The Magic of Monster Masks: A Comparative Analysis of the Greek Gorgon and Chinese Taotie

Before writing systems, ancient artists relied on recognizable icons to convey their messages to the viewer. Through a comparative study of the Greek gorgon and the Chinese taotie, this paper explores how these monster face symbols prevailed for centuries. Drawing from a combination of classical, art historical, anthropological, and psychological theories, this paper concludes that the hybridity and frontality inherent to these monsters makes them an effective tool for meaning-making. The icons are infused with magical powers, and they balance recognizability with mutability. As such, the monster masks are powerful iconographic motifs for different materials, ritual contexts, and cultural eras.

At its heart, the basic purpose of a monster face icon is to incite fear. This fear may incentivize the viewer to avoid wrongdoing or it could have an apotropaic effect. Apotropaism operates through the magic of *mimesis*, wherein "a representation of an object enjoys the power of, or the power over, that object" (Elliot 2016, 159). Thus, the physical replication of the monster face could function as an embodiment of the monster's fierceness and danger in order to thwart bad fortune. This power becomes even stronger when one considers the reactions that the hybridity evokes. Hybrids merge together uncommon features to create a superorganism that acts outside of the expectations for nature. Their form is no longer a bounded entity, which allows the artist to intentionally appeal to different cultural memories. This hybrid gains its "livingness" from its static, external features; these features recall local predators and/or mythical stories in that region. The Gorgon is a hybrid with the anthropomorphic face of a human woman, hair made from snakes, and boar tusks as teeth. Being bitten by a snake or gored by a boar could spell death for an unsuspecting victim, and the gorgon adopts this intimidation. The myth bestows an

added threat, since the most outwardly unassuming aspect of the monster–the human woman–is said to have eyes that can turn someone to stone. The taotie is less straightforward in its form, but achieves similar results. Its zoomorphic features come from a dragon, and many renditions have a human head attached on top. The monster is symmetrical, so that each half of the frontal face will also double as a profile view and embody two creatures in one form. Similar to the gorgon, the taotie has large bulging eyes and fangs on display. As the "glutton" of Chinese myth, the taotie is known to be insatiable and its icons adopt this characterization. The monster faces do not need to complete any specific action beyond representation to convey these threats, which is why their hybridity can work in conjunction with a frontal view.

In contrast to the profile view, which embeds the monster as a third-person non-participant that the viewer omnisciently observes, frontality allows for a second-person point of view (Mackay 2001). The viewer is forced to make eye contact through the confrontation of the gaze, giving the monster face more power as an active participant involved in both the artistic scene surrounding it and the real circumstance of viewing. This makes frontality rather exceptional in Greek art, and carefully attributed to specific figures. Yet, full frontal faced figures can still show movement in the arms or feet. So why do archaeologists mainly find the gorgon and taotie as only a frontal face? The icon is also mimicking a mask, allowing it to gain movement when an actor assumes the character during rituals, festivals, or plays. The open mouth, fangs, and/or absence of the lower jaw offer the possibility for actors to speak, growl, and express themselves in their performance. This merging of frontal features could also connect to altered states of consciousness as the human actor and monster icon become one composite being (Wengrow 2013). The reflection of gaze, the disembodied emphasis on the face, and the

unnatural hybridization of form can be instinctually unsettling, but it also leaves room for abstraction and cultural adaptation.

Comparative studies, such as the one undertaken in this paper, are essential for us to understand early artistic evolution, common rituals, and systems of cultural exchange throughout the ancient world. Opening up Classics to interdisciplinary discussions can only progress our field as a whole and inspire new interpretations of the existing body of evidence.

Bibliography

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