

TETHYS AND THALASSA IN MOSAIC ART

ŞEHNAZ ERASLAN

Arkeolog Dr., T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı
Kültür Varlıkları ve Müzeler Genel Müdürlüğü
erionaz@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Tethys who represents the feminine fertility of the fresh water in the Greek mythology, was among the Titans, the children of the first generation of God and Goddess. Tethys, as being a sister/wife of Oceanus, the stream encircling earth, was depicted frequently in the Roman Imperial Period, especially on the mosaic pavements of pools and baths. In the mosaics of the Early Roman Period she accompanied her husband Oceanus with the sea monster Cetus who wraps her neck. From the 3rd century A.D. on, Tethys has been depicted alone, e.g. without her husband on the mosaics and then, the expression of Tethys was integrated with Thalassa, who also symbolizes the sea.

This paper focuses on the reasons why the figures of Tethys depicted in the mosaics have turned into the figures of Thalassa. In order to explain the topic, firstly the similarities and differences among the Tethys-depicted mosaics will be compared and contrasted chronologically.

Key Words: *Tethys, Thalassa, mosaic, Roman era.*

MOZAİK SANATINDA TETHYS VE THALASSA

ÖZET

Grek mitolojisinde, Uranus ve Gaia'nın çocukları olan Titanlar arasında yerini alan Tethys, suların doğurgan dişiliğini temsil etmektedir. Tethys, dünyayı çepeçevre saran suların Tanrısı olan eşi Okeanos ile birlikte genellikle Roma Döneminde hamam ve havuz yapılarındaki mozaiklerde betimlenmiştir. Erken dönem Roma mozaiklerinde deniz canavarı Ketos ile birlikte Okeanos'a eşlik etmektedir. M.S.3.yüzyıldan sonra yanında Okeanos olmadan tek başına betimlenirken daha sonraki dönemlerde denizi sembolize eden Thalassa olarak mozaiklerde yer almıştır.

Bu makalede, mozaiklerde betimlenen Tethys figürlerinin daha sonra yerini Thalassa figürlerine bırakmasının nedenleri üzerine bir değerlendirme yapılmaktadır. Konuyu açıklamak için öncelikle Tethys betimli mozaiklerin kronolojik sıralaması dikkate alınarak benzerlikleri ve farklılıkları açıklanmaya çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Tethys, Thalassa, mozaik, Roma Dönemi.*

INTRODUCTION

The marine goddess Tethys has a significant place among Greek gods. According to early Greek poets, Tethys and her brother Oceanus are from Titans being children of Uranus and Gaia. Hesiodos indicates that Tethys married Oceanus and this marriage formed the seas of world (Hesiod, *Theog*, 132- 136- 337). According to Homeros, Oceanus is the oldest of all water Gods, while Tethys represents the fertile femininity (Homer, *Il*, xiv.201). However in Late Greek and Latin literature the goddess is defined as the personification of the sea, antique writer Hyginus in his fables calls Thalassa daughter of Aether and Hemera (Hygin. *Fab. Praef*, 2).

In the earliest Tethys mosaics, it is seen that the Goddess acts a part as the wife of Oceanus in Antioch, Zeugma and Garni. It is impossible to find a prototype of these compositions neither in relief, painting nor in sculpture. However, in depiction art of Hellenistic Era, the portrayals of sea gods and various sea creatures were quite often used. For this reason, it wouldn't be wrong to state that the originals of them are based on a depiction example coming from Hellenistic Era.

In these early mosaics, Tethys accompanies her husband and brother Oceanus assuming a mythological role with two wings on her forehead and with the sea monster Cetus enfolding his neck. Cetus, especially in Tethys depicted mosaics, are sometimes seen as a protective presence standing next to Tethys and attacking outwards.

TETHYS AND OCEANUS MOSAICS

The oldest mosaics featuring Tethys were discovered Calender House in Antioch (Fig.1). This mosaic, which is on display in Antakya Museum, is dated back to 2nd century A.D (Levi 1947: 38-9; Lassus 1983: 257; Campbell 1988: 61). In the "Calendar House" mosaic, Tethys and Oceanus were depicted with various marine animals. Tethys probably holds the body of Cetus with her left hand. The figures of Oceanus in such examples were described with a rudder resting on the shoulders and a pair of claws on hair. And Tethys was depicted with a pair of wings on her hair and a Cetus around. It seems that whole-body representations of Oceanus and Tethys together are compositions of Antioch origin; and there is not an example until now, in which they were depicted in whole-body form together in Roman provinces other than Anatolia. The mosaic has the characteristics of naturalistic Greco-Roman style in terms of technique and style (Dorigo 1971: 56-58; Wages 1986: 120). The most prominent feature of this mosaic is the importance attached to presentation of figures rather than geometrical ornamentations or ornamental plant figures in pictorial areas. By the display of light and shadow in colour transitions, the figures take form in the mosaic. As in Hellenistic depictions, the figures were handled realistically and foreground and background were separated from each other.

Similar mosaic examples including Oceanus and Tethys can also be found in Zeugma. In the mosaic unearthed from the ground of pool of the "House of Poseidon" dated 3rd century AD. In this mosaic Poseidon, Oceanus and Tethys were depicted together (Ergeç *et*

al. 2000:110; Önal 2002: 35-38) (Fig. 2). Poseidon, sitting his golden chariot pulled by creatures with a horse body in the forepart and a coiling hinder-quarter, namely Hippocampus, holds a trident with his right hand. In the below part of the mosaic, Oceanus and Tethys were depicted side by side. The maturity expression created by silver tesserae in his hair and beard is striking. The indicators of the Goddess in early periods, in other words a pair of wings and Cetus, are seen in such mosaic too. In stylistic terms, it resembles the Tethys figure depicted in "Calendar House" mosaic. Both of these mosaics tend to display the characteristics of classical naturalism. The absent expression in the eyes of Tethys, the random placement of the fish, and showing the fish as if moving bear the characteristics of classical naturalist forms. The greatest similarity is seen in description of the fish, placed on all areas of the panels, swimming freely. Here, the artist aimed to imitate the marine life by including various fish in different colours such as octopuses, eels, shrimps and seashells.

One of the mosaics depicting Tethys and Oceanus together have been found on the pavement of Roman Bath in Garni (Wages 1986: 120; Thierry- Donabedian 1987: 529). In the mosaic dated 3rd century AD, the outmost part of the panel was bordered by a pink stripe, and the figures of Nereid, Eros and fish ornament were used as border ornamentation (Fig. 3). As the mosaic is in a highly-damaged situation, only eyes and hair of Tethys and hair of Oceanus can be seen. The colour tones of hair of Oceanus were separated by black tesserae in horizontal lines. In this horizontally lined hair are the claws. The face and eyes of the Goddess were depicted lineally and shading method was not used. Over their heads is the inscription including an Ancient Greek phrase, ΜΗΔΕΝ ΛΑΒΟΝΤΕΣ ΗΡΓΑΣΑΜΕΘΑ (We have worked for nothing in return). We can conclude from this inscription that the mosaic master made the mosaic for free of charge. In the preserved area at the top right-hand corner of the square frame in which Oceanus and Tethys were depicted, the inscription, ΘΕΤΙΣ (Thetis), written in Ancient Greek language is seen. At the upper part of the mosaic, Tethys is seen as sitting on a Triton swimming in the sea. The face and eyes of the Goddess were depicted lineally and shading method was not used. The stylistic perception of the East can be observed in the mosaic. The figure types are under an oriental influence. In this manner, the mosaic in Garni displays stylistic features highly different from the other mosaics found in Antioch and Zeugma.

TETHYS MOSAICS

Tethys figures have some changes in the examples of the second half of 3rd century AD. One of the most important changes is that Tethys has been depicted without Oceanus. The other significant change is that rudder theme which was one of the indicators of Oceanus, is now observed for Tethys.

While Tethys has endured in Antioch and its surroundings, Oceanus figures have endured in European and North African geographies, except for Eastern states, in the shape of head/mask with sea animals and mythological sea creatures until 6th century AD. (Becatti 1967: 112-13; Clarke 1979: fig.93-4 Voute 1972: 639-73; Dunbabin 1978: 152; Eraslan 2012:157-166) (Fig.4).

In this period goddess' faces are depicted as bulky and dull, instead of classical-naturalist form. In the Sun Dial House (Fig.5), it is seen that Tethys has been in the first stages of this development and has been depicted as bulky and old, her nose as plump and big and her lips as pale and distorted (Levi 1947: 214). Moreover, this figure has been in the first phase of this period as goddess is not on the main panel and depicted as a complementary component without fish, Cetus or Eros showing a change in the models of Tethys. One of the changes is that rudder theme which was one of the indicators of Oceanus, is now observed for Tethys.

In a mosaic found in Tarsus (Fig.6) and dated back to 3rd century AD, Tethys was depicted alone and in bust form. Tarsus, among the mosaics depicting Tethys alone, has an important role as it depicts rudder and shows the change. Moreover, a masculine appearance instead of ideal beauty can be observed in Tethys of Tarsus. It is possible to say that this type is modelled after by the Tethyses in Anazarbus (Anavarza) and Philippolis (Shahba). Common features of these types are wavy and messy hair, round chin and a masculine appearance.

As mentioned above, the closest follower of the Tethys of Tarsus which is depicted as winged and bust form with a rudder is Tethys in Anazarbus (Anavarza) (Fig.7) dating back to the 4th century AD (Budde 1969: 95). The goddess, alone and in bust form, is depicted naked on the curves showing sea waves to her shoulders. On the right of the Tethys there is Eros riding on a dolphin and on the left of the Tethys there is Eros sitting on the rocks. This mosaic is accepted to demonstrate one of the most beautiful scenes showing furiousness of the sea goddess (Bingöl 1997:129). Anazarbus (Anavarza) mosaic is similar to Tarsus mosaic in many ways: lips, oval and plump face, round chin, big nose, pink colored cheeks, wavy hair, thick and long neck, wings in forehead. The greatest similarity is that both of the goddesses are depicted in a masculine appearance. Anazarbus (Anavarza) mosaic has a more masculine appearance with her neck and big nose. The decorative and abstract scene in the Anazarbus (Anavarza) mosaic is different from the previously mentioned Calendar House which has a classical naturalist form. In this stylistic process, it is understood that Cetus, rudder, Eros and dolphins are used as complementary elements beside Tethys in this all-changing-composition.

In the style called Constantine Renaissance which dominates in the second half of 4th century AD, classical models were again in use. The most characteristic features of the style are calm appearances of figures, shapely facial lines and the importance given to details (Dunbabin 1999:166). Tethys mosaic in Philippolis (Shahba) is considered as one of the best examples of this style (Fig.8). The bigness of the eyes of Tethys who is depicted in bust form and alone, and central of the mosaic with salient facial lines and the goddess with the movement of her dark colored hair has characteristics of Constantine Renaissance (Balty 1977: 66). The goddess, who is under the water to her shoulders, is depicted on the light yellow floor as large as to cover all the space of the square. Her eyes are salient and big and her eyebrows are thick and dark-brown colored. This mosaic, among other Tethys mosaics, is the closest example of Anazarbus (Anavarza) mosaic. The models of lips and cheeks are almost the same. But the mosaic in Philippolis (Shahba) has

shapely nose and facial lines in classical ideal beauty. The most salient similarities of the goddesses depicted in bust form are that all indicators of Tethys are found in the scene. A stylistic approach to abstraction is observed in both of the mosaics. This feature is observed in the Eros in the frame instead of the central figure in Philippolis (Shahba) mosaic and in Eros in the central scene in Anazarbus (Anavarza) mosaic. A more striking feature is the masculine appearance of the two goddesses. As Philippolis (Shahba) mosaic unites classicism and abstraction, Balty dated this mosaic back to the second quarter of the 4th century AD.

THALASSA MOSAICS

The change in the Tethys figures continued in the early stages of the late Antique Period. This change is so explicit that even Tethys, who is described with a double-wing on her head as we see mostly in Antioch and Zeugma, is depicted as Thalassa with lobster claws on her head from after the second half of the 4th century A.D. In fact, the reason of lobster claws, which normally belong to Oceanus, to be seen on Thalassa figures can be explained as the indicator of lobster claws' transformation into an element of seamen folklore.

The presence of Thalassa mosaics is there after the middle of the 4th century A.D. Known to be the personified posture of the marine for the Greek in this period, Thalassa is portrayed on the mosaics with lobster claws on her head and the wheel on her shoulder together with Cetus. According to this, it will not be wrong to say that the earliest sample of Thalassa is located in Jaén (Spain) (Fig.9). On a mosaic in Jaén dating back to the second half of the 4th century A.D., Thalassa, depicted alone and in a bust form, appears as emerged out from the sea together with two Cetuses each on her sides (Blázquez 1990: 285). The goddess is no longer depicted with two wings on her head but, as apparent here, with two lobster pincers rising from the sides of her head. One of the most important indicators of Tethys, Cetus, is present in Thalassa figures, as well.

A Thalassa mosaic found in Antioch can be pointed out as the closest successor of the mosaic in Jaén in respect to chronology. The mosaic is found in the B room of a building called 'Yakto Complex' (Fig.10). Levi dated this mosaic which belongs to the iconographic evolution of this group to the third quarter of the 5th century A.D (Levi 1947: 323-5). Similar to the example in Jaén, Thalassa on this panel is depicted alone and in bust form with twin lobster claws on her head. In the Yakto Complex mosaic, craftsman concretized the waves on the sea surface using dark and light tones of the green tessera. The artist succeeded in creating a real sea atmosphere by using the tones of green and used the sea as a border. There are Erores riding dolphins and several different types of fishes rising from among the waves surrounding Thalassa on the bottom of the panel.

However, in the 6th century A.D. one can locate changes in the figure styles depicted on the mosaics. In this period, there are oval faces pictured from front, huge and open eyes, outlined body lines, names defining the figures, flashing colors, dark and light tones to indicate color differences on the white background (Dunbabin 1999: 199).

One of the examples of this style is a Thalassa mosaic thought to be appeared in Syria between the 5th and the 6th centuries A.D (Fig.11). In the mosaic, Thalassa is depicted alone and in bust form in a medallion (LIMC VII: 1199). On the left side of her head, the name of the goddess (Thalassa) is written in Greek. Since Thalassa on the mosaic is depicted together with an inscription, this piece is considered highly important for the iconography. Her face and body is depicted from the front turned to the viewer. Different from the classical examples, the figure of the goddess is schematized and thus took a decorative form. Probably, the mosaic craftsman has aimed at creating a decorative composition out of the goddess figure schematizing Cetus and fish form, instead of making a counterpart of reality.

During the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. the change in Thalassa figures continues. The lobster claws on Thalassa's head are not depicted in the figures any more. The reason of this should be related to the fact that the natural forces representing the Gods have been personified.

The last example of Thalassa compositions is a mosaic found in the Church of Apostles in the city of Madaba in Jordan (Fig.12) (Piccirillo 1991: 116-7). There is an inscription of Thalassa above the head of the goddess. Why is Thalassa depicted in a Christian church? The Greek scripture surrounding the goddess reads that "God the creator of the heavens and earth; give Anastasios, Thomas, Theodoros and Salamis who made the mosaic a long life." The mosaic craftsman begs God for gratitude for such an unholy composition. Hence, it is acknowledge that the goddess is recognized with all her nakedness in the 6th century A.D. The reason of the disappearance of lobster pincers in the compositions can be attributed to the deity natural forces' being personified. Just like it is here, the sea is depicted as Thalassa being personified. The fact that a pagan mosaic is present in a Christian church indicates that the pagan gods are still respected.

Consequently, it is possible to say that Tethys figures are compiled of three periods. In the first period, Tethys is together with her husband Oceanus in a Godly manner as a mythological figure. Thus we can say that Oceanus and Tethys were portrayed with their divine identities in Asia.

In the second period, she is without Oceanus and with identification that symbolizes the sea. In this period, Tethys continued her existence in Antioch, Tarsus and Anavarza, and in today's Syria, Shahba. Accordingly we tend to think that the origins of examples depicting Tethys individually are in Antioch. In such mosaics, Tethys was described in the centre of the mosaic with wings on her head, the rudder resting on her shoulders and the Cetus around. It has been determined that figures of Eros and marine animals accompany Tethys in some mosaics. In these period Oceanus continued to survive in Europe and North Africa geography until the 6th century AD. In such depictions, Oceanus was depicted as coming out of the sea at shoulder length and sometimes as in mask form on sea ground with various mythological creatures or marine animals around.

And in the third period, she is at last as the figure of Thalassa who is a personification of the sea. Although most of the Tethys figures are found around Antioch,

Thalassa figures are found today's Syria, Jordan and Spain. Figures of Tethys and Thalassa, despite of their functional and stylistic differences, are the same in composition. Thalassa figures appear in mosaics in Late Antique period & Early Christian Period as the successor of Tethys figure who is depicted with a story-telling fashion as the wife of Oceanus, the symbol of marine's productive femininity. The fact that these kinds of pagan figures appear in the church mosaics mostly in the eastern regions, is important for the reason that it shows how the goddess is still respected.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balty, J. 1977. *Mosaiques Antiques de Syrie*, Bruxelles.
- Becatti, G. 1967. *The Art of Ancient Greece and Rome, from the Rise of Greece to the Fall of Rome*, New York.
- Ben Abed- Ben Khader. A. (ed.)2003. *Image in Stone: Tunisia in Mosaic*, Paris.
- Bingöl, O. 1997. *Malerei Und Mosaik Der Antike In Der Türkei*, Mainz /Rhein: Philipp von Zabern
- Budde, L. 1969. *Antike Mosaiken in Kilikien I*, Münster: NRW.
- Campbell, S. 1988. *The Mosaics Of Antioch*, Canada: Gagne.
- Cimok.F. 2000. *Antioch Mosaics*, İstanbul: A Turizm.
- Clarke, J.R. 1979. *Roman Black and White Figural Mosaics*, New York.
- Dorigo, W. 1971. *Late Roman Painting*, New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Dunbabin, K. M. D. 1978. *The Mosaics of North Africa, Studies in Iconography and Patronage*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Dunbabin, K. M. D. 1999. *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eraslan, Ş. 2012. "Antik Dönem Sanatında Okeanos Figürleri", *Atatürk Üniversitesi Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi Dergisi / Journal of Fine Arts Faculty*, Erzurum, 22 :157-166.
- Ergeç, R- Önal, M- Wagner, J. 2000."Seleukeia am Zeugma Euphrat/ Zeugma. Archäologische Forschungen in einer Garnisons- und Handelsstadt am Euphrat", , *Gottkönige am Euphrat. Neue Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Kommagene*, J. Wagner (ed.), 105–113.
- Hesiod. *Theog.* 1966. (= Hesiodos, *Theogonia*), Kullanılan metin ve çeviriler: *Theogony*. With an English trans. by M. L. West. Oxford.
- Homer. *II.* 1988. (= Homeros, *Ilyada*) Kullanılan metin ve çeviri *İlyada*. çev. Azra Erhat-A.Kadir. Can Yayınları.
- Hyg. *Fab.* 1933. (= Hyginus. *Fabulae.*) Kullanılan metin: Ed. H. J. Rose, Hygini Fabulae.
- Önal, M. 2002. *Mosaics of Zeugma*, A Turizm Yayınları.
- Lohuizen-Mulder, Mab Van. 1998. "Frescoes in the Müslim Residence and Bath House Qusayr Amra", *Bulletin Antieke Beschaving*, 73-133.
- Piccirillo, M. 1993. *The Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman: American Center of Oriental Research.

Lassus, J. 1957. *Réflexions sur la technique de la mosaïque*, Conférence-visite du Musée S. Gsell, Alger, 50 p.

Levi, D. 1947. *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Thierry, J. M.- Donabedian, P. 1987. *Les Arts Arméniens*, Paris: Mazenod.

Voute, P. 1972. "Notes sur l'iconographie d'Océan. À propos d'une fontaine à mosaïques découverte à Nole (Campanie)" *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Antiquité* 84 : 639-674.

Wages, S. M. 1986. "A Note on the Dumbarton Oaks Tethys Mosaic", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 40: 119-128.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

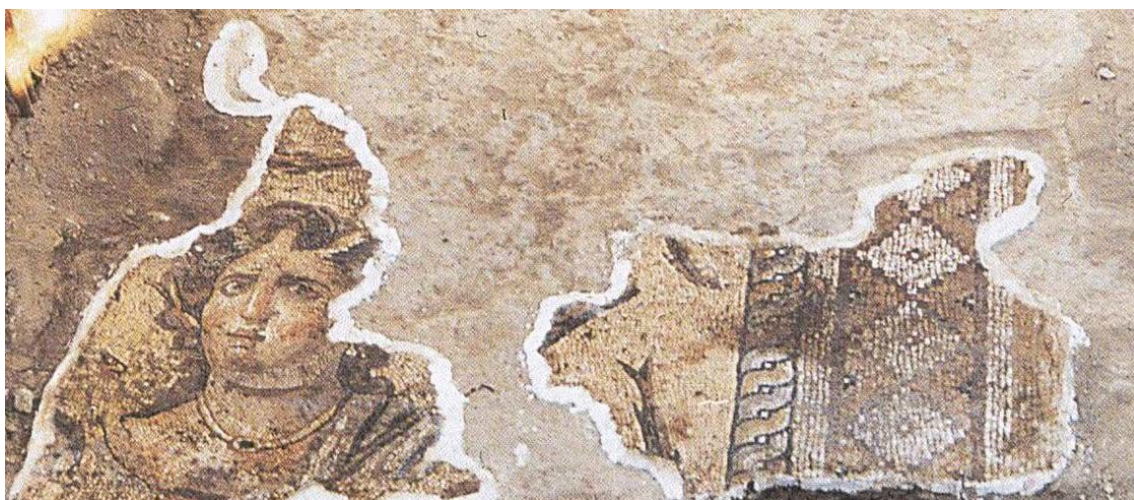


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12