38 Mosaic Bust of the Pyramos River
Mid- to late second century C.E.
Seleucia, House of Cilicia (519-K), room 1
Marble and limestone tesserae, 56 × 57 in. (142.2 × 144.8 cm)
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, 1938.14

The bust is identified by a Greek inscription as “Pyramos.” It is one of four medallions with busts personifying rivers. Only two are extant; the other, representing the Tigris River, is in the Detroit Institute of Arts. As part of a dining-room composition, the four rivers framed a large central panel with personifications of provinces; the one that is preserved is labeled “Cilicia.” Pyramos is framed within a medallion inscribed in a yellow square with a green foliate motif. He is shown as a beardless youth, in contrast to the bearded Tigris, and in his hair are green and grey river reeds. He wears a black chlamys off one shoulder.

Another bust of Pyramos was discovered in the House of the Porticoes, also in Seleucia, dated to the Severan period. Personifications of place, topographical images, were found at other sites in Ancient Syria and seem to have been a specialty of the mosaic workshops. A mosaic of the Euphrates as a full seated figure was found east of Aleppo and is firmly dated by inscription to 228 C.E. As for the missing parts of the original House of Cilicia pavement, scholars have suggested that the missing province was Mesopotamia, and the missing rivers, the Euphrates and the Kydnos. Whether in baths, houses, or public fountains, the rich imagery of marine deities personifies water and evokes the pleasures and benefits associated with it.

The stylistic character of the entire composition, especially the inclusion of panels that imitate coffered ceilings, can more comfortably be assigned a date in the later second century rather than the Hadrianic/Amantine date assigned by Levi.


39 Mosaic of Tethys
C. 250–75 C.E.
Daphne, House of the Boat of Psyches, room 6
Marble and limestone tesserae, 76 × 54 in. (193 × 137.2 cm)
The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1937.118

The bust of a long-haired sea goddess with wings sprouting from her forehead marked the center of a long vertical panel that decorated room 6 of the House of the Boat of the Psyches. A sea creature with a dragon head and snake body (keraunos in Greek mythology) wraps around her neck. Scattered throughout are various fish, a crab, an eel, and below, a winged Eros rides a dolphin and casts his fishing line. Stylistically the marine scene is treated as a free-figure composition with fish scattered across a neutral white ground. Yet the fish are carefully rendered and can be identified with real species. The compositions and bodies of the figures are naturalistic.

Similar female busts appear in mosaics from the Greek East, especially in ancient Syria. At Antioch alone five mosaics dating from the second to the fifth centuries include representations of sea goddesses. They have been variously identified as Theris, Tethys, and Thalassa, the latter a more generalized personification of the sea, usually shown with a rudder. Although the Baltimore goddess does not have any other attributes or label, she is convincingly identified as Tethys, goddess of the seas. She appears as a full-bodied figure in a second-century mosaic from the House of the Calendar at Antioch, in which she and her consort/brother the god Ocean are paired as the rulers of the waters. This identification is confirmed by the Greek label THYI (Tethys) beside a winged female bust surrounded by fish in a mosaic that decorated the octagonal pool of Bath F at Antioch.

While more female marine figures survive from Antioch, Ocean was surely equally popular. We know from a passage in the Chronicle of Malalas (11.382) that Marcus Aurelius built a nymphaion called “Okeanomon” in Antioch, which is taken to imply that it was embellished with a representation of Ocean. A relief with Ocean, probably from a waterspout, was found in Seleucia Pieria (Sanandaj) and is today in the Hatay Archaeological Museum.

Antioch’s many sources of water—the Mediterranean, the Orontes River, and the natural springs and pools at nearby
Antioch
The Lost Ancient City

Christine Kondoleon

Princeton University Press
in association with the Worcester Art Museum