



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.1461618

# MEDUSA IN NABATAEAN, HATRAN AND PALMYRENE CULTURES

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**Received: 14/07/2018**

**Accepted: 10/11/2018**

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## ABSTRACT

Medusa is a powerful Greek methodological creature that had a face of a woman with snakes instead of hair, her name is derived from the Greek verb μέδω meaning “to guard or protect”, which makes it one of the important decorative elements related to classic funeral forms of art including wreath, light torch, snake and anchor, which all were supposed to protect the dead in their afterlife. The head of Medusa was to be found on different artistic works from Greek and Roman Civilizations, which had their significant influence on the cultural aspects of Ancient Near East; consequently classic mythological characters and symbols would be found in architecture and other artistic works of Nabataean (4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.-106 A.D.), Hatran (3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C. – 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D.) and Palmyrene (3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D.) Kingdoms. This paper aims at shedding the light at the different depictions of Medusa in artistic works of these Ancient Arabic Kingdoms, as well as the different symbolic functions related to them.

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**Keywords:** Medusa Head, Nabataea, Hatra, Palmyra, Funeral Symbols, Tomb Protection.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Being the most well known and mostly appearing on artistic works among her sisters, the Gorgon Medusa proved to be of significance not only in Greco-Roman art, but even in the Near Eastern artworks. This paper aims at exploring the different depictions of Medusa on the forms of art in Ancient Arab Kingdoms and their symbolism. First it would be useful to give a general background on the mythological and artistic aspects related to this monster.

As referred to Hesiod by Hard (2004) and Harris & Platzner (2000), the first children of Phorkys and Keto were the "Graiai" and their sisters the "Gorgons"; of which the name of the GRAIAI simply means old women since they were grey-haired from birth, the three of them possessed only a single eye and tooth between them, they passed them from one to another so as to be able to see and eat. The gorgons were named Stheno, Euryale and Medusa; the three sisters had a horrible sight that could turn the beholder to stone, their heads were wreathed with snakes and had tusks like wild boars. Medusa and her sisters were originally as referred to the Roman poet Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 4.770) beautiful maidens, Poseidon had raped Medusa in Athena's temple, the goddess transformed Medusa's beautiful hair to serpents and made her face so terrible to behold that the mere sight of it would turn onlookers to stone (Freeman, 2013). Another story is that Medusa's hair was first admired by her lover Poseidon, which enraged Athena who changed it into snakes (Vycichl 1990: 151).

The three gorgons were mentioned in the myth of the hero Perseus, who was sent by King Polydectes to fetch the head of Medusa, Perseus had the help of Athena and Hermes, who gave him a sickle of adamant, the cap of Hades (which made him invisible), and winged shoes. He compelled the Graeae, to reveal Medusa's whereabouts. Finding Medusa asleep, after being guided by the shield of Athena as a mirror so not to look at her directly, Perseus could cut off Medusa's head with his sickle, and by wearing the cap of Hades, he could avoid the other Gorgons who were pursuing him. After returning the magical weapons to the gods, Perseus gave Medusa's head to Athena, who placed it on her shield (Roman & Roman, 2010). A review on medusa-gorgoneion in golden objects has been recently presented (Lazarou, 2018) and here, medusa is placed in the frame of nabataean, hatran and palmyrene cultures.

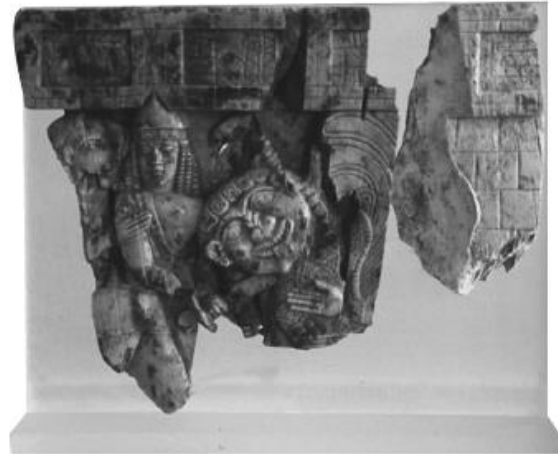


Figure 1. *Perseus slaying Medusa on an ivory relief dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. in Samos Museum (Hard, 2004, P. 60, Figure 2.6)*

## 2. MEDUSA IN CLASSICAL ART

Different works of art held different depictions of Medusa head or the scene of slaying her by Perseus, few though show her flying or running; these included pottery vessels, terracotta figurines, mosaic floors, sculptures, sarcophagi and many others.

In Archaic art and later, the face of Medusa was to be seen frequently as a motif for its circular shape, also as an amulet to protect from bad luck and evil (Norris, 2000). One of the earliest works is dated back to 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., where the face of Gogoneion is painted on a metope in the temple of Apollo at Thermon, Athens (625-600 B.C.) (Topper, 2007). An ivory relief dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. in Samos Museum shows Perseus slaying Medusa, the hero is standing and wearing the cap of Hades, the goddess Athena shows behind him (Fig. 1).

Another significant work is the face of Medusa painted on the top of a terracotta stand (black-figure on Attic) dated to 570 B.C., this work is signed by Ergotimos as potter and Kleitias as painter (Norris, 2000). The common thing among archaic art works is how the features of Medusa's face were painted or carved, besides the bearded and fanged head, the coiled hair surrounded with snakes, a frontal stare with big ears and layered nose, and a protruding tongue are all observed (Topper, 2007) (Fig. 2,3 & 4). Medusa would also appear with wings growing out of her bust girded with serpents, the lower of her body ending in a dragon's tail and lion's legs (Fig. 5).

Medusa monstrous face was usually portrayed on the bust or the armor of Athena, as a goddess of war and wisdom, and for further protection; she had a facemask of Medusa, the Gorgon with the power to petrify, and to turn flesh to stone.

The goddess was frequently represented in works of Greek, Hellenistic and Roman art in statues, colos-

sal busts, reliefs, coins, and in vase-paintings. One of these works is the celebrated colossal statue of the goddess, of gold and ivory, which was erected on the acropolis of Athens, represented the goddess in a standing position, with Medusa head on her bust, also the works of Piraeus Athens, Terracotta Statuettes of Athena from Pella Museum and the frieze from Pergamum Zeus Alter (4<sup>th</sup> -1<sup>st</sup> Centuries B.C.) (Fig. 6-10). Besides being used for protecting from evil, another interesting interpretation of symbolism is given by Stark (2016, P.11): "In classical Greece, snakes were associated with women due to their cold and wet demeanors. Medusa is fearsome in appearance as both reptile and violent female. Her toothed mouth is intended to invoke the vagina dentata- a toothed vagina capable of emasculation. The medusa's deathly stare and mouth express anxiety surrounding male castration and powerlessness".

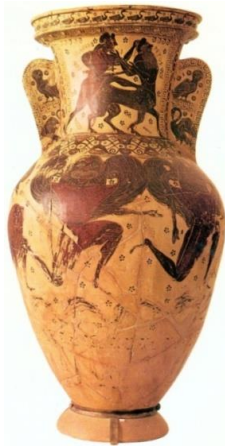


Figure 2. The body of an early black-figure amphora decorated with a representation of the legend of Medusa's decapitation by Perseus and pursuit of the latter by her sisters, flying over ocean (620 B.C.); National Archaeological Museum, Athens (Andronicos et al., 1975: 45).



Figure 3. The face of a Gorgoneion on a metope in Temple of Apollo at Thermon (625-600 B.C.) (Topper, 2007, P.74, Figure 1)



Figure 4. The Face of Medusa on top of a terracotta stand; Attic, black-figure (570 B.C.) (Norris, 2000, Page 161, Pl.23)



Figure 5. Bronze shield rim and device from the Olympia Museum; Mid-6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. (Andronicos et al., 2015, 214; <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/490610953143069046/>).



Figure 6. Athena Varvakeion, Roman copy of the Athena in Parthenon by Phidias. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athena\\_Promachos#/media/File:Athena\\_Varvakeion\\_-\\_MANA\\_-\\_Fidias.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athena_Promachos#/media/File:Athena_Varvakeion_-_MANA_-_Fidias.jpg)).



Figure 7. Piraeus Athena (350-330 B.C.); National Archaeological Museum, Athens (Andronicos et al., 1975: 79; [http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus\\_images/athena\\_piraeus.jpg](http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/athena_piraeus.jpg)).



Figure 8. Detail of the upper part of a bronze statue of Athena with medusa on her armor (350-330 B.C.); National Archaeological Museum, Athens (Andronicos et al., 1975: 79; [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:7367\\_-\\_Piraeus\\_Arch.\\_Museum,\\_Athens\\_-\\_Athena\\_-\\_Photo\\_by\\_Giovanni\\_Dall'Orto,\\_Nov\\_14\\_2009.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:7367_-_Piraeus_Arch._Museum,_Athens_-_Athena_-_Photo_by_Giovanni_Dall'Orto,_Nov_14_2009.jpg)).



Figure 9. Terracotta statuette of Athena, (2nd Century B.C.); Pella Museum (Andronicos et al., 1975, 263; <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/190347521726103192/>).



Figure 10 Zeus and Athena in conflict with giants, a detail from the large frieze of the Zeus Altar from Pergamum, Hellenistic Period (Onians, 1999: Figure 108a)

One of the distinguished examples is a fragment of marble stele used as grave marker (500-490 B.C.) (Fig. 11), the Gorgon here replaces the sphinx in protecting the grave and keeping evil away (Norris,

2000). This is more visible though on pottery vessels, where several Attic red-figured vessels had shown Medusa as a beautiful woman sleeping and being approached by Perseus (Fig. 12). This does not apply

to the same degree though to the case of coins where monstrous features of Medusa's head are still visible in later periods on some examples (Fig. 14) (Goldsbrough, 2014).

It is noticed that the Gorgon's head was portrayed in less monstrous forms in artistic images from the fifth Century BC onwards, actually it was depicted as a beautiful winged woman, moreover, from about 300 BC and onwards, she appeared in pathetic mode with a look of horror or pain about her eyes (Fig. 13) (Hard, 2004).

In Roman art, the medusa appears on artistic works as a beautiful female with more humanized features; the usage of Medusa became more of a decorative function, though it continued as a protective symbol; especially on floors and wall paintings. Moreover, Medusa started to be accompanied by imageries of Dionysos the god of wine, whose worship brought pleasure and good fortune. A good example comes from a mosaic floor in a Roman villa discovered on the Via Emanuele Filiberto in Rome (Fig. 15). A colorful female bust is surrounded with a black-and-white mosaic; the head is flanked with snakes with serpentine locks of hair, which identify her as the Gorgon Medusa (Belis, 2016). The head of the Medusa, besides the griffins, dolphins, sphinxes, laurels, and other decorative shapes were the most commonly used on tombs and stone sarcophagi in the Roman period for funeral and protective purposes (Davies, 1978). Many depictions of Medusa's head on buildings and tombs were found all over the areas that were under the rule of Greeks and Roman, good examples come from Leptis Magna in Libya; in Turkey: Temple of Apollo in Didim, Antalya, also the underground Yerebatan Sarayi Cistern; Ornate theatre mask in Ostia Antica, Rome; the Catacombs of Kom El Shuqafa, Alexandria, Egypt; and Um Qais

(Gadara), Jerash (Gerasa) and Petra in Jordan, as well as many others.



Figure 11. A marble stele with a carved running winged Medusa, this graver marker belonged to a person named Kalliades (500-490 B.C.) (Norris, 2000, P.162, Figure 24)



Figure 12. Perseus beheading Medusa on an Attic red-figured pelike (450-440 B.C.), a work attributed to Polygnotos, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Topper, 2007, P.75, Figure 2)



Figure 13. The beheading of Medusa on an Apulian red-figured krater, a work of Eton-Nike Painter, (370 B.C.) from Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum (Serfontein, 1991, P.107, Pl. 23)



Figure 14. A group of coins where the head of Medusa appears (Goldsborough, 2014):

- a. A coin of Neapolis, Macedonia, classical hemidrachm (1.9g), c. 411-348 BC. The head of Medusa appears on the obverse, Artemis on the Reverse
- b. A coin of Apollonia Pontika, Thrace, 6 drachm (3.4g), c. 450-400 BC. Medusa appears on the Reverse, on the Obverse an anchor with crayfish to left
- c. A coin of Selge, Pisidia, trihemionbol (0.8g), c. 370-360 BC. Medusa on Obverse, Athena on Reverse
- d. A L. Plautius Plancus denarius (3.9g), c. 47 BC. Medusa (beautiful) smiling, legend "Lucius Plautius," on Obverse, Aurora, goddess of the dawn, (or Victory) conducting the four horses of the sun, legend "Plancus" on Reverse

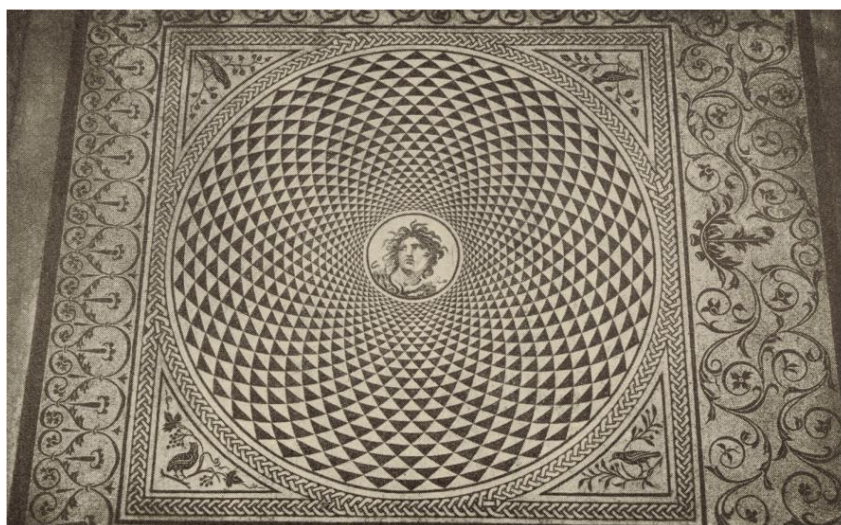


Figure 15. A mosaic floor of a villa in Rome (AD 115-150) with the head of Medusa in the center (Belis, 2016, P.6)



Figure 16a. A sarcophagus with carved head of Medusa, Umm Qais (Gadara, Jordan) (<http://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/Gadara.html>)



Figure 16b. A sarcophagus with carved head of Medusa, Umm Qais (Gadara, Jordan)

Taken on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2006

### 3. MEDUSA IN ANCIENT ARAB KINGDOMS:

#### 3.1. MEDUSA IN NABATAEAN KINGDOM (4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY B.C.-106 A.D.)

Medusa has been represented in different carved facades at Nabataean sites, such as Petra, Hegra, Khirbeth al-Dharih, Khirbet Tannur and Hauran. Usually it appeared as a female head with serpents emerging from her hair and as a necktie (Fig. 18, 20 & 23), in other cases two wings appeared through her hair locks (Fig. 20). Following is a description of some artistic works in Nabataean sites where Medusa was found.

##### 3.1.1. HEGRA

Medusa head has been featured on four tombs facades in Hegra (Jaussen and Savignac, 1909: B7, B11), usually carved in a relief above the entrance of a tomb as a male or female head between two serpents (Fig. 17).

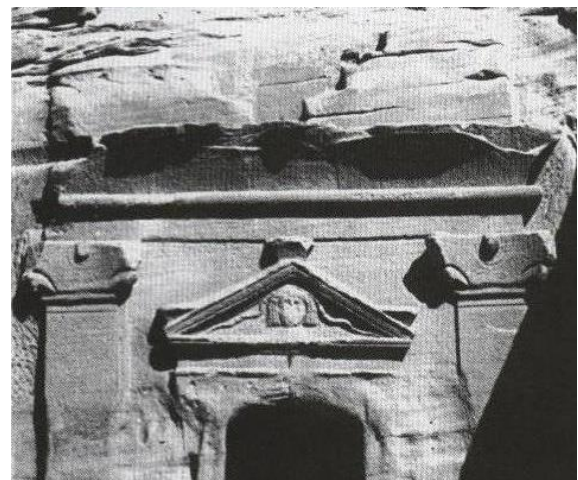


Figure 17. Relief of Medusa between two serpents on a tomb façade, Hegra (McKenzie, 1990, Pl 16c).

##### 3.1.2. KHIRBET AL-DHARIH

Two sculptures of Medusa have been found in Khirbeth al-Dharih, the first is a relief carved on a stone pediment of the temple at the site, one of the serpents can be recognized on the top of the right side of her head and below her chin, her smiling face and calm looks reminds us of the same way Medusa was presented in late Hellenistic and Roman Periods

(Fig. 18). While the second medusa is a round piece made of plaster and found inside the same temple (Fig. 19) (Villeneuve *et al.*, 2002: Fig. 63, 267), despite

the disfigured face of her, the wavy hair and serpents made her identification as a gorgon possible.



Figure 18. Medusa head carved on Khirbet al-Dharrah temple's façade (Villeneuve *et al.*, 2002: Figure 63).



Figure 19. Medusa head, Plaster, found inside Khirbet al-Dharrah temple (Villeneuve *et al.*, 2002: Figure 267).

### 3.1.3. KHIRBET TANNUR

Two Medusa heads in relief were found in the Temple of Khirbet Tannur site, one of them is similar in appearance to Medusa heads of Petra (Fig. 24); on the top of her head, two serpents confronting each other and remnants of two wings above them can be

observed (Fig. 20); the bodies of the serpents encircled her face and were knotted together under her chin of her grumpy face. The other Medusa head (Fig. 21) is totally different where the calm face is topped with a coiled hair with a ribbon bow and is surrounded with a lavish background of acanthus leaves covering the whole frieze. The common aspects among these two heads are the triangular eyebrows, the rounded chin and the protruding eyes.



Figure 20. Medusa head, Khirbet Tannur (Glueck, 1965: Figure 39).



Figure 21. Medusa head, Khirbet Tannur (Glueck, 1965: Figure 38a).



### 3.1.4. PETRA

Two Medusa heads appear on the architrave of the entablature above the Corinthian pilaster capitals of the Lion Triclinium (Fig. 22) (Glueck 1965: Fig. 38b), there is a similarity of faces features and hairstyle to those of Khirbet Tannur (Fig. 21) (Glueck 1965: Fig. 38a). The lower parts of two serpents can be seen emerging from below the ends of the curled side-tresses of the two Medusas with being joined

below their chins. (Glueck, 1965: 355; Patrich, 1990: 120; Mckenzie, 2005: Pl.235, Pl.151).

Beside Medusa heads that were found at Petra on several facades; Medusa heads were also found on sides of separate capitals of apparently square columns (Fig. 23, 24), a pair of wings was visible on top of each head, with two knotted serpents under their chins (Glueck, 1965: 354).



Figure 22. Medusa heads on Lion Triclinium, Petra (Glueck, 1965: Figure 38b)



Figure 23. Medusa head on a capital, Petra (Glueck, 1965: Figure 40)

### 3.1.5. SUWAYDA

The Nabataeans (as well as Hatrans and Palmyrenes) worshipped the goddess Allat, equating her with the Greek Athena and the Roman Minerva. A wide number of Allat statues have been discovered in different sites of these cultures with the medusa face portrayed on her bust, as a goddess of war and wisdom, and for further protection, which is a clear influence of Greco-Roman Cultures. One of these statues have been found in Suwayda (a Nabataean site in South of Syria), the goddess appeared raising her

right hand to hold a spear and holding an armor in her left hand, a detailed relief of medusa head with wings and serpents was on her bust (Fig. 25).



Figure 24. Winged Medusa head on a capital, Petra (Glueck, 1965: Figure 37b)



Figure 25. Allat-Minerva statue, Second Century AD. Suwayda, Syria, National Museum of Damascus (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Lat#/media/File:Allat-Minerva.jpg>).

### 3.2. MEDUSA IN HATRAN KINGDOM (3<sup>RD</sup> CENTURY B.C. – 3<sup>RD</sup> CENTURY A.D.)

Medusa head was frequently represented in works of art in Hatra, in both round and relief sculptures (Fig. 26, 27 & 30), as a female (Fig. 30) and rarely as a male (or possibly as a bearded female as in Archaic period artworks mentioned above) (Fig. 26 & 27). In general the statues were mostly made of stone, but in three examples copper was used as a material (Figures 27, 31 & 32). Her head appears on the bust of Allat in five examples (Fig. 28, 29, 31, 32 & 33). A unique representation of medusa as a male was on the walls of Hatra Great Temple, with two serpents above the head which was decorated with a heavy beard styled in plant leaves (Figure 26). Another medusa statue functioned as a mall was of copper, four serpents were surrounding the neck, their heads were extending from hair (Fig. 27).



Figure 26. Male medusa head, limestone, Great Temple, Hatra, Iraq (Glueck, 1965: Figure 35a).



Figure 27. Male medusa head made of copper, Fourth Temple, Hatra, Iraq (Safar & Mustafa, 197: Figure 218).



Figure 28. Allat standing beside a male god, Limestone, Fifth Temple, Hatra, Iraq (Safar & Mustafa, 197: Figure 225).



Figure 29. Allat represented as Athena, Limestone, Fifth Temple, Hatra, Iraq (Safar & Mustafa, 197: Figure 226).



Figure 30. Medusa head between two serpents, Limestone, Great Temple, Hatra, Iraq (Safar & Mustafa, 1974: Figure 95).

A distinguished relief of medusa found at Hatra (thought to be originally from another site) (Safar & Mustafa, 1974: 118), is a female head with two wings above her head and two serpents encircling her face with being knotted together under her chin (Fig. 30), two vine trees from each side with bunches of grapes and vine leaves are going out of the head, two big serpents are extending toward the head. Comparing this work of art with examples from the tombs façades of Hegra and the one appeared on Umm Qais sarcophagus (Fig. 16 & 17), the clear function of medusa as a symbol related to funeral beliefs and afterlife is clearly seen. Three main symbols are observed in this scene: medusa head, the two serpents and the vine trees. The purpose of carving medusa head on the sarcophagus or on tomb façades is for the protection of the tomb itself and its contents, while the purpose of carving the two serpents are to insure the immortal life of the dead, since the serpent change its skin yearly, while carving the vine trees was to insure the happy and prosperous after-life of the dead.

The rest of medusa heads found at the site are carved on the bust of the goddess Allat (Fig. 28, 29, 31, 32, 33), the wings above her head and the two serpents below her chin are easily recognized in one of them (Fig. 33).

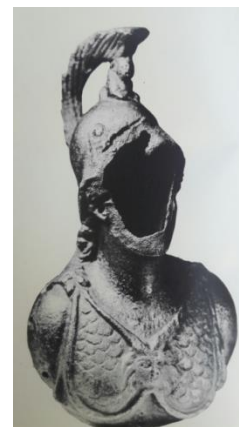


Figure 31. Allat represented as Athena, a statue of copper, Great Temple, Hatra, Iraq (Safar & Mustafa, 1974: Figure 151).



Figure 32. Allat represented as Athena, copper, Great Temple, Hatra, Iraq (Safar & Mustafa, 1974: Figure 150).



Figure 33. The goddess Allat between two female figures, Limestone, Fifth Temple, Hatra, Iraq (Safar & Mustafa, 1974: Figure 224)

### 3.4. MEDUSA IN PALMYRENE KINGDOM (3<sup>RD</sup> CENTURY A.D.)

Medusa representations at Palmyra are rare compared with its representations in Nabataean and Hatran cultures. One example was found on the bust of Allat goddess who appeared as a representation of Athena holding her spear in the right hand and laying her armor on the floor (Fig. 34).



Figure 34. Allat and the sun god before a worshipper, A third Century relief from northwest of Palmyra (Colledge, 1976: Figure 39, p 175).

### 3.5. MEDUSA & OTHER SYMBOLS

Different symbols were depicted on artistic works of Nabataeans for decoration and protection, these included snakes (symbolizing the soul of the dead and a guardian of sacred places), lion (a guardian and a symbol of death), falcon (symbolizing the passage of the soul to the other world and they connect people to deity), sphinx (a guardian), and rosette (symbolizes immortality and eternal life) (al-Zoubi & al-Qudrah, 2015). Such symbols were also observed in the arts of Hatrans and Palmyrenes. The combination of Medusa with these symbols supports its function as a protector of tombs and sarcophagi, also the dead and any other funeral objects left for afterlife. Such Classical influence was not only seen in funeral aspects; jewellery worn by Nabataeans to get protection in daily life against evil, enemies and bad luck was also buried with their dead; these pieces carried some symbols related to death as lion head, rosette, and snakes, bunch of grapes (for fertility), sea shell (for birth and innovation), palm branches (victory over death), laurel wreath (for blessings and immortality), and figures of mythological figures (as Pan, Eros and Mercury) (Almasri, et. al., 2012). Making then the presence of Medusa justified as a protector and a decorative element. It is worth mentioning that such usage of this symbol continued to the second Century A.D.; a good example is the tomb of Sextius Florentinus, the Roman governor of Arabia who died around AD 129 and was buried in Petra, one of the most elaborately ornamented facades in Petra. The Medusa head below an arched pediment with a large eagle above, which is also another significant Nabataean funeral symbol (Reynolds, 2012).

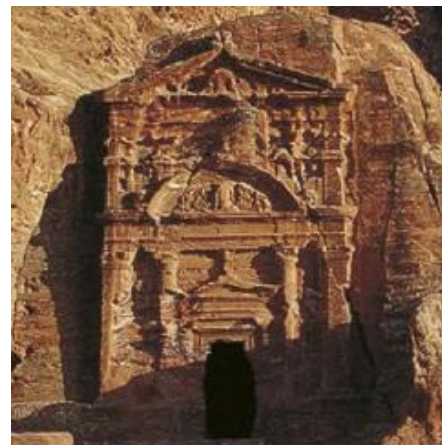


Figure 35: Sextius Florentinus Tomb (Kindersley, 2016)

### 4. CONCLUSION

Medusa head as female and male was common as a symbolic and an artistic element in Nabataean, Hatran and Palmyrene Cultures. Her statues carved, formed and molded from stone, plaster and copper,

connected with civil and religious buildings such as temples, tombs and triclinia, or carved on the bust or armor of Allat, the goddess of war and wisdom, which is also an equivalent of Athena/Minerva in Greco-Roman mythology. The head of Medusa was used in Ancient Arab kingdoms arts and funeral practices for protection and guarding the building or the tomb, and to get rid of evil spirits, this is supported by other funeral and protection symbols that combined Medusa in different works of arts.

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