that through exceptional behavior a hero can remove himself from sinful action, as displayed by Herakles’ labors and his resulting deification.<sup>32</sup>

A challenge to a character of such dire embodiment would not be as effectively conveyed if the opposing foe were to have the appearance of a larger, otherwise benign, fish. Though the monstrous elements that exist within the sea derive from creatures of the natural world, as is evidenced across all styles of representation and through etiological observation, something beyond naturally convincing entities is needed alongside the image of the classical hero in order to sharpen the degree of heroism displayed. The extraordinary, essence of a hero is best representable when it is paired with an entity that is equally distant from the ordinary. This same

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<sup>29</sup>*Iliad*, 22. 304-305, A.T. Murray, Ph.D. Translation.

<sup>30</sup> Powell 2001, 477-489; Morford, M., and R. Lenardon. 1995; Lord Raglan. 1936; Kerényi, K. 1959; Green, P. 1997.

<sup>31</sup> Stevanovic 2008, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Padilla 1998.

entity, the sea monster, achieves symbolic association with the ominous and often gruesome nature of the sea.

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