

THE INTERSECTION OF CULTS OF APHRODITE OURANIA AND HODEGETRIA “PANAGIA MYRTIDIŌTISSA” IN THE ISLAND OF KYTHERA

APHRODITE OURANIA VE HODEGETRIA “PANAGIA MYRTIDIŌTISSA” KÜLTLERİNİN KYTHERA ADASI’NDA KESİŞİMİ

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ABSTRACT

Within the scope of this study, it is analyzed in which elements the cult of Aphrodite, a Pagan goddess born in Island of Kythera, was transferred to the Virgin Mary, one of the most important religious figures of Christianity, in the same geography. Among the epithets of Aphrodite, Ourania, which is identified with the Island of Kythera, is similar to Hodegetria-Myrtidiōtissa Mary in some aspects. In addition, the myrtle, one of the most well-known attribute of the goddess Aphrodite and the plant she patronized, was transferred to the Virgin Mary in the same cult area. Virgin Mary performed a miracle to find her lost icon in the myrtle bushes. As a result of this miracle and the cult transferred to Mary on the Island of Kythera with the icon attributed sanctity, the epithet Myrtidiōtissa, which is almost never mentioned in the sources, emerged. Just as the Temple of Aphrodite Ourania, a sanctuary was built for Virgin Mary on Island of Kythera called Church of Panagia Myrtidiōtissa and the tradition was transferred to Christianity with all its elements.

Keywords: Island of Kythera, Aphrodite Ourania, Virgin Mary, Hodegetria, Myrtidiōtissa, Myrtle, Christianity

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma kapsamında Pagan tanrıçası Aphrodite'nin Kythera Adası'nda doğan kültürün, yine aynı coğrafyada Hristiyanlığın en önemli dini figürlerinden Bakire Meryem'e hangi öğeler doğrultusunda aktarıldığı incelenmiştir. Aphrodite'nin epithetleri arasından Kythera Adası ile özdeşleyen Ourania, bazı yönleriyle Hodegetria-Myrtidiötissa Meryem ile benzerlikler göstermektedir. Bunun yanı sıra tanrıça Aphrodite'nin en bilindik sembollerinden ve himayesine aldığı bitki olan mersin, yine aynı kült alanında Bakire Meryem'e aktarılmıştır. Meryem, kayıp ikonasının mersin çalılıklarında bulunması için bir mucize gerçekleştirmiştir. Bu mucize ve kutsallık atfedilen ikona ile Kythera Adası'nda Meryem'e aktarılan kült sonucunda, kaynaklarda neredeyse hiç değinilmeyen Myrtidiötissa epitheti ortaya çıkmıştır. Tıpkı Kythera Adası'ndaki Aphrodite Ourania Tapınağı gibi yine aynı lokasyonda Panagia Myrtidiötissa Kilisesi adında Meryem'e adanmış bir mabet yapılarak gelenek Hristiyanlığa aktarılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kythera Adası, Aphrodite Ourania, Meryem, Hodegetria, Myrtidiötissa, Mersin Bitkisi, Hristiyanlık

INTRODUCTION

Many ancient cultures have been influenced by each other throughout history and have survived to the present day. From Semitic beliefs to Pagan traditions, Judaism to Christianity and Islam, many cross-cultural elements have transformed and developed and gained new identities. Various scientific studies suggest that Aphrodite, an important religious figure of her time, traces her origins to goddesses such as Ishtar, Inanne or Astarte in Near Eastern cultures. Aphrodite's pagan elements were synthesized over time in cultures with different traditions and beliefs, and new characters emerged. Similarly, it is seen that many elements and figures in Christianity, a religion of salvation, carry traces of the beliefs of previous periods. It is known from apocryphal and canonical texts that the Virgin Mary, who miraculously gave birth to Jesus Christ, also experienced various miraculous events in her own life before giving birth to Jesus Christ. It is seen that these miraculous events and the elements within them carry traces of the beliefs of ancient cultures. In this context, the Island of Kythera, the oldest worship center of Aphrodite, suggests the possibility that some elements emphasizing the divine aspect of Aphrodite may have been passed on to the Virgin Mary in a similar way.

CULT OF APHRODITE IN THE ISLAND OF KYTHERA

Kythera Island, whose existence is known from various narratives for centuries, is identified with Aphrodite, the "Goddess of Love and Beauty" of Greek mythology. One of the first names to mention this is the poet Hesiod. According to Hesiod, Kronos cuts the testicles of his father Ouranos with a sickle made of adamant stone and throws them into the sea. After a while, white foam rises from the sea. An immortal girl grows out of the foams, and this woman is Aphrodite¹ (Hes. *Theog.* 190-205; Weitzmann, 1984, p. 52). After her birth, the Goddess travels on a shell and her first landfall is Island of Kythera. This is the reason of Hesiod used the word "Kythēreian" for Aphrodite, means "Kythēreian" (Hes. *Theog.* 198). The historian Herodotos also associated Aphrodite with the Island of Kythera (Hdt. I, 105.3; Weitzmann, 1984, p. 85). He mentioned that the oldest temple dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite as Ouronia was built by the Phoenicians in the Island of Kythera. He stated that this temple was also the ancestor of the Temple of Aphrodite built on Kypros (Hdt. I, 105.3). The geographer Pausanias,

similar to Herodotos, pointed out that the Temple of Aphrodite Ourania in Kythera was the oldest and most sacred temple dedicated to the goddess (Paus. 3.23.1). Ovidius also preferred to call Aphrodite "Cythereius" in his *Metamorphoses* (Ov. *Met.* 13.624-625).

MYRTLE PLANT AS A SYMBOL OF APHRODITE

In the Greek mythology, we are aware of the existence of various plants and trees that were symbolized or patronized by gods and goddesses in the light of the information provided by ancient writers. For Aphrodite, white or pink flowers, blackberries or myrtle bushes (*myrtus communis*) with their glossy leaves and evergreen foliage are often mentioned (Oğur, 1994, p. 21; Becker, 1996, p. 208; Cyrino, 2010, pp. 63-64). The myrtle plant is thought to symbolize divine mercy or virtue, sometimes love or immortality (Becker, 1996, p. 208). Myrtle trees are also known as trees that adorned temples in the *mythos* or as aphrodisiacs in ancient times (Foster & Tudor-Craig, 1986, p. 45; Clark, 2015, p. 383). In the sources, myrtle is mentioned as a plant under the patronage of Aphrodite (Gezgin, 2010, p. 132). With the regard to this issue, the Roman poet Virgil said "and Venus fair the myrtle"²; the fable writer Phaedrus, under the title "Trees Under the Patronage of the Gods"³, wrote "The myrtle by the queen of love"⁴; the naturalist writer Pliny referred to "the myrtle to Venus"⁵; and the historian Plutarch mentioned "and the myrtle is a plant of Aphrodite"⁶.

In Hesiod's *mythos* of Aphrodite's birth, the first place the goddess visited after being born from the foam was the Island of Kythera (Fig. 1). She covered her naked body with myrtle bushes on the shores of the island (Foster & Tudor-Craig, 1986, p. 45; Pepin, 2008, p. 117). Sandro Botticelli, one of the leading painters of the Italian Renaissance, depicted the moment Aphrodite arrives on the shore of the island on a seashell, in his work "The Birth of Venus".⁷

² Verg. *Ecl.* 7.61-64.

³ "Arbores in Deorum Tutela": *The Fables of Phaedrus* 3.17.

⁴ *The Fables of Phaedrus* 3.17.

⁵ Plin. *HN* 12.2.

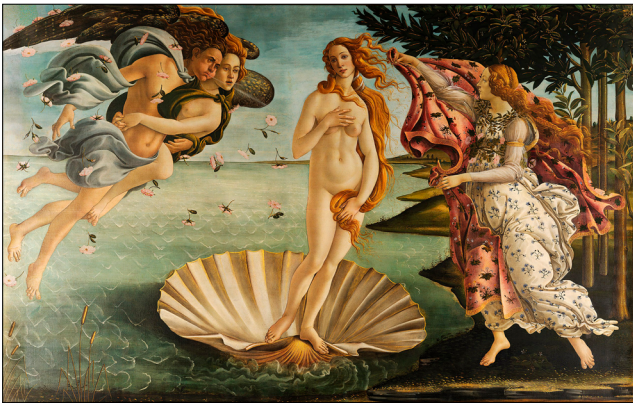
⁶ Plut. *Vit. Marc.* 22.4.

⁷ This *mythos* of the birth, originally from Hesiod, was also the source of *Stanze per la giostra* by Angelo Poliziano, one of the leading intellectuals and poets of the Italian Renaissance. Botticelli, who probably did not read Hesiod's text directly, is thought to have taken Poliziano's text as a reference in Birth of Venus. In addition, it is mentioned that the *Venus Anadyomene* (Rising from the Sea) by Apelles, one of the Hellenistic Period painters, was also a source for Botticelli. The details of this work, which has not physically survived to the present day, are described in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*. Plin. *HN* 35.36.85-7, 90-2; Gombrich, 1945, p. 9; Weitzmann, 1984, p. 53.

¹ Alan M. Greaves' study on the cult of Aphrodite in Miletos and its colonies show that Aphrodite was considered as a "goddess of the sea" in line with the Hesiod-based *mythos* of Aphrodite's birth from the sea. Associated with the epithet *Ouronia*, the Island of Kythera, where the Temple of Aphrodite *Ouronia* is located, is the most important cult center of Aphrodite born of the sea. This resulted in Aphrodite being referred to both as a Kytheran and as the "Goddess of the Sea". Greaves, 2004, pp. 27, 31.

Figure 1

Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus / *Venus'ün Doğuşu* (Google Arts & Culture: Google Art Project, Accession number: 00158551, Uffizi Gallery)



The figure standing to the right of Aphrodite is handing her a floral veil to cover her naked body. One of the most striking elements of the figure is that she is carrying around her neck a wreath made of myrtle bushes under Aphrodite's patronage (Fig. 2) (Clark, 2015, p. 383).

In Botticelli's "*Spring*", Aphrodite's relation with the myrtle plant is emphasized more seriously. Goddess Aphrodite is the main figure in the center of the painting (Fig. 3). When viewed just behind her, myrtle bushes depicted with dark colored leaves are seen. This part of the painting draws attention to Aphrodite's sanctity. The shape formed by fruit trees and bushes draws a half-round line just behind Aphrodite. This line reminds of the gate of heaven and emphasizes Aphrodite's spiritual aspect. And the myrtle bushes spread around Aphrodite's body, which is positioned in the center of the arch, in accordance with her body shape (Clark, 2015, p. 383). The myrtle bushes, of which she is the patron, extend from Aphrodite's body

Figure 2

Sandro Botticelli, The Birth of Venus, detail of myrtle wreath / *Venus'ün Doğuşu, Mersin çelengi detayı* (Google Arts & Culture: Google Art Project, Accession number: 00158551, Uffizi Gallery)

**Figure 3**

Sandro Botticelli, Spring / *İlkbahar* (Google Arts & Culture: Google Art Project, Accession number: 8360, General catalog number of Uffizi Gallery, Uffizi Gallery Florence)



to the surroundings, emphasizing the divinity of the goddess. Aphrodite's son Eros rises like a halo just above the goddess' head.

STORY OF APHRODITE'S PRIESTESS MYRENE

Considering the etymology of the word myrtle⁸, the Ancient Greek equivalents are "μυρρίνη" (*myrrinē*) or "μυρσίνη" (*myrsinē*) (Liddel & Scott, 1996, p. 1155). Aphrodite's association with this plant is again seen in Greek mythology with a virgin female figure named Myrene (in some cases Myrina⁹). Aphrodite's association with this plant is again seen in Greek mythology through the figure of a virgin woman named Myrene.

Myrina, Myrene or Myrtea was a beautiful and engaged maiden to a known man. One day robbers or pirates kidnapped her and hid her in a cave. When robbers/pirates in the robbery, young maiden was freed by the gods (or directly by Aphrodite) and escaped from the cave. She was consecrated as a priestess of Aphrodite in her temple. Afterwards, Myrina's betrothed found and tried to take her, but she killed him. Aphrodite saw the dignity of her priesthood and was impressed. Goddess thereupon turned Myrina into a myrtle tree. She granted to myrtle tree a pleasant aroma and took it under her patronage (Skinner, 1911, p. 189; Pepin, 2008, p. 117).

According to another narrative, a young man, who had previously loved Myrene, took up the task of hunting down the robbers. When he returned successful, he asked for a reward and the people of the town allowed him to take Myrene to wife, in spite of her being a priestess. But Aphrodite was displeased to see her priestess break her vows, she cast the young man into a fatal illness and turned Myrene into a myrtle tree (Skinner, 1911, p. 189).

⁸ Turkish: Mersin.

⁹ The *mythos* which includes Myrina is different the one that involves a queen of the Amazons. Strab. 12.8.6.

RELATION BETWEEN ISLAND OF KYTHERA AND THE VIRGIN MARY AS BOTH HODEGETRIA AND MYRTIDIŌTISSA

There are various titles attributed to Mary in Christian iconography and art of depiction. Prominent examples include Panagia Hodegetria (Fig. 4), Panagia Blakheritissa or Panagia Eleousa (Ševčenko, 1991a, pp. 2172-2173; Ševčenko, 1991b, pp. 2170-2171; Ševčenko, 1991c, p. 2171; Cunningham, 2021, p 17). There are also many other lesser-known epithets attributed to Virgin Mary to emphasize other aspects of her and her various miracles. One of these epithets is Panagia *Myrtidiōtissa* (Μυρτιδιώτισσα) also known as "Our Lady of the Myrtle". The story of *Myrtidiōtissa* is based on an icon found in the myrtle bushes by a shepherd on the Island of Kythera (Paspalas, 2008, pp. 197-200). At the same time, this icon gave its name to the Church of Panagia *Myrtidiōtissa*, which was founded where it was found and preserved in the church. The church still exists today in the same location (Paspalas, 2008, p. 199).

Figure 4

Berlinghiero Berlinghieri, Hodegetria (The Met object ID: 435658, Metropolitan Museum of Art New York)



According to the narrative, exactly forty days have passed since Mary's death¹⁰ (SynaxCP 891.30). On the twenty-fourth of September, a shepherd is grazing his flocks in the myrtle bushes (Paspalas, 2008, p. 217). Suddenly the Virgin appeared to the shepherd. The shepherd fell to the ground in surprise at the sight of Mary. Mary told the shepherd to look for his icon, which had been brought there many years before and hidden among the myrtle bushes (The Great Synaxaristes of September: 603-604). As soon as the shepherd got up, he started looking for the icon in the myrtle bushes. When he found the icon, he cried with happiness and took it home. He told his family and friends that he had seen Mary and found her icon. When the shepherd woke up the next day, he realized that the icon he had found in the myrtle bushes was gone. The shepherd thought that someone had stolen the icon, but he found the solution by going to the myrtle bushes. When he got there, he found the icon hidden in the bushes again. The shepherd took the icon back to his home, but when he woke up the next morning, the icon had miraculously disappeared again. He went back to the myrtle bushes and found the icon in the same place. The shepherd then realized that the Virgin wanted the icon to remain among the myrtle bushes. According to the narrative, a church dedicated to Panagia *Myrtidiōtissa* was built where the icon was first found. The building where the icon of *Myrtidiōtissa* is kept has expanded until today and has hosted many miracles¹¹ (The Great Synaxaristes of September: 605; Paspalas, 2008, pp. 199-200).

In the years following the discovery of the icon, another miracle in the same village took place as follows: A paralyzed man named Theodoros Koubanios lived in the village (Paspalas, 2008, p. 213). This man also had a strong belief that Mary could make him walk again. Every year, on the twenty-fourth of September, Theodoros sent his family to the Church of Panagia *Myrtidiōtissa* to light candles in his name and ask for Virgin's blessing. Theodoros, unaware of everything, asked his family to take him to church the year of the miracle. The paralyzed man's family took him to church on the twenty-fourth of September (The Great Synaxaristes of September: 605). During the liturgy, a loud noise was heard from the seashore. People fled the church, thinking they were being attacked by pirates. Left alone in the church, the paralyzed man panicked and asked the Virgin Mary to protect him.

¹⁰ The Dormition of the Mother of God: August 15.

¹¹ The Archives of Orthodox America, 1997, Icons of the most Holy Holy Mother of God "of the Myrtlewood".

Figure 5

Icon of the Virgin Myrtidiōtissa, Myrtidia, Kythera / *Myrtidia Myrtidiōtissa Ikonasi* (Paspalas, 2008, p. 198-Fig. 12.1)



Suddenly a voice rose from the icon and told Theodoros to stand up. The astonished man then stood up and ran out of the church. But there was no attack outside. It was just a sign from God to allow the paralyzed man to be alone in the church with the icon of the Virgin (The Great Synaxaristes of September: 605-607). So Theodoros, who had a strong faith in Mary, began to walk again and everyone witnessed the miracle of *Myrtidiōtissa*¹² (The Great Synaxaristes of September: 608).

The most remarkable thing about the *Myrtidiōtissa* icon is that it is depicted in the Hodegetria style. Hodegetria is an example known in Christian iconography as “Indicator of the Way”¹³ (Talbot Rice, 1974, p. 9; Rubin, 2009, p. 81; Maktal Canko, 2019, pp. 64-65). In the depiction of Hodegetria, the Virgin Mary holds the Christ Child on her left arm. She gestures toward him with right hand while directing her gaze either at the viewer (Talbot Rice, 1974, pp. 12-13; Ševčenko, 1991a, p. 2172). The Hodegetria depicts Mary guiding humanity, pointing out that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation from the sins of mankind. Although there are several icons of Panagia *Myrtidiōtissa* at the present times, the best known of these is a metal-plated icon, probably dating to the 17th century, preserved in the Church of Panagia *Myrtidiōtissa* on Island of

¹² The Archives of Orthodox America, 1997, Icons of the most Holy Holy Mother of God “of the Myrtlewood”.

¹³ “The one who shows the way”.

Figure 6

Icon of the Virgin Myrtidiōtissa of Alimos / *Alimos Myrtidiōtissa Ikonasi* (Paspalas, 2008, p. 215-Fig.5)



Kythera. While this icon is not the one miraculously found in the original narrative, it is important as it continues the tradition.

In this example, found in Kythera and known as the icon of Myrtidia, the Virgin Mary and the Christ-Child are depicted in the Hodegetria style (Fig. 5). Myrtle bushes are seen rising on both sides of Mary holding the Christ-Child. The noteworthy aspect of the Christ-Child is that he is holding a globe in his hand. The Christ-Child holding a globe in his hand is not uncommon in typical depictions of Hodegetria¹⁴. This globe symbolizes the authority of Jesus Christ on earth. Moreover, Jesus Christ, who is considered to be the king of the Jews, shows that he holds the power of the earthly empire with the globe, one of the most significant symbols of power in the ancient world¹⁵ (Matt. 2:1-2; Kazhdan, 1991, p. 1936). The predella part of the icon includes scenes of the finding of the icon by the shepherd in the myrtle bushes, the miracle of Virgin Mary raising the paralyzed man on his feet, and the Castle of Chora on the island of Kythera (Paspalas, 2008, p. 200).

¹⁴ For detailed information on the place of the orb (orb/globus), a symbol of power and authority, in iconography, see also: Parani, 2003, pp. 33-34, 44-45.

¹⁵ For the complete New Testament texts, reference has been made to G. Campbell’s “*The Holy Bible: Quatercentenary Edition King James Version Published in the Year 1611*”. The abbreviations in the texts are based on the Bible Book Abbreviations at logos.com.

Figure 7

Luca Signorelli, the Marriage of the Virgin / *Meryem'in Evliliği* (National Gallery of Art artwork ID: 46138, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection U.S.)



In the icon of *Myrtidiōtissa* from Alimos, which was probably made later than the icon of Myrtydia, the Virgin Mary and the Christ child appear again in the Hodegetrian style (Fig. 6). A myrtle plant is seen rising on either side of the main figures, and the child Jesus holds a globe in his hand. The predella of the icon contains the same three scenes as in the Myrtydia icon (Paspalas, 2008, p. 214). Thus, the icon of Mary which represents the cult on the island of Kythera is a unique example of a combination of Hodegetria and *Myrtidiōtissa*.

Another and perhaps the most outstanding feature of the *Myrtidiōtissa* icons is the black faces of the Virgin Mary and Christ-Child (Paspalas, 2008, pp. 204-206). Studies on the origin of this depiction, also known as “Black Virgin¹⁶” (Black Madonna) in the literature, are rare. The scarcity of examples and the absence of comprehensive studies on the “Black Virgin” in the literature make the *Myrtidiōtissa* example unique. In the earliest studies on the subject, references to antiquity are often made for this depiction in terms of origin¹⁷ (Pommerol, 1901, pp. 85-86).

The relation of the Virgin Mary, who performed these important miracles, with the myrtle plant also dates back to Island of Kythera. Likewise, one of the prominent symbols of the Goddess Aphrodite, who has a much older history than the cults of Mary, is the myrtle plant/tree. As mentioned, there are various miracles related to myrtle that Aphrodite, similar to Mary, performed.

¹⁶ The *black* attribute of Virgin is also mentioned to as, ἡ μέλας (μελανία), ὁ κατάμαυρος. Paspalas, 2008, p. 203.

¹⁷ Apart from the pre-Christian premise, another assumption is that it is of Africa origin. Scheer and Blaha-Peilleux, 2005, pp. 81-82; Also in another narrative, black-faced Virgin is mentioned again. Kain Hart, 1992, p. 216.

Figure 8

Luca Signorelli, the Marriage of the Virgin, detail / *Meryem'in Evliliği*, detail (National Gallery of Art artwork ID: 46138, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection U.S.)



Although there is no detailed information in the sources on the relevant matter, it should be taken into consideration that the myrtle plant may also be a symbolic element in Mary's marriage to Joseph (Ἰωσήφ¹⁸). The myrtle plant represents the bond between lovers or betrothed couples through Aphrodite. In marriage-related worshipping, the cult of *Ourania* promises marriage and eternal happiness to betrothed couples bound by sacred love (Şahin, 2013, p. 59 -fn. 129-). Similarly, this is also one of the elements attributed to Mary in Christianity (Dafni, 2016, p. 223). In both tradition and belief, wreaths made of myrtle branches were used in the marriage ceremony.

¹⁸ Ἰῶσῆφ.

According to The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary, men who were of marriageable age and had never been married were each given a branch/wand to decide who would be the man to marry Mary. Whoever's branch blossoms will be the man to whom Mary will be entrusted and to whom she will be married (Fig. 7). Eventually, only Joseph's branch blossomed (The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary: 7). Especially in Renaissance works depicting the marriage of Mary and Joseph, the blossoming branch must symbolically represent the myrtle plant. In the work "The Marriage of the Virgin" by the painter Luca Signorelli, the blossoming branch in Joseph's hand looks remarkably like a real myrtle branch in bloom (Fig. 8-9).

Figure 9

Myrtus Communis, Myrtle Tree / *Mersin Ağacı* (Plants of Hawaii, Image 080304-3229, Forest Starr and Kim Starr)



BIRTHS, ROOTS AND NATURES OF APHRODITE OURANIA AND VIRGIN MARY

In the *Symposion*, Plato mentioned that Aphrodite has two different natures. The first of these is Aphrodite *Pandēmos*, which Homer narrated as Aphrodite was born as the daughter of Zeus and Dione (Hom. *Il.* 5.310, 5.370; Plat. *Symp.* 180 C-185 C). The word *Pandēmos* (Πάνδημος) means "with the whole people" or "common to all people" (Liddel and Scott, 1996, p. 1296). Aphrodite *Pandēmos*, who can be characterized by her youth and fondness for worldly pleasures, appears as the Aphrodite of all people, a figure who focuses on sensual desires and her own needs. The *mythos* of birth from the foam rising from the sea, as told by Hesiodos, forms the basis of Aphrodite *Ourania* (Ὀὐρανία) (Hes. *Theog.* 173; Liddel and Scott, 1996, p. 1272). This miraculous birth story emphasizes the "heavenly or celestial" aspect of Aphrodite, in stark contrast to *Pandēmos* (Plat. *Symp.* 180 C-185 C). From Plato's account, it is understood that Aphrodite's nature of *Ourania* represents fidelity and sacred bonding beyond worldly pleasures (Plat. *Symp.* 180 C-185 C). In this context, it has a tradition that promises people everlasting happiness, especially in relation to matrimony (Şahin, 2013, p. 59 -fn. 129-).

After the *mythos* of Aphrodite's nativity, which grounded the cult of *Ourania*, when considering Mary, we again encounter a miraculous birth narrative. The relevant information is given in "The Protoevangelium of James" and "The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary".

Joachim (Ἰωακείμ¹⁹), married to Anne (Ἄννα), is a rich and pious man. Since the couple have no children, Joachim makes an offering to the temple, but his offering is not accepted because he has not sown seed in Israel. Thereupon Joachim left home and retreated to the desert to join the twelve tribes of Israel (The *Protevangelium of James*: 1; The *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*: 2). On the other hand, Anne was lamenting that she could not have children. As a last resort, Anne put on her wedding clothes and decided to pray to God. She knelt under a laurel tree and asked God to bless her and her womb (The *Protevangelium of James*: 2). After Joachim and Anne's actions, they were both visited by an angel who foretold the miracle that was about to take place (The *Protevangelium of James*: 4; The *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*: 3-4). When Joachim returned from Israel, the couple met at the city gate and embraced each other (The *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*: 4). On that day Joachim rested in his house; the next day he took his offerings to the temple. The priest carefully examined the plate Joachim had placed on the altar and saw no flaws. Joachim realized that God had forgiven him; he left the temple and went home. Nine months later Anne gave birth to a daughter. They named the child Mary (The *Protevangelium of James*: 5; The *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*: 5).

In terms of nativity stories, both Aphrodite and Mary are miraculously born figures. It is also noteworthy that *Ourania*, where the celestial side of Aphrodite is emphasized, and the story of Mary's life contain other important miracles and, in some ways, resemble each other (Hes. *Theog.* 173; The *Protevangelium of James*: 4; The *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*: 3-4). The birth of Mary's child is also a miracle. As recorded in the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel is sent to the Virgin Mary, who is betrothed to a man named Joseph (Luke 1.26-27). The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her she was about to give birth to a son and that he would be called Jesus. The Virgin Mary had been told that Jesus would be called "son of the Most High" (Luke 1.28-32). Mary told Gabriel in astonishment that she had never had a relation with a man before and asked how this could possibly happen (Luke 1.34-35). Then the angel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her. Gabriel added that the power of the Most High would overshadow Mary and that the child would be called "Son of God" (Luke 1.35). Then the angel left Mary (Luke 1.38). After Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Angel appeared to her again (Matt.

¹⁹ *Ioākeim*.

1.18-25; Luke 2.1-7, 2.9). He told her that he had good news for all mankind, because a savior had been born in the city of David. This savior was Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2.10-11).

From the biblical narratives, it is clear that Mary actually gave birth to Jesus Christ, the savior of all humanity. Mary, known as the Theotokos, "God-bearer", is the one who offers her part in the salvation of all humanity, independent of her will (Podskalsky, 1991, p. 2070). Mary therefore moves out of her maternal role and assumes a more divine identity. In Acts of the Apostles, the proclamation of salvation was sent to the children of Abraham and to those who lived in the fear of God (Acts 13.26-43). It is also stated in Acts of the Apostles that people's sins will be forgiven through Jesus and that all who believe in Jesus will be endowed with righteousness (Acts 13.38-39). In particular with regard to the salvation and eternal happiness of humanity, this structure of Christianity is recalling the mystery religions (Aydın, 2003, p. 190; Duygu, 2017, pp. 76-7).

Mystery religions do not represent a religious structure on their own. They were mostly found in the Mediterranean Basin. Mystery religions included some faith traditions that were supervised by the Roman Empire. Cults such as Mithras, Cybele or Osiris are the most popular of these traditions centered around various *mythos* (Cumont, 1911, pp. 53-54; Duygu, 2017, pp. 73-76). There are also remarkable analogies between some elements of Christianity and mystery religions, such as the miraculous birth of Jesus as the savior of mankind, his murder by his enemies and his subsequent resurrection (Aydın, 2003, pp. 190-191; Duygu, 2017, pp. 76-77; Temiztürk, 2018, p. 141). Mary's miraculous birth of Jesus, the only way of salvation from the sins of humanity, points to a sacred mission. Mary's miraculous birth of Jesus, the only way of salvation from the sins of humanity, points to a sacred mission.

Clearly, when the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus, she did not just give birth to a baby; she attained a holy status by giving birth to Jesus, the son of God. In this sense, beyond being a mortal woman in various aspects, she assumes a divine role similar to Aphrodite *Ourania*.

The ascension of Mary to the rank of queen of the heavens or paradise, like Aphrodite *Ourania*, was realized by the church and its adherents. At the root of this issue is the debate on whether Mary is the Christotokos or the Theotokos. With the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, the belief that Mary gave birth not only to Jesus, a human being, but also to Jesus, the son of God, was accepted²⁰

(Cameron, 1978, pp. 87-88). Thus, the Theotokos nature, which emphasizes the divinity of Mary, was officially recognized.

In addition to the permeability between the cults of Aphrodite *Ourania* and Mary, Astarte, one of the goddesses of the Near East, is also a necessary figure to be mentioned. It is noteworthy that Astarte, who is considered equal to Inanna/Ishtar, bears Aphrodite's epithet *Ourania*. In accordance with this epithet, Goddess Astarte is also referred to as "Queen of Heaven" (Dhorme, 1956, p. 59; Greaves, 2004, p. 31). This characterization is significant as it represents the origin of cults emphasizing the celestial aspect of both Aphrodite and Mary.

CONCLUSION

The goddess Aphrodite is one of the most remarkable figures of Greek mythology. There are different stories about her birth in Homer and Hesiod. While Homer points to Aphrodite's biological parents, Hesiod mentions the miraculous birth of the goddess and her divine aspect. Plato pointed out two different natures of Aphrodite, *Ourania* and *Pandēmos*, based on these *mythoi* in his *Symposion*. The oldest shrine to Aphrodite *Ourania* is located on the Island of Kythera. The common area where the cults of Aphrodite and Mary converge is Island of Kythera. The place where Mary's cult of *Myrtidiōtissa* took place and where she performed miracles is also Island of Kythera. Upon this event, a church was built in the same place dedicated to Mary, similar to Aphrodite's sanctuary, and its name was honored with *Myrtidiōtissa*. The myrtle plant, patronized by Aphrodite and sacred in many works of art, is the most important element of Mary's sanctuary on the Island of Kythera. It is also on the island of Kythera where, through the spiritual guidance of Mary, her lost icon was found among the myrtle bushes. In this icon, Mary is depicted with myrtle bushes, as in her hiding place, and in addition, the black-faced Mary and Christ-Child appear in Hodegetria style. With its depiction of Hodegetria, this icon is very important as it emphasizes Mary as a mother and her son Jesus, who will be martyred for the salvation of humanity. With all these qualities, in which her heavenly and divine aspects are also emphasized, Mary shows an analogy with Aphrodite *Ourania*. The myrtle plant stands out as a sacred motif on the cult site of Kythera Island. Aphrodite's *Ourania* nature formed an important link with Mary's titles of Hodegetria and *Myrtidiōtissa*, forming a unic synthesis. Through this synthesis, Aphrodite transferred her patronage and some elements of the cult of *Ourania* to Mary. As a natural consequence, all these elements were transferred to Christianity. The new Christian cult, which also embraced the myrtle plant and various miracles, was centered on the island of Kythera rather than Anatolia.

²⁰ As it is known, Ephesus is also the cult site of the goddess Artemis. Artemis, who was considered sacred by the local people living here, found a new identity with the acceptance of Mary's divinity as a result of the Council of Ephesus, and the local people were pleased in terms of faith. This reveals another important example of the permeability between cults. Acts 19.28-37; Cooper, 2004, p. 41.

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