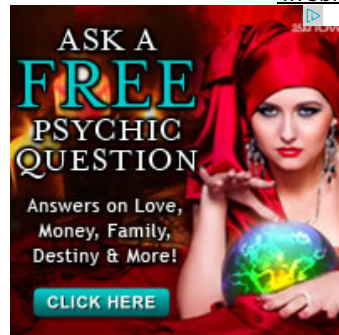


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Although coral can appear in a multitude of colors, in terms of symbolic importance, red coral usually takes center stage. Cultures around the Mediterranean Sea and in parts of Asia have assigned it important meanings for centuries. The ancient Greeks thought that when the hero Perseus beheaded the gorgon Medusa, coral was formed from drops of her blood. A similar association was to be found later in Christianity, where coral was a symbol of the blood of Christ's passion. The ancient Romans used coral as an amulet to protect against disease- particularly for young children- a practice that continued into the

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early modern era. Its strong connection with the sea also led to coral being a good luck charm of sorts, and was carried by sailors as protection against any storms or waves that might unleash their wrath on unsuspecting ships.

In India and parts of Southeast Asia, coral is one of the navaratnas, a series of nine specific gems that are linked to specific heavenly bodies as part of an ancient astrological system (the word navaratna means "nine gems" in Sanskrit). In this case, coral is associated with Mars, probably due to its red color. In certain sects of Buddhism, there is a belief that coral trees grow in paradise, and for many centuries coral was used in China to carve jewelry, statues and many other decorative items (a practice also visible in other locations where coral held symbolic importance).

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