



“ THE ROLE OF MYTHOLOGICAL ARCHETYPES IN PRE- CLASSICAL ART NARRATIVE”

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ABSTRACT

Mythological archetypes have shaped human perception and artistic expression since antiquity. In pre-classical civilizations—including Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Aegean, Near Eastern, and early Indic cultures—myth served as a fundamental narrative system that structured social values, cosmological ideologies, and political authority. Artists used recurring archetypal figures such as the Hero, the Mother Goddess, the Divine King, the Trickster, the Monster, and the Mediator to communicate shared cultural meaning. This paper explores how these archetypes were embedded in visual forms such as sculpture, relief carving, pottery, temple murals, and ritual artifacts. It also evaluates how mythological archetypes created coherent visual narratives long before the development of formal literary traditions. Through a comparative cultural approach, the study illustrates how archetypes functioned as symbolic tools that unified belief systems, legitimized power, mediated human–divine relationships, and shaped early visual storytelling. The paper emphasizes that pre-classical art is not simply decorative but narrative and ideological, relying on archetypal imagery that communicated complex theological and moral ideas.



KEYWORDS : Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Aegean , relief carving, pottery.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mythological archetypes are universal patterns or symbolic motifs recognizable across cultures. Carl Jung (1959) defined archetypes as primordial images rooted in the collective unconscious, forming a shared symbolic system that manifests through mythology, dreams, and art. Pre-classical art—spanning roughly from the Neolithic period through the Bronze Age—predates formalized historical writing in most parts of the world. Visual images were therefore the primary means of narrative communication.

In early civilizations, art served not only aesthetic purposes but also spiritual, ritualistic, and political functions. Mythological archetypes provided the narrative foundation upon which these functions depended. Whether in the Hero myths of Mesopotamia, the divine kingship of Egypt, the Great Mother of the Aegean world, or the cosmic order in early Indic cultures, mythic archetypes structured the way artists represented the world and its metaphysical forces. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role these archetypes played in pre-classical art narratives and how they contributed to the construction of meaning in visual culture.

2. UNDERSTANDING MYTHOLOGICAL ARCHETYPES

2.1. Archetype as a Concept

Archetypes are recurring symbolic images that represent universal patterns of human experience. Jung's psychological theory (1959) identifies archetypes such as the Hero, Mother, Wise Old Man, Trickster, Shadow, and Self. In mythological studies, Lévi- Strauss (1963) emphasized archetypes as structural components of human storytelling. Campbell (1949) further demonstrated that archetypal narrative patterns, particularly the Hero's Journey, appear across global mythic traditions.

2.2. Archetypes in Pre-Classical Contexts

In pre-classical civilizations, archetypes were not abstract psychological constructs; they were embodied in material culture. Religious rituals, funerary practices, and kingship ceremonies relied heavily on symbolic imagery. Artists transformed archetypes into concrete visual forms, enabling myths to be preserved long before widespread literacy.

Archetypal representations provided:

- Cultural continuity, linking generations through shared myths Legitimacy, strengthening rulers' divine authority
- Moral frameworks, offering narratives of virtue, order, and cosmic balance
- Social cohesion, grounding rituals and traditions in powerful symbols Thus, archetypes were central to the narrative function of early art.

3. MYTHOLOGICAL ARCHETYPES IN MAJOR PRE-CLASSICAL CIVILIZATIONS

3.1. Mesopotamia

Mesopotamian art reveals some of the earliest known archetypal images in history.

3.1.1. The Hero Archetype

The Epic of Gilgamesh, though written later, draws on even older visual traditions. Images of Gilgamesh struggling with lions or the Bull of Heaven appear on Sumerian cylinder seals (Kramer, 1981). These portray the archetypal Hero—strong, semi-divine, bridging the human and cosmic realms.

3.1.2. The Monster

Figures such as Humbaba or hybrid creatures (part bull, part human, part bird) represent chaos and danger. These monsters affirm cultural values by embodying threats that heroes must overcome.

3.1.3. The Divine King

Rulers like Sargon and Naram-Sin were often depicted with divine symbols such as horned crowns, emphasizing the archetype of the God-King (Frankfort, 1948). Such imagery reinforced political authority through mythic association.

3.2. Ancient Egypt

Egyptian art is one of the clearest examples of archetypal narrative in imagery.

3.2.1. The Divine King and Cosmic Order

The pharaoh embodied the archetype of Horus, the divine ruler. His duty was to maintain ma'at, the cosmic order. Artworks such as Narmer's Palette depict the pharaoh smiting enemies, symbolizing the restoration of divine balance (Hornung, 1999).

3.2.2. The Mother Goddess

Figures such as Isis and Hathor represent nurturing, fertility, and protection—core aspects of the Mother archetype. Temple iconography shows Isis nursing the infant Horus, a theme resonating across cultures.

3.2.3. The Journey to the Afterlife

The "Weighing of the Heart" scenes from funerary papyri portray archetypal moments of judgment, transformation, and rebirth. These images narrate the soul's trial through recognizable mythic motifs.

3.3. Aegean and Early Greek Cultures

Before classical Greece, the Minoans and Mycenaeans produced rich myth-infused art.

3.3.1. The Mother Goddess Archetype

Minoan snake-goddess figurines reflect fertility, domestic protection, and cosmic renewal (Marinatos, 2010). As archetypes, such figures connect human life to natural cycles.

3.3.2. The Bull Symbolism

The bull, symbolizing power and virility, appears in frescoes such as the Bull-Leaping scene at Knossos. This motif anticipates later Greek myths like Theseus and the Minotaur.

3.3.3. Early Heroic Narratives

Mycenaean artifacts depict warrior kings and hunting scenes that embody early forms of the Hero archetype, which would later dominate Greek epic poetry.

3.4. Indus Valley and Early Indic Traditions

Although less decipherable due to script limitations, archetypal motifs are visible.

3.4.1. Proto-Shiva (Pashupati)

The famous seal of a horned deity in yogic posture suggests the archetype of the Mediator—a figure bridging human and divine realities (Parpola, 1994).

3.4.2. Fertility and Mother Goddess Figurines

Terracotta female figurines represent the archetype of fertility, motherhood, and regeneration, consistent with broader ancient traditions.

3.4.3. Animal Totems

Tigers, bulls, and elephants embody archetypal moral and social qualities, forming part of a symbolic narrative tradition.

4. ARCHETYPES AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN PRE-CLASSICAL ART

4.1. Visual Storytelling Before Writing

In cultures without widespread literacy, visual narratives were essential. Art objects served as:

- Text-less myths Teaching tools Ritual objects Political propaganda
- Scenes carved on temple walls, pottery, or seals conveyed sequential action, much like panels in modern comics.

4.2. Symbolic Compression

- Archetypes allowed artists to condense complex myths into single images. For example: A pharaoh smiting enemies = cosmic order restored
- Hero fighting beast = triumph over chaos Goddess with child = renewal of life
- This symbolic efficiency made art a powerful storytelling tool.

4.3. Ritual Contexts

Many archetypal images appear on votive objects, ceremonial vessels, and funerary artifacts. These items narrate the spiritual aspirations of the community.

5. KEY ARCHETYPES AND THEIR INTERPRETIVE FUNCTIONS

5.1. The Hero

Represents courage, transformation, and protection. In pre-classical art, heroes often appear:

- As warriors Animal tamers Monster slayers
- Their narratives affirm societal ideals of strength and leadership.

5.2. The Mother Goddess

- Symbolizes fertility, creation, and emotional connection. Appears in: Fertility figurines
- Temple murals Ritual pottery
- She anchors the community's relationship with nature.

5.3. The Divine King

- Represents political order, sanctioned by divine authority. Depicted as: Larger than subjects
- Wearing sacred iconography Performing ritual acts
- This archetype reinforces hierarchical power structures.

5.4. The Trickster

Found in early Near Eastern and African traditions. Embodies intelligence, mischief, and creative disruption.

5.5. The Monster

Symbolizes chaos and existential danger. Appears in hybrid forms in Mesopotamian, Aegean, and Indus traditions.

5.6. The Mediator

A bridge between human and divine realms—priests, shamans, and proto-Shiva figures.

6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

6.1. Universal Patterns

- Across civilizations, archetypes serve similar functions: Establish cosmic order
- Communicate moral values Justify social structures Encode religious beliefs

6.2. Cultural Specificity

Although archetypes are universal, their visual forms differ:

- Egyptian art is formal and symbolic Mesopotamian art focuses on heroic realism Aegean art emphasizes nature and movement Indic art highlights spiritual mediation
- These variations demonstrate how archetypes adapt to local cosmologies.

7. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

7.1. Jungian Interpretation

Archetypes surface from collective unconscious patterns (Jung, 1959). Pre-classical art thus externalizes internal psychological structures.

7.2. Structuralist Interpretation

Mythic archetypes reveal binary oppositions (life/death, order/chaos), which early art expresses visually (Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

7.3. Semiotic Interpretation

Barthes (1972) argues that myth functions as a system of signs. Pre-classical art is thus a symbolic language.

8. CONCLUSION

Mythological archetypes played an indispensable role in shaping pre-classical art narratives. They provided the symbolic vocabulary through which early communities articulated their cosmologies, social hierarchies, and existential concerns. By embodying archetypes visually, artists preserved communal myths long before literary forms emerged. Whether in the form of divine kings, heroic warriors, nurturing goddesses, or monstrous adversaries, archetypes allowed early societies to create shared meanings that transcended time and geography.

Pre-classical art is, therefore, not simply decorative; it is narrative, ideological, and profoundly symbolic. Its archetypal imagery laid the foundation for later classical traditions and continues to influence modern artistic expression.

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