The Attic red-figured vase illustrated opposite and on pages 128 and 129 was acquired by the Museum last year. It is an outstanding example of the style of Polygnotos, one of the most important of the vase painters active in Athens about 450-430 B.C., who had been hitherto represented in our collection by only a minor work.

One side is decorated with a conventional scene, a king, whom the inscription calls Polyplethes, standing between two women. The other, or principal side, has a picture of Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa. Medusa lies relaxed in sleep on a rocky hillside sparsely grown with small flowering plants. Her wings rise half opened behind her. She wears a short dress (for Gorgons, when awake, were active creatures and had no use for the floor-length robes of Greek women) made of heavy wool, woven in handsome geometric patterns. Perseus (somewhat unnecessarily identified by the inscription Πιππευ[ς]), with his head turned away, seizes her by the hair and puts the cutting edge of his harpe, or sickle, to her neck. The artist has absent-mindedly made the wings of his cap point in the wrong direction. Athena watches the scene. Her aegis is still bare of the Gorgon’s head, which she will receive from Perseus after he has completed his mission.

This scene is interesting for two particularities. It is one of the earliest illustrations of the story to show the Gorgon not as a hideous monster but as a beautiful woman. Art in this respect lagged behind poetry; in an ode written in 490 B.C. Pindar already speaks of “fair-cheeked Medusa.” Much more remarkable is the second particularity, the presence of rays around Perseus’ head. They do not show in the photograph, for the paint with which they were drawn has flaked off, but the dull lines that it has left on the glaze are plainly visible on the vase itself (see the drawing on p. 130).

At least one other representation of Perseus, a drawing on a white-ground toilet box in the Louvre, shows him with rays around his head. The style of this work would date it a few years earlier than our new vase, but the attitude of its Perseus is very similar. His head is turned back, his knees are bent in a running position, and one arm (instead of both) is stretched out in front of him. It looks as if Polygnotos and the artist of the Louvre vase had been inspired by the same work. What this work was we may perhaps discover after we have considered the meaning of the rays. Since the discussion of the rays involves details of the story of Perseus and Medusa, we shall begin by briefly recalling the story.

When Akrissios, king of Argos, asked Apollo’s oracle at Delphi whether he would have a son, he was told that he would not, but that his daughter Danaë would bear a son, at whose hands he would meet his death. So he imprisoned Danaë in an underground chamber, in order that no man might approach her. But Zeus, who had fallen in love with her, transformed himself into a shower of gold raining through the roof of her prison. To Zeus she bore a son, Perseus. When Akrissios discovered this, he shut Danaë and Perseus in a chest and cast them into the sea. The chest floated to the island of Seriphos, where Danaë and Perseus were rescued and cared for by a fisherman, Diktys. After Perseus grew up, Diktys’s brother, King Polydectes, fell in love with Danaë, and to get rid of Perseus sent him after the Gorgon’s head. With the help of Hermes and Athena, Perseus succeeded in obtaining the cap of Hades, which made him invisible, the winged shoes, which helped him to fly, and the kibisis, a bag for carrying the head. He found the three Gorgons asleep and, looking the other way (for the Gorgon’s head would turn
Perseus cutting off Medusa's head as she sleeps. Detail of an Attic red-figured vase by Polygnotos. About 450-440 B.C. Rogers Fund
Attic red-figured vase of which a detail is shown on the preceding page

the beholder to stone), cut off the head of Medusa, the mortal one. Her two sisters pursued him but could not catch him, for the cap of Hades made him invisible. He returned to Seriphos and displayed the head to Polydektes and his people, who were immediately turned to stone. He then set out with the friendliest intentions to see his grandfather, Akrisios, whose fears he finally succeeded in allaying. But the oracle was fulfilled nonetheless, for one day when he was engaged in a discus-throwing contest, his discus by mischance struck Akrisios, who died of the wound.

Albert Dumont, who published the Louvre vase, explained the rays around Perseus' head as an attempt to show pictorially the magical properties of the cap of Hades. Perseus, however, had been a familiar figure in art and legend from the seventh century B.C. on. It would hardly seem likely that an artist of the mid-fifth century should suddenly find it necessary to draw attention to the well-known power of the cap of Hades. Moreover the cap is de-
of the most frequently used charms against the evil eye. People began to wonder where the head had come from and how the “Gorgon” had been deprived of it. The story of Perseus and Medusa was an attempt to answer these questions.

The myth, then, cannot be used to prove that Perseus was a sun god. Nor is there any trace of an identification of him with the sun in genuine popular belief. Philosophical speculation is another matter. In Byzantine commentaries on Hesiod we find Perseus explained as the sun and Medusa as the moisture that the sun evaporates. This probably goes back to an ancient source, but it is only one of several ancient explanations. Another, for example, made the three Gorgons three kinds of Fear vanquished by Courage (Perseus) and Wisdom (Athena).

Just when the solar explanation of Perseus was first hazarded we do not know; it may be as old as our vase. The interpretation of the Homeric gods as allegories of natural phenomena is said to have been begun by Theagenes of Rhexium in the twenties of the sixth century B.C. In the second half of the fifth century we find Metrodoros of Lampsakos applying this method even to heroes. Agamemnon, he said, was the ether, Achilles the sun, Helen the earth, Paris the air, and Hektor the moon. But such theories would hardly have been reflected in vase paintings. It is the popular forms of myths that appear on vases, not the abstruse notions of philosophers.

If our new vase and the Louvre toilet box had been painted at a later period and in South Italy, we might cite as a parallel the great halo of rays around the hero Bellerophon on a South Italian vase of the Hellenistic age. Precisely why these rays were given to Bellerophon we do not know. Perhaps they refer to something uncanny in him. For we find them (or sometimes a mere halo) on South Italian vases around such figures as Lyssa, the personification of madness, a sphinx, a sea demon, and the sea nymph Thetis, who had the power of transforming herself into other shapes. It may be, on the other hand, that the custom of giving rays to representations of the sun, dawn, and the morning star, who (except for the Sun) were among the less important figures in Greek mythology, gave rise, among artists of Italy, to a tendency toward bestowing rays on various minor mythological figures. This latter habit, however, whatever its explanation, is not Attic and so cannot be used to interpret our new vase.

The following tentative explanation of the rays at least does not contradict what we know of Attic art and of the way in which Athenian vase painters worked. One of the constellations is named Perseus, and since it is described by the astronomer Eudoxos, who lived in the first half of the fourth century B.C., it was probably recognized before his time. Various other considerations have led scholars to conjecture that its recognition goes back to the sixth century B.C. The attitude of the figure in the stars is not unlike that of the Perseus on our vase and on the toilet box in the Louvre. The knees are bent in a running position and the right arm is raised. Now Sirius, the dog star, is represented in art, for example on coins of Keos, an island...
Head of Perseus. Detail of the vase shown on page 128. Drawn by Lindsley F. Hall

off the coast of Attica, as a dog with rays around his head. I therefore suggest that Polygnotos and the artist of the Paris vase had seen a picture of the constellations among which Perseus figured as a running youth with rays around his head. Euripides in the Ion, 1146 ff., describes a tapestry representing the heavens with the sun, moon, stars, night, dawn, and a number of constellations which is used to roof a banqueting tent. Perhaps some such tapestry was the source of the Perseus on our new vase.

There is, however, an alternative possibility which has been suggested to me by Professor Nock and which seems to me attractive. Homer describes a supernatural light around the heads of fighting heroes (Iliad v. 4 ff. and xviii. 203 ff.) and in the Birds of Aristophanes (1709 ff.) Peithetairos, the founder of the city Cloud-Cuckoo-Town, is said to surpass the brilliance of stars and sun. The rays, then, may be a form of glorification of Perseus as hero. They were perhaps suggested to the artist of the original painting by the story of Danaë and the golden rain. Double meanings of this kind are not characteristic of vase paintings but occur in major art. The great mural painter Polygnotos, for example, represented Phaidra as a girl in a swing, a covert allusion to her suicide by hanging, and a number of similar instances occurred in his work.