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OCEANUS, TETHYS AND THALSSA FIGURES IN THE LIGHT OF ANTIOCH AND ZEUGMA MOSAICS

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Abstract

The iconography of Oceanus and Tethys is a composition depicted both together and individually especially on the floor mosaics of pools and baths in the period of Roman Empire. When we analyze the samples gained from Europe, Asia and Northern Africa where the Roman Empire reigned, we determine that goddess acted as the wife of Oceanus just on Asia mosaics. In Late Ancient Period, Tethys was described as Thalassa, the personalized form of the sea. These mosaics have appeared mostly in Antioch (Antakya) and Zeugma.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the figures of Oceanus and Tethys typologic and iconographic in the light of certain mosaic examples selected from the Roman Period.

Keywords: Roman Period, Mosaics, Oceanus, Tethys

Introduction

In Greek and Roman traditions, Oceanus was considered as the oldest of all ocean gods and Tethys is considered as the fertile power of oceans. In Greek mythology, this world-ocean was personified as a Titan, a son of Ouranos and Gaea. Hesiodos indicates that Oceanus married Tethys and this marriage resulted in the formation of rivers, seas and water sources (Hesiod, *Theog*, 132- 136- 337). On the other hand, in Greek and Latin literatures of Late Ancient Period, Tethys was described as Thalassa (Θάλασσα), the personalized form of the sea (Hygin, *fab*, pref,2).

Such mythological figures survived in various fields of art, from Archaic Period until Late Roman Period. Although limited to a few examples in the Archaic and Hellenistic periods, they became a popular theme with respect to the mosaic art especially during the Roman Period. In Archaic and Hellenistic periods, this Titan was often depicted as having the upper body of a muscular man with a long beard and horns (often represented as the claws of a crab) and the lower body of a serpent. In Roman Period, Oceanus was generally described as an old man with long beard and hair. Among his indicators are a pair of claws and a rudder resting on his shoulders. On the other hand Tethys has a mythological role in the mosaics of Early Roman Period; she accompanies her husband Oceanus. In this period, she was generally described as a young and beautiful woman. Among her indicators was a pair of wings on both sides of her head and a Cetos covering her neck (Eraslan, 2012:158,159).

The function of architectural structures in Ancient Period influenced the selection of mosaic compositions. The mosaics depicting Oceanus and Tethys are known to have been inlaid at bath, pool and *triclinium* parts of private houses/villas and at *tepidarium* and *frigidarium* sections of public bathhouses in Roman Period. As it is seen, they were inlaid in sections related to water since they are water gods. Again it is understood that the mosaics depicting such mythological concepts were common between the 2nd century AD and 6th century AD. According to my observations it is possible to classify the figures of Oceanus and

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Tethys belonging to such period in two types; Oceanus and Tethys Depicted Together, and Oceanus and Tethys Depicted Individually.

In the earliest mosaic examples depicting Oceanus and Tethys, it is seen that Tethys plays a role as the wife of Oceanus only in mosaics found in Antioch and Zeugma and in Garni (Armenia). In such examples included in the first type called as Oceanus and Tethys depicted Together, the figures of Oceanus and Tethys were described side by side in whole-body form or as busts.

Oceanus and Tethys Mosaics

The earliest examples of Oceanus and Tethys found in ancient city of Antioch. In these earliest examples, Oceanus and Tethys were depicted as either sitting face to face or half-lying as example “Calendar House” mosaic and “House of Tethys and Oceanus” mosaic dated 2nd century AD. In such mosaics, the figure of Tethys belonging to the semi-nude designs of Hellenistic Era covers a large part of the mosaic (Dorigo, 1971: 57).

In the “Calendar House” mosaic, Tethys and Oceanus were depicted as surrounded by *himation* under their waists and together with various marine animals (Levi, 1947: 38–9; Lassus, 1983: 257; Campbell, 1988: 61) (Fig. 1). They both sit on the sea floor. Tethys leans left and raises her left hand up. She 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. In the “House of Tethys and Oceanus” mosaic, they were depicted as half-lying reciprocally; their faces and bodies are parallel to each other (Levi, 1947: 222) (Fig. 2). It seems that whole-body representations of Oceanus and Tethys together are compositions of Antioch origin; and there is not an example, in which they were depicted in whole-body form together in Roman provinces other than Anatolia.



Figure 1: Antioch, Oceanus and Tethys

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.



Figure 2: Antioch, Oceanus and Tethys

The earliest Depictions busts of Oceanus and Tethys have been found in Antioch. In such mosaics, the busts of Oceanus and Tethys are generally seen within a square or rectangular frame. The most prominent feature of these mosaics is that bodies of Oceanus and Tethys were pictured as coming out of the sea side by side at shoulder length. In all of such mosaics they are surrounded by marine animals. All Tethys figures in this type have a pair of wings on their forehead as seen in all depictions in whole-body form. The common characteristic of Oceanus figures of this type is that all of them have bushy hair and beard. Moreover, all of them were depicted with a pair of claws arising from the bushy hair.

One of the earliest examples of such mosaics has been found in "House of Menander" dated 3rd century AD in Antioch (Levi,1947: 214; Cimok, 2000: 187) (Fig. 3). Designed on a central basis, a large part of the mosaic is covered by Gods and Goddesses. Eros figures were placed reciprocally and upside and down. The fish on left and right sides of Oceanus and Tethys swim symmetrically towards each other. In the mosaic, the artist created a three dimensional effect in colours. The mosaic has the characteristics of naturalistic Greco-Roman style in terms of technique and style. The importance attached to presentation of figures rather than geometrical ornamentations or ornamental plant in pictorial areas is observed in this mosaic too.



Figure 3: Antioch, Oceanus and Tethys

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. Poseidon, Oceanus and Tethys were depicted together (Ergeç *et all* 2000, 110; Önal, 2002: 35-38) (Fig. 4). 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.



Figure 4: Zeugma, Oceanus and Tethys

One of the mosaics depicting Tethys and Oceanus together have been found pavement of Roman Bath in Garni. 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 (Wages, 1986: 120; Thierry- Donabedian, 1987:529) (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Garni, Oceanus and Tethys

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 ΗΡΤΑΣΑΜΕΘΑ (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, ΘΗΤΙΣ (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.

The three dimensional effect observed in mosaics depicting Oceanus in Antioch and Zeugma cannot be observed in the mosaic of Garni. In other words, light-shadow and semitones of colours were not used; the figures were depicted superficially rather than in forms. By using a single stripe, the lines were

designated, and such linearity limited the form and it seems as if there is a single outline. It is noticed that the figures of Nereid, Triton and Eros depicted in the large border area are not in line with the realistic measurements. Dolphin and Eros figures placed in the scene in both of the mosaics were described in border ornamentation in the mosaic of Garni, and around the bust in "House of Menander" mosaic.

It is not possible to find a prototype neither in relief art nor painting art nor in sculpture art, which could have an influence on such compositions. However, in description art during the Hellenistic Era, depictions of sea gods and various marine animals were typically used. Therefore, we are also in the opinion that the original forms of such depictions originate from a description example belonging to the Hellenistic Era.

Tethys Mosaics

After the second half of the 3rd century AD, the figures of Oceanus and Tethys are considered to be included in the second type, namely Oceanus and Tethys Depicted Individually. The most prominent aspect of this type is separate depiction of Oceanus and Tethys, not as husband and wife. It stands out that Tethys was depicted individually mostly in Antioch and its environs (Wages, 1986: 120; Şahin 2008,148–153). In today's Turkey, Tarsus and Anavarza, and in today's Syria, Sahhaba regions have such an example. 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.

One of the Tethys compositions has been found in Seleucia Pierra (Samandağ), located in the environs of Antioch. Tethys pictured individually in whole-body form in the centre (Cimok, 2005: 62) (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Seleucia Pierra, Tethys

The lineament was depicted differently from the classical forms; it was depicted as awkward and old. Her face is thin and long; her eyes are small; and her lips are colourless and shapeless. At the right and left of Tethys are the fish schematized as still as death without any indicator related to their species. The artist preferred to create a decorative scene rather than imitating the nature. The lineament and hair composition of Tethys of "Seleucia" are different from the other examples. But, the most significant difference of "Seleucia" mosaic is that the artist placed abstract elements like Eros figures unseen in the "Calendar House" into the scene.

The change in Tethys figures continued in Late Ancient Period. Such change is so explicit that even Tethys, depicted with a pair of wings on her head mostly in Antioch and Zeugma, was started to be represented with claws on her head as Thalassa by the 4th century AD. The reason why claws identified with Oceanus are also seen in Thalassa figures can be explained as that claws turned into an element of marine culture. Although most of the Tethys figures belonging to Asian geography can be confronted in Anatolia, Thalassa figures have been found in Syria, Jordan and Spain. From a narrative point of view, the Thalassa figures, observed in Late Ancient Period as the wife of Oceanus and continuation of Tethys figures representing the fertile femininity of sea, were included in mosaics as a power of protection against potential marine dangers.

One of the earliest examples of Thalassa figures has been found in Antioch. Dated 5th century and in the mosaic called "Yakto Complex", Thalassa was depicted individually and as a bust with a pair of claws on her head (Levi, 1947: 323–5; Cimok, 2000: 248–249) (Fig. 7). In this mosaic, Thalassa comes out of the sea at waist length and holds the rudder with her right hand and a small dolphin with her left hand. The dolphins

were schematized differently from their real forms and they adopted a decorative form in the scene. The artist strengthened such decorative scene with Eros figures. The artists made the waves explicit with light and dark green tesserae. By using the tones of green, the artist succeeded in creating a marine atmosphere and used the sea as a border.



Figure 7: Antioch, Thalassa

In Asian geography, depictions of Tethys are common, while depictions of Oceanus are common in European and North African geographies. 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.

Oceanus Mosaics

The earliest examples of mosaics depicting Oceanus individually are confronted in European geography. In such mosaics, Oceanus was generally depicted in head form. As of the midst of the 2nd century AD, head of Oceanus was depicted sometimes as coming out of waves with Nereid or Triton figures in sarcophagus of marine composition and sometimes in larger dimension together with the other members of "sea thiasos". The fact that depictions of Oceanus in head form are also seen in sarcophagus of Roman Period besides the mosaics indicates his protective identity. The selection of angles required for the placement of the head of Oceanus described under the panels in mosaics features the defensive characteristic of the God (Voute, 1972:639-73; Dunbabin, 1978: 152).

As of the 2nd century AD, Oceanus was depicted in head/mask form firstly in mosaics in Ostia (Becatti, 1967: 112-13; Clarke, 1979) (Fig. 8). The head of Oceanus was depicted in black-white style in the centre of round part circulated by the figures of Triton in "D" room of Maritime Bathhouse in Ostia. In this mosaic a couple of lobster claws rise on his head and the beard of Oceanus were shaped with moss leaves. The same similarity can be seen in the example depicting Oceanus in head form surrounded by the figures of Nereid in "C" room of Maritime Bathhouse. In both of these examples, which were made in black-white style, the beard of Oceanus was shaped with moss leaves. It is clearly discovered that Oceanus was used as a decorative theme in such examples.

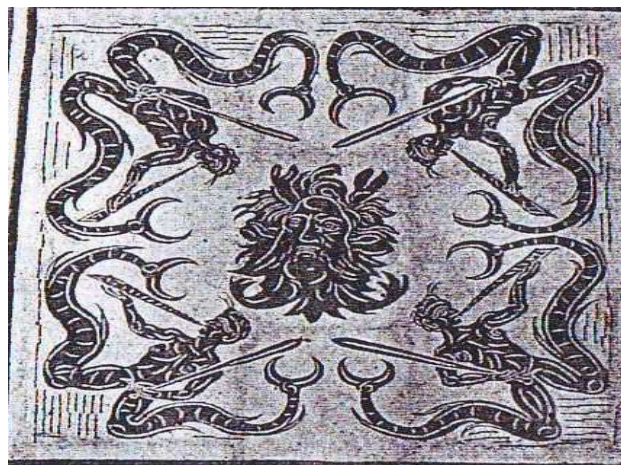


Figure 8: Ostia, Oceanus

The figures of Oceanus in European geography were schematized and given a decorative form. Therefore, it is thought that Oceanus heads or busts may have been designed as patterns ornamenting the mosaics, besides their divine characteristics.

One of such schematized examples has been found at hypocaust section of Glesia villa dated to 4th century AD in Montreal province of France (Balmelle, 1987: 194) (Fig. 9). The border of panel includes dolphin patterns and circled by two tiny stripes inside. The bust of Oceanus is in a central position on a white floor. Over his head is the inscription on which "OCIANVS" is written. In the model, displaying a stylistic approach towards abstraction which is completely different from the classical naturalist forms, the God was depicted as half human and half animal. The wild and angry expression observed in the eyes of Oceanus is different from the calm and attractive expression of Oceanus depicted in Asian Roman geography.



Figure 9: Montreal, Oceanus

In North Africa, examples of Oceanus figures totally different from the ones in Europe with a decorative character. In this region, between the 2nd century and 4th century AD, the mosaics depicted Oceanus in head form and in large dimensions covering the total area of mosaics. Especially, the heads of Oceanus having an attractive expression in his big eyes looking towards far away are highly distinctive, showing the defensive character of the God. It is also possible to see Nereid or Eros figures on dolphins as well as various ship patterns. It is thought that Africans may have chosen such big Oceanus heads in their mosaic compositions in their houses as a power protecting them from dangers coming from the sea.

One of these heads of Oceanus seen in frigidarium section of Roman bathhouse in Themetra city of Tunisia. In this mosaic, dated 3rd century AD, the big head of Oceanus was depicted with all its glory (Ben Abed-Ben Khader, 2006:115) (Fig. 10). Here, the fish, ships, fishermen and a few buildings complete the marine scene. The Oceanus head of Themetra is totally different from the ones created as a decorative theme with lineal shapes observed in late 2nd century AD. Such difference can be clearly observed in big and attractive eyes of Oceanus head, covering a large part of the panel, with dark green bulky hair and beard and sea water pouring down from the sides of his mouth.



Figure 10: Themetra, Oceanus

Conclusion

Consequently, while Tethys continued her existence in Antioch and environs, the figures of Oceanus continued to survive until the 6th century AD together with various marine animals or mythological sea creatures. One of the differences is that the wheel pattern, one of the indicators of Oceanus, started to be seen in Tethys too. Then, why were the figures of Oceanus and Tethys depicted in separate mosaics? It seems that Oceanus and Tethys, representing the husband-wife concepts in Greek mythology, were depicted as god and goddess in earlier examples. In later examples, on the other hand, both of these figures were reflected as figurative descriptions symbolizing the sea, rather than divine concepts. That's why these two figures were depicted separately as the symbols of the sea.

It looks like, collective description of Oceanus and Tethys figures are compositions of Antioch origin. It is not surprising to confront with the depictions of Oceanus and Tethys with Hellenistic origin in Eastern provinces during the reign of Roman Empire. Within this framework, non-existence of Oceanus and Tethys figures in whole-body form or as a bust outside the eastern provinces can be considered as an evidence of consideration of Oceanus and Tethys together only in such geographies. Although Oceanus and Tethys represented husband-wife concepts in Greek mythology in Asian geography, in time, these two figures were separated from each other and individual depictions of Tethys as a bust were mostly made. Non-existence of examples depicting Oceanus and Tethys together outside the Asian geography explains why these two figures get respect together only in Asia. From this point of view, we can put forward that Oceanus and Tethys were depicted with their divine identities in Asian geographies. However, in later examples dated to the period between the 3rd century AD and 6th century AD, it is seen that in time Tethys was started to be depicted in mosaics as Thalassa, the personalized form of the sea.

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