

The “Achilles’ heel” of the Nereid goddess Thetis

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Abstract: Along with Amphitrite, Thetis is the best-known Nereid goddess in Greek mythology. The myths related to her have to do mainly with her son, Achilles but also with other mythological personalities. The essay aims to present a holistic image of the goddess Thetis based on her inner world via her relationship with Peleus and anyone who needs her help, as well as the philosophical debate between herself and her son.

Keywords: Thetis – Peleus – Achilles – water – emotion – reason.

EL TALÓN DE AQUILES DE LA DIOSA NEREIDA TETIS

Resumen: Junto con Anfitrite, Tetis es la diosa nereida más conocida de la mitología griega. Los mitos relacionados con ella tienen que ver principalmente con su hijo, Aquiles pero también con otras personalidades mitológicas. El ensayo pretende presentar una imagen holística de la diosa Tetis basada en su mundo interior a través de su relación con Peleo y cualquiera que necesite su ayuda, así como el debate filosófico entre ella y su hijo.

Palabras clave: Tetis – Peleo – Aquiles – agua – emoción – razón.

Introduction

In Greek mythology, approximately 6,000 names of heroes and gods are recorded and this is something which proves their abundance but also the desire of the ancient Greeks to marginalize the one-dimensional nomenclature.¹ The most important element in this case however, is not so much the plurality of names as the existence and dominance at the same time, of an admirable and incomparable genealogical order. This is observed, for example, in Hesiod when he deals with the genealogical tree of the gods² as well as in Homer, where the central hero of the *Iliad*, Achilles, is called either “Pelides” because of his father³ or “Aiacides” because of his grandfather.⁴ It is worth noting that, this tendency so that each heroic figure is presented as fully as possible through an exemplary class of the respective genealogy, is not observed in other mythologies.⁵

Taking into account the above, it is obvious that something similar will also apply to a sea goddess and more specifically, the goddess Thetis, who is always accompanied by the accompanying name “Nereid”, being the daughter of the sea god Nereus, like the rest of her forty nine sisters. The issue that arises with the goddess Thetis is that she is not such a well-known mythological figure and the reasons for this are mainly two. Firstly, she is considered — wrongly — a minor deity, due to her non-permanent presence on Olympus. Of course, the gods and goddesses who reside outside of Olympus were quite many and consequently, this position does not have strong foundations. Second, the glow of her son, Achilles, is unattainable in

¹ Kakridis (1986, 26).

² Girgenis (2010, 277-389).

³ Mavropoulos (2004, 624).

⁴ Mavropoulos (2004, 571).

⁵ Kakridis (1986, 27).

Greek mythology and therefore, it is a logical consequence, that she herself is overshadowed by the demigod hero, at the level of academic analysis, art, poetry, worship, etc.

The present essay focuses on outlining the character of the goddess Thetis, in total. For instance, which were the aspects of her soul and inner world, how she acted, how she reacted and what was her impact on the ancient world. In addition, an attempt is made to identify her with a specific virtue, just like with the other gods of Greek mythology, in general. Yet, concerning the leader of the Nereids, nothing similar is observed and this is quite strange. Finally, the anatomy of the “mother vs son” conflict, in a philosophical context of course, strengthens and multiplies the qualitative size of both, even though this is about a negative element about Thetis’ character.

The kindness of Thetis

Everyone knows that the gods in Greek mythology are accompanied by a characteristic nominal property. For example, Athena is the goddess of wisdom, Aphrodite is the goddess of love, Hestia is the goddess of family, Hera is the goddess of marriage and so on. However, international literature has not dealt with the goddess Thetis in this context in depth. The core of her mental disposition is to provide help to anyone who really needs it.

Thetis is the one who cares for and raises the god of fire, Hephaestus, at the bottom of the sea when his mother and queen of the heavens, Hera, literally threw him from Mount Olympus — although he was still an infant — because he was lame.⁶ The concept of contrast is very strong in this incident, since the sea goddess par excellence, nurtures the god of

⁶ Mavropoulos (2004, 602).

the opposite element, fire. Of course, Hephaestus never forgot that Peleus’ wife was like a real mother to him and for that reason, he always honored her in various ways.

It is also Thetis who rescues the young Perseus and his mother, Danae, when they were both locked in a chest, tossed by the waves. They were thrown into the sea by her father, Acrisius, who feared an oracle, according to which Danae’s son would kill his grandfather after his adulthood.⁷ Dionysus also owes his rescue to Thetis, when he was ambushed by the king of the Arabs, Lycurgus. The god of wine found refuge in the sea, where the goddess Thetis emerged and protected him.⁸ Also, Thetis is the one who sympathized with Alcyone for the loss of her husband, Ceyx, after a shipwreck and transformed them both into the well-known bird called “alcyone”.⁹

In the *Iliad*, Thetis is said to have come to the aid of Zeus, as Poseidon, Hera and Athena had defected and chained him, with the ultimate goal of dethroning him. One of the three Hecatoncheires, Briareus or otherwise, Aegaeon, ascended on Mount Olympus at the behest of Thetis and broke the bonds of Zeus, thus giving him the right to continue his rule on Mount Olympus.¹⁰ This is one of the two favors that Zeus owes Thetis which Achilles years later mentions to his mother when he wishes to find his justice, after the insult he suffered from Agamemnon. The second favor is related to the indirect omnipotence of Thetis which overcomes even Zeus and will be highlighted a little below.

Finally, her contribution to the rescue of the ship of Argo and by extension all the Argonauts, during their passage — first them and after a

⁷ Mandilaras (1994, 165-167).

⁸ Otto (1991, 63).

⁹ Berens (2009, 162).

¹⁰ Mavropoulos (2004, 74).

generation, Odysseus and his comrades — through the straits of Scylla and Charybdis, cannot be overlooked even though her attitude at that moment towards her husband, Peleus, was strongly negatively charged.¹¹ Bearing in mind all the above, everyone can easily conclude that kindness is the main characteristic that governs the mental world and behavior of Thetis and therefore, the paper introduces that “goddess of benevolence” is suitable as a phrase for the silver-footed goddess and should rightfully accompany her.

Power, weakness and morality of Thetis

Unfortunately, however, Thetis herself is a tragic figure for ancient Greek literature because while she is next to anyone with her undivided support and divine power, she cannot do anything at all to save her son, from the certain death which the three Fates have prescribed for him. Thetis, therefore, despite being a goddess, cannot face fate and while she is powerful as a goddess, she is the embodiment of maternal pain and weakness when it comes to her demigod son.¹²

Despite her previous weakness, a weakness that characterizes though all the gods since the three Fates define everything, Thetis is distinguished by omnipotence which is not so well known in mythological circles, or at least, due importance is not given to this specific fact. She is a goddess with cosmic powers with the ability to regulate order and maintain stability.¹³ Her omnipotence lies in the fact that the son she would bring into the world would become stronger than his father.¹⁴ It is a prophecy of the second

¹¹ Nikolaidis-Asilanis (1985, 175).

¹² Christoforou-Pougiourou (2012, 49).

¹³ Slatkin (1986, 21).

¹⁴ Mavropoulos (2007, 251-252).

generation Titan, Prometheus when he was chained on Mount Caucasus, after the wrath of Zeus (some other versions claim that it was Titaness Themis).¹⁵ The beauty of Thetis however, leaves no one untouched and attracted the interest of the two greatest gods in power, Zeus and Poseidon. The cosmic power of Thetis is also presented by Alcman, a lyric poet in the middle of the 7th BC century that lived in Sparta. After the publication of the Oxyrhynchus papyrus 2390 it is revealed that in one of his poems, Alcman deals with a kind of theogenic cosmology. He describes ancient views that coincide with modern cosmological hypotheses about the birth of the universe that humanity perceives nowadays. More specifically, when matter began to be arranged, a kind of channel — road or passage — was created, something like a start. The matter of all things was disturbed and decayed and then, an entity was born who arranged everything. After that, a resource was created and when that resource reached its edge, there followed a limit, an end. When this entity — Thetis — was born, all these became the beginning and the end of everything while simultaneously, she is characterized by the ability to set universal laws,¹⁶ as evidenced by the etymology of her name.

Especially, regarding the case of Zeus, Thetis backed off, respecting the fact that the one who raised her was Hera herself, thus proving her morals on the one hand — she could disobey Zeus and be on the top of hierarchy of the gods but she did not do it — and on the other hand, with her decision, she gives meaning to the values represented by the daughter of Cronus and Rhea (marriage, family, faith, etc.).¹⁷ In terms of dilemma, Thetis chooses morality over selfishness, in this case at least. Zeus did not

¹⁵ Mavropoulos (2008, 501).

¹⁶ Danezis et al. (2002, 25).

¹⁷ Girgenis (2010, 379).

accept this turn of this event and decided to marry her to a mortal, something that is considered as the oldest version.¹⁸

Notably, it was forbidden to compare any mortal with Thetis and the other Nereids in beauty since in such a case, the results were too bad. A similar example is the humiliation of Cassiopeia, queen of Ethiopia and mother of Andromeda because she thought her daughter was more beautiful than the Nereids¹⁹ and another example is the beauty contest between Thetis and Medea, judged by the king of the Cretans, Idomeneus. The result was again, in favor of the goddess.²⁰

Prometheus' oracle alarmed Zeus because if it was going to be fulfilled, Achilles as a god would be the next ruler of the world, continuing the succession in power and dethroning him, just as Zeus did with his father, Cronus and he in turn, with his own father, Uranus. Consequently, Thetis had to be forced to marry a mortal so that the child who would be born would be a demigod and in spite of how powerful he was, he could not pose a threat to the universal order and the assurance of Zeus' rule. At this point, the range of both mother and son as personalities in total, is most emphatically demonstrated, since the society of that time created — apparently not by accident — a myth, according to which Thetis had the power to give birth to the next ruler of the world if he was a god, regardless the fact that Achilles, through his worldview and his way of life — even a short one — succeeded and “dethroned” Zeus in the end.²¹

The legendary marriages of Peleus and Thetis are therefore extremely important because they seal the continuity of Zeus's authority while all the

¹⁸ Edwards (2003, 334).

¹⁹ Stefanidis (1992, 20).

²⁰ Cultural Heritage Management Laboratory (2006, 161).

²¹ Spanos (2016, 190).

gods, except Eris, attended the ceremony on Mount Pelion²² (something similar had only happened in the marriages of Cadmus and Harmonia, in Thebes).²³ The only goddess, who was also distinguished by the same ability of Thetis, was one of the Oceanids, named Metis, the first wife of Zeus and mother of the goddess Athena, who was born inside her father’s body. When Metis was pregnant to Athena, she was already incorporated in the body of Zeus, due to his fear of not being born — after Athena — the son who would — also — overthrow him from the throne.²⁴

At the same time and taking into consideration all the previous facts, the spatial scope of the cult of the goddess Thetis does not seem to make her a deity of reduced appeal. In the province of Pharsala, in the south of the Prefecture of Larissa, archaeologists place the “Thetideion”, a sanctuary dedicated to the goddess which is even mentioned by the Athenian tragic poet Euripides, in one of his tragedies.²⁵ Sanctuary of the goddess also existed in ancient Sparta²⁶ while she was known even to the Persians. Shortly before the naval battle of Artemisium in 480 BC — which took place at the same time as the battle of Thermopylae — a storm hit the Persian fleet as it sailed towards the coast of Euboea. The Persians made offerings and sacrifices to Thetis and all the Nereids because they had heard from the Ionians the story that Peleus had conquered her in this place and that the cape of Sepias belonged to her and her sisters.²⁷

²² Chatzopoulos (1999, 91).

²³ Chatzopoulos (1999, 23).

²⁴ Skartsis (1993, 85).

²⁵ Stavros (1989, 77).

²⁶ Papachatzis (1999, 359).

²⁷ Syntomorou (2007, 333).

Thetis in correspondence with Peleus

Peleus on the other hand, is endowed with many virtues. When he was a guest in the kingdom of Acastus, Astydamea — Acastus' wife — tried to attract him. His decisive action consists in refusing to make an affair with a married woman and his motive derives from the possible anger of Xenius Zeus.²⁸ Peleus showed self-restraint and Zeus realized it at once. Piety is so deeply rooted in the mortal hero and that makes him a true representative of aristocracy.²⁹

Additionally, even during the fight between them, noble Peleus does not appear to hit Thetis, press or exert force on her.³⁰ It is obvious that he does not harm her in any case, taking into account her supernatural forces.³¹ Peleus proves another time that he is noble when he follows the established rules and behaves with politeness to the father of Thetis — the sea god Nereus — asking for her hand.³²

Another feature of him was his gentle and charitable character. This is underlined in the *Iliad*, in three cases of supplicants who appealed to Peleus.³³ It is worth noting the promise he made to the river-god of his kingdom, Sperchios,³⁴ to offer him the blond hair of his son when he would return from Troy. This means that even Peleus thinks about the mortal nature of his mighty son and he does not commit *hybris*, proving for one more time his devoutness. In terms of feats, Peleus managed to conquer

²⁸ Burnett (2005, 71).

²⁹ Pfeijffer (1999, 85).

³⁰ Henry (2005, 42).

³¹ Willcock (1995, 105).

³² Meyerhoff (1984, 107-108).

³³ Mavropoulos (2004)

³⁴ Mavropoulos (2004, 733).

Troy along with his brother Telamon and Heracles³⁵ and took part in the hunt of the Caledonian Boar,³⁶ proving his caliber years before the Trojan War. Last but not least, Peleus was the first winner in pentathlon.³⁷ During the Argonautica campaign, on the island of Lemnos, Jason organized matches for the Argonauts with five events; stadion (short foot race), javelin throw, discus throw, long jump and wrestling. Peleus won the second place in the first four while in wrestling the first since he was invincible. These achievements made Jason to recognize Peleus as the most capable, strong and charismatic comrade of all the rest on his journey to Colchis. So, he honored him in a separate way, unifying all five competitions, giving him the prize of “pentathlon”. Centuries later, Aristotle would express his immense appreciation for those kind of athletes.³⁸

In addition to his martial prowess, Peleus is recognized also as skilled speaker and simultaneously, is able to implement whatever he decides.³⁹ There is no doubt that the king of Phthia is a complete personality of a Homeric hero while he is addressed as equal to the gods.⁴⁰

Thetis is the one who helps everyone if they find themselves in a difficult position but she is also the one who will behave impulsively and not in the proper way towards Peleus, in two incidents. In the first, the son of Aeacus was frightened by the cries of baby Achilles when Thetis, secretly from him, placed the infant over the flames of the sacred fire, so that his mortal parts would burn, in order to cover them with ambrosia and to become via this ritual, immortal. The shock and the shouts of Peleus — he

³⁵ Kakridis (1986, 92).

³⁶ Chatzopoulos (1999, 55).

³⁷ Kakridis (1986, 139).

³⁸ Iliou (1999, 54).

³⁹ Mavropoulos (2004, 258).

⁴⁰ Mavropoulos (2004, 772).

did not know anything at all — led her to the decision to move in the maritime kingdom of her father Nereus, abandoning both husband and son.⁴¹

In the second, she appeared before him — and only him — to inform him that she would help the Argonauts on behalf of Hera, so that the ship of Argo would pass safely through the straits of Scylla and Charybdis. After a careful reading, their unexpected meeting seems more than awkward. While she gently touches the tip of Peleus' hand only for a moment, she immediately threatens him that if he reveals to the other Argonauts her presence, she is going to be very angry with him, as she was in the past during the process of trying to make Achilles immortal via sacred fire.⁴² The way Thetis addresses to the pious, just and meek Peleus is inconsistent with her morals and kindness. She is characterized by a continuous obsession since she stubbornly refuses to accept the fact that she, an immortal goddess, was forced to marry a mortal (variations on how this happened are several), even though in a multitude of heroes at that time — among them Heracles, Theseus, Jason, Orpheus, Telamon, Meleager, Polydeuces, Idas, Amphiaraus, etc. — the gods considered Peleus to be their most beloved mortal. Even Hera characterized him, as “ἄριστον ἐπιχθονία”,⁴³ which means the most exceptional mortal among those who were living on earth at that time, in the context of both heroism and virtue, because of his overall personality.⁴⁴ It is clear from this incident that the mortal nature of Peleus plays a more important role for Thetis than Peleus himself. Even heroism and virtues at their peak cannot bridge the gap between immortality and impermanence.

⁴¹ Papandreou (1984, 87).

⁴² Ojennus (2016, 264-265).

⁴³ Cactus Philological Team (1999, 347).

⁴⁴ Herter (1959, 48).

To a certain extent, she is not wrong since she perceives her relegation to a life that will only bring her misery, as punishment for the quarrel of Zeus and Poseidon and she is chained with mortal sufferings.⁴⁵ This coercion is the price she paid for the sustainability of Zeus’ reign.⁴⁶ She is not directly responsible for that and she is being punished for something she did not do, making thus the whole marriage concept to seem a reward only for Peleus.⁴⁷ Moreover, since she is immortal, she will mourn both husband and son; the lamentation of Peleus will end with his death while hers, is eternal.⁴⁸ Last but not least, when immortality enters into the realm of time, very strong conflicts rise up and mortals are not keen on any cost.⁴⁹ Still, the question remains; regardless of Peleus, do not heroism and virtues deserve recognition and respect?

The philosophical conflict between mother and son

The literature does not focus on the total power of the goddess and chooses to present her at least with one weakness. Thetis is a goddess and she had the power to make Peleus immortal if she wanted from the beginning, just like goddess Calypso wanted for Odysseus.⁵⁰ This emphasis on that weakness declares that her obsession against Peleus is representing a deep inner state of mind. Mother and son are distinguished by a close relationship and this happens because of two reasons. First, Achilles is “ὠκύπους”, as if he is running as fast as possible to his end which is already

⁴⁵ Heath (1992, 390).

⁴⁶ Schein (1984, 155).

⁴⁷ Kyriakou (1994, 50).

⁴⁸ Heath (1992, 390).

⁴⁹ Arvanitakis (2008, 211).

⁵⁰ Doukas (1999, 147).

predetermined by the three Fates and for this reason, he lives everything to the fullest extent. Secondly, with his presence in the land of Troy, his father cannot be next to him, so the only point of reference is his mother. Throughout the war in Troy, Thetis always stands by Achilles, for whatever he needs, even though she knows that in the end, her divine power will not count to save her only beloved son.

Studying Achilles through any source, everyone can easily understand that emotion overwhelms the young hero. He is terribly irritable but only when he is provoked and his impetus is such that even gods tremble. It could be argued that the greatest of teachers, the centaur Chiron, the only thing he could not tame in Achilles was his impetus since all the rest, the hero cultivated to the highest level, only him, next to his beloved teacher.⁵¹ It is Chiron through his double nature that beats instinct via reason and teaches his best and beloved student virtues such as aversion to material goods,⁵² honor, integrity, gratitude, justice, friendship.⁵³

In addition to the knowledge of his short life which makes him live everything to the edges and manifest accordingly, the explosion of his emotional world is also inextricably linked to his mother. As the sea goddess that she is, the main element that characterizes her is water. In all the philosophies of the world, water is identified with emotion.⁵⁴ Sometimes it is calm, like the calm surface of the sea in summer and sunny times and sometimes it is turbulent, like the waves in the state of the storm. It is clear that Thetis moves between these two poles.

So being the offspring of a sea goddess, whose focus is on emotion, it does perfectly make sense that Achilles is distinguished for his intense

⁵¹ Karatolias (2012, 34).

⁵² Hainsworth (2004, 230-231).

⁵³ Pappa (2019, 14).

⁵⁴ Eom (2014, 31).

emotional charge. Yet, his apprenticeship alongside centaur Chiron curbs his drive and spontaneity, regardless of how intense a situation is. On the one hand, it is no coincidence that Chiron was the teacher of many heroes and personalities and on the other hand, it is also no coincidence that his favorite student was Achilles, the hero who, due to his virtues, was the ideal role model of man in ancient Greece. The abandonment of king Peleus from the sea goddess was a permanent element of tradition because there was room left — not by chance — for centaur Chiron to emerge.⁵⁵ The “Chiron-Achilles” dipole already shaped not just “living” but the “living well” trend at that time, emphasizing education by competent teachers and not simply by parents, who may not be capable of such a role, something which would be suggested several centuries later, by Plato.⁵⁶

On the other hand, Achilles is also Peleus’ son. He has at least some of his father’s characteristics and the most important thing is that he is the only one who understands and at the same time, can coexist on familiar terms with both mortal and divine elements.⁵⁷ It seems that the marriage of Peleus and Thetis has a high symbolism since the goddess of the sea is married to a man whose name is related to clay.⁵⁸ In turn, clay is connected to earth and its stability which is in complete contrast to the unsteadiness of the liquid element. Over the years, the waters of the sea receded and the mud formed new shores. Therefore, Peleus (clay/earth) fathered Achilles with Thetis (sea).⁵⁹

The scene that demonstrates the dynamic effect of Peleus and Chiron’s teaching on Achilles is when the demigod is ready to kill Agamemnon in

⁵⁵ Janko (2003, 638).

⁵⁶ Mavropoulos (2006).

⁵⁷ Wilson (1974, 389).

⁵⁸ Shewan (1916, 184).

⁵⁹ Janko (2003, 594-595).

front of the entire Achaean army because of the latter's insult to the former. At that moment, time somehow freezes and the goddess Athena appears — only Achilles can see her — and urges him to put the sword back in its scabbard (she doesn't force him to do that and this is the scene's key point).⁶⁰ Finally, the great hero restrains himself. Peeling back the veil of myth and analyzing the event on a purely realistic basis, the quintessentially emotional hero favored logic over emotion and instinct, discarding any self-centered element. From the moment the son of Peleus made this move in a boiling state of soul, the characteristics of his father and the role of his upbringing by the wise centaur Chiron, cannot be but fully decisive.

The supremacy of reason over emotion is not only recorded in this event and the reinforcement of the above argument derives from another mythological incident. During the reign of Cecrops, when Athena and Poseidon argued about which of the two would be the protector of Cecropia (later Athens), the winner is Athena⁶¹ who represents reason and not Poseidon who represents emotion, like Thetis, because of the element of water. Empiricism as a mindset can strengthen the above conclusion. Athena's sacred tree is the olive and its derivative is oil. Nature itself, through the mixing of oil and water, certifies that oil (reason) floats on water (emotion) and thus, by this metaphor, reason always wins over emotion.

Summary

On an encyclopedic level, Thetis is known mostly for her fight against Peleus and their wedding. On a philosophical level however, there is also a struggle between herself and her son, where two very large pillars col-

⁶⁰ Mavropoulos (2004, 69).

⁶¹ Papandreou (1984, 91).

lide, those of logic and emotion. Good manners in general, giving help to anyone who needs it and strong emotions dominate both of them. The immortality of the goddess though, does not automatically imply an outflow of self-discipline and total perception of things. Achilles forges himself next to Chiron and suppresses the feeling, at a very critical moment, achieving the greatest victory, in essence defeating himself. And if in this philosophical dispute Achilles emerges victorious, it is indisputable that his kind goddess mother would have been proud that her son surpassed her, as centuries later the old Spartans were for their young ones.⁶² After all, by studying Achilles, it is proven — and that is why he is an everlasting role model — that he is a warrior (he lives to fight every day at all levels) and not simply a fighter (he fights solely to live) and that war, not only in the field but throughout people’s lives, is not a matter of brute force but primarily of spirit. To conclude with, the son did not surpass only his father according to the well-known prophesy but his divine mother as well, whose attitude changed in the end since she restored the existence and total value of Peleus, making him ultimately immortal by her side.⁶³



⁶² Meraklis (1992, 87).

⁶³ Stavros (1989, 120-121).

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