Funded by
the European Union
Avrupa Birliği tarafından
finanse edilmektedir

Vira Trabzon Ortahisar

Kadim Bir Liman Kenti

An Ancient Harbor

Ed. Özlem Şendeniz

ORTAKLAŞA
KÜLTÜR, DİYALOG VE DESTEK PROGRAMI
İSTANBUL KÜLTÜR SANAT VAKFI
İKSV
GOLA YAYINLARI

Gola Kültür Sanat ve Ekoloji Derneği Yayınları No: 5

Vira Trabzon Ortahisar: Kadim Bir Liman Kenti
Vira Trabzon Ortahisar: An Ancient Harbor

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Mizanpaj
İrfan Çağatay

1. Baskı: İstanbul, Ekim 2025
ISBN: 978-605-73818-8-0
e-ISBN: 978-605-73818-7-3
Sertifika No: 52243

Baskı: Alimpex Baskı ve Ambalaj Çözümleri Ltd.
Feyzullah Mah. Uğur Sok. No.4/23
Maltepe İstanbul
0554 165 99 50
0212 871 99 50
Sertifika No: 81274

Gola Kültür Sanat ve Ekoloji Derneği
Merkez Mah. 1026 Sok.
Fındıklı/Rize
www.golader.org

ORTAHİSAR BELEDİYESİ 2014 TRABZON

GOLA
KÜLTÜR SANAT VE EKOLOJİ DERNEĞİ

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The Black Sea in the Light of Mythology and Sea Relationship

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mustafa Açа[1]

Introduction

Mythologies, a set of oral or written narratives developed by a society to explain the universe, nature, creative forces, human origins and the meaning of life, are not just "old time stories." Myths, which have multifaceted functions for societies, attract attention today with these functions such as explaining how the universe and life emerged, legitimizing the value judgments, moral norms and social order of the society, being a powerful narrative instrument that transmits cultural heritage from generation to generation, giving meaning to fears, hopes and desires coming from the depths of human consciousness, and making sense of them with the help of religious ceremonies, birth-death cycles and seasonal rituals (Eliade, 2024).

Myth, which aims to perceive and express ultimate truths like science, is actually an alternative form of research that extends to the distant past. Unlike science, it seeks to perceive reality through narratives rather than hypotheses, equations, technical explanations or taxonomic rules (Bringhurst, 2008).

The sea is also allocated a place in the explanations of myths about natural and cultural property areas. Throughout human history, the sea

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has been an element of nature that is both feared and admired. With its endless appearance and the unknowns, it hides, the sea has become a divine image with deep meanings in mythologies. In the mythological narratives of different civilizations, the sea often appears as a force of nature, the home of a god or the starting point of life. In ancient Greek mythology, which draws attention with its sophisticated aspects among mythological systems, Zeus rules the sky, Hades rules the underworld and Poseidon rules the seas. Poseidon, the god not only of the seas but also of earthquakes and horses, swells the seas and sinks ships when he is angry. In this respect, the sea is depicted as both a source of life and a destructive force. In Norse mythology, the sea is often depicted as a dangerous and chaotic place. A giant snake named *Jörmungandr* lives in the oceans and encircles the earth by biting its tail. When *Ragnarök* (the apocalypse) comes, it will come out of the sea and a great war will begin. This narrative reflects the threats the sea hides and its uncontrollability. In Sumerian-Babylonian mythology, Tiamat is the personification of the salty seas. She is seen as the goddess of chaos. In the epic of creation named *Enuma Elish*, it is narrated that the order (cosmos) was established with the destruction of Tiamat. This myth indicates that the sea is also the first being, the first state of nature (Eliade, 2005).

The sea is filled not only with gods, but also with semi-gods, creatures and magical beings. Mermaids (nereids, sirens) in Greek mythology lure sailors to their deaths. Similarly, in Japanese mythology, spirits such as "*umibōzu*" can haunt those travelling on the sea. These narratives represent both the beauty and the dangers of the sea.

In many mythologies, the sea is also considered as a transitional area between life and death. For example, in Ancient Egypt, the souls of the dead cross the Nile River to reach the afterlife. This understanding is based on the idea that water and the sea are spiritual boundaries.

In Turkish and Siberian mythologies, the sea is not as a prominent element as in Greek or Mesopotamian mythologies, but it bears very powerful symbols. In general, the element of "water" occupies a sacred place and the sea or great waters are associated with creation, life and the afterlife. In Turkish and Siberian mythologies, in narratives about the creation of the universe, the sea or water is at the very beginning

of existence. In the Altai creation myths, at the beginning of the universe there is only the god Ulgen and immense water. This water is an amorphous space of existence where the earth and sky have not yet been separated. This situation is a kind of chaos, and the sea here represents the "prime matter", that is, the building block of the cosmos. In some versions of this myth, the Black Khan (or Erlik Khan) emerges from this water, representing the dark side of creation. In other words, water is the place where both creative and opposing forces are born.

In Turkish and Siberian mythologies, waters, especially large waters such as rivers, lakes and seas, are also seen as spiritual passages. They are places where spirits change places and pass into the afterlife. This belief is also compatible with the paradigms of Kamism. Kams and Shamans talk about traveling to the "spirit world" when they go into trance. During this travel they usually must cross a river or water. This water is a threshold between realities. Even without the sea, the "great water" always represents a sacred threshold.

In Turkish and Siberian mythologies, there is no prominent "god of the sea" like Poseidon in Greek mythology. However, water spirits (*Su İyesi* - protector of the waters) are quite common and significant. These spirits are the protectors of lakes, rivers and big waters. The fact that fishermen from the Eastern Black Sea region have been throwing bread into the sea for many years while passing through İnce Burnu, a headland located west of Sinop, as a sign of respect for a "*baba*" (a revered spiritual figure or a local saintly figure) believed to be buried there, and fearing that they will face the wrath of the sea if they do not, points to the synthesis of beliefs about water spirits (*su iyeleri*) with Islam and the ancient cultures of the region.

On the other hand, water spirits are generally depicted as female. It is no coincidence that feminine supernatural beings such as *Goncoloz*, *Obur* and *Cazı*, which are encountered in Eastern Black Sea folk beliefs and narratives, are associated with the sea. Among the Eastern Black Sea communities, *Cazı*, who is believed to haunt human and animal offspring and cause them to die by eating their lungs or hearts, is believed to come from Russia across the Black Sea. In some memorates there are accounts of fishermen encountering *Cazıs* (witch-like beings) in the sea

(Küçük, 2011). *Goncoloz* or *Karagoncoloz*, believed to appear along the Eastern Black Sea coasts between the last week of December and the first week of January, is noted for its resemblance to the "*kallikantzaros*," a sea goblin in Greek folklore (Öztürk, 2005: 622). According to popular belief, during the rest of the year, it is occupied measuring sand with a six-holed sieve along the shores of Crimea. *Goncoloz*, who crossed the Black Sea when the time came and reached the Eastern Black Sea coast, is still mentioned by mothers and grandmothers in the "Manahos-Solaklı" culture line on the coast of Trabzon and the western coast of Rize to scare mischievous children even today. In the aforementioned areas, it has been believed that the great storm occurring every year on January 1st or 2nd is caused by *Goncoloz* and brings snow along with it; legends have been told about *Goncoloz*, coming ashore shouting with the storm (Aça, 2020).

In Turkish cosmology, there is always a balance between sky, earth and water. In the relationship between the celestial realm where Ülgen resides and the underworld (Erlik's world), water can serve as a separator or a connecting element. In particular, images such as the "celestial sea" (for example, the Milky Way is considered a "celestial river") make sense in this context. In the pre-Islamic period of the Western Turks, there are also remnants of rituals and beliefs about the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and other large bodies of water. These seas were considered as border regions and sometimes as places where the gods intervened on earth. In Turkish and Siberian mythologies, the sea does not directly refer to a "worshipped" god, but to a deep cosmic power. In this respect, the sea is like a symbol of the balance, dependence and sacredness between man and nature (Gezgin, 2018).

Myths, Beliefs and Rituals

The Eastern Black Sea Region, a geography shaped by steep mountains, deep valleys and rough seas, has deeply affected not only the daily lives of the peoples living on it, but also their cultural worlds and traditional worldviews. The Black Sea has been recognized not only as a source of income, but also as a realm of existence loaded with supernatural powers, rituals and traditions.

In ancient times, the Black Sea, which was called *Pontos Aexeinos* (inhospitable sea) due to its rugged coastline that deprived it of safe natural harbors and because the natural characteristics had not yet been fully explored by Hellenic colonists, resulting in perilous sea voyages. However, after the development of maritime technology and the acceleration of colonization, contrary to before, it began to be called *Pontos Euxeinos* (the hospitable sea) (Işık, 2001; Arslan, 2006). The east of the Black Sea, which has inspired many myths, legends and beliefs since ancient times, was regarded by the Ancient Greeks as the end of the world. The Ancient Greeks, who envisioned the entire area behind the Bosphorus as the border of *Oecumene*, the entrance to the world ruled by Hades, considered the north of the Black Sea as the place of exile of the gods. The richness of myths and beliefs about the opposite (northern) shores of the Black Sea in particular is related to the chronology of colonization. Giant eagles, mythological creatures with lion bodies, eagle wings and heads (*grypons*) which were said to attack from the air to travelers and merchants before colonization and Hellenic sailors afterwards, and bloodthirsty goddesses waiting for unfortunate sailors in secluded coves point to the rapid spread of the Ancient Greek pantheon in these areas (Petrova and Shevkun, 2019). When we look at the works of ancient authors and other sources, it can be said that the mythic imaginations of the opposite coasts developed in a much more limited form in the Eastern Black Sea Region. A similar situation is observed when considering examples of ancient myths and beliefs associated with the Western and Central Black Sea regions of Turkey (Amazons, Argonauts, Golden Fleece, etc.). The limited number of recorded myths and legends related to the Eastern Black Sea should not be interpreted as the absence of sea-focused narratives, beliefs and practices.

In the folk culture of the Eastern Black Sea, the sea has been considered as one of the basic elements that ensure the continuity of life throughout history. However, this sea has also been perceived as dangerous, unpredictable and sometimes ominous. For this reason, the local people are always respectful and cautious toward the sea. Sudden weather changes, strange occurrences or disappearances at sea are

interpreted through explanations such as "the spirit of the sea" or "the sea had a claim."

In some coastal settlements, especially at certain times of the year, there are practices such as remaining silent, making a wish or throwing three stones into the water before swimming. These rituals aim to please the spirit of the sea and wish for abundance. Especially at the beginning of summer, people wake up early in the morning and quietly enter the sea before sunrise. These practices carry meanings of both personal purification and harmonization with natural cycles.

Another practice that provides concrete evidence of the regional culture's relationship with the sea is the May 7 activities. The May 7 events organized in certain areas along the Black Sea coast of Ordu, Giresun and Trabzon on May 20-21 reveal different aspects of the people of the region's relationship with the sea. The local people, often gathering at the "sacred" spots where streams meet the sea, perform various practices with hopes of healing, abundance, good fortune, and renewal. They wet their bodies with seawater, enter the sea up to their waists, throw pebbles into the water while making wishes with their backs turned to the sea, pass through the mouths of seven streams using small boats or step over a *sacayağı* (a three-legged metal stand used in hearths), and —as in the case of Beşikdüzü— just before heading to the highlands, they wash their cows, calves, and small livestock with seawater on this special day.

On the day of Hıdırellez, the people who come to the seashore sail to the sea with small motors, pass through the mouths of 7 streams, pray and make wishes under the influence of beliefs that the sea and sea water are healing.

Another similar tradition that has been practiced for many years in the Eastern Black Sea region, especially in the Trabzon region, is *Alaturbi/ Aladurba* Day. Celebrated every year on July 5-6, this special day allows the local people to remember their commitment to the sea and to keep their traditional rituals alive. According to a legend about the origin of this day, a great flood disaster occurred in Maçka on July 5 and a chapel located by the stream was flooded. The priest named Alaturbiya, who was in the chapel at the time of the incident, disappeared in the flood

waters. In order to find the priest, the people sailed to the sea on rafts and continued their search by shouting "Alaturbiya" at the mouths of the streams. Since the priest could not be found despite all searches, the 5th of July was accepted as a day of mourning (URL-1). On the other hand, it is stated that the festival known as *Litropi* in Rize, which is a post-harvest festival, is called *Alaturbi* in the west of Trabzon and *Kolhoba* among the Laz communities living on the eastern coast of Rize (Öztürk, 2009). Just like the May 7, in *Alaturbi*, people enter the sea with the expectations of health, abundance and good luck; cross 3 or 7 stream mouths with boats; take water from 7 waves and small babies are bathed with this water (Ciravoğlu, 2009).

Communities living on the Black Sea coast and their cultures also have widespread beliefs and traditions related to the sea. For example, the Laz, especially on August 14 (August 1 according to the Gregorian calendar), wake up before sunrise and no one speaks; conversations are made with signs. They enter the sea before having breakfast, and after entering the water, everyone makes a wish and prays for abundance and protection from disasters. This ritual shows their spiritual connection with the sea and their respect for nature. There are also supernatural creatures associated with the sea in the folk beliefs of this community. For example, the creature known as "*Cazi*" is a supernatural figure and occupies an important place in oral culture. Such creatures reflect the unknown and mysterious nature of the sea (Aleksiva, 2022).

In mythologies, the sea is not just a physical space, it is also a symbol of the unknown, power, creation and destruction. Each culture has interpreted the sea according to its own geography and experiences. However, the common point is that the sea is always respected, sometimes feared, but never ignored.

In Georgian mythology, the Black Sea is not just a sea, but also a place intertwined with heroism and legends. The area around Cape Jason is particularly associated with the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece legend in Greek mythology. According to the legend, the hero Jason and the Argonauts went to Colchis (today's Georgia) in search of the Golden Fleece. During this journey, they are said to have stayed along the Black Sea coast, especially at Cape Jason. This place is also home to important structures that bear traces from the past to the present.

In the folk beliefs of Muslim Georgians, elements of nature -especially animals- carry spiritual meanings. For example, a butterfly entering the house is interpreted as the spirit of a deceased person returning home and asking for a prayer. Such beliefs are regarded as spiritual reflection of nature (Sikharulidze, 2023).

In the Eastern Black Sea oral culture, there are many legends and folk narratives about the sea. Sometimes it is thought that the spirit of a sailor lost at the sea returns and sometimes mysterious lights appearing in the middle of the sea are associated with supernatural beings. The ritualistic practices that Eastern Black Sea fishermen and their families have practiced for centuries around the sea also bear traces of deep cultural interactions. Many examples such as women whose husbands or sons are at sea hanging brooms and sieves from churning ropes to calm the storm, throwing bread with butter and honey into the sea, or experienced fishermen pointing their knives toward the storm or waterspout while reciting prayers reveal how numerous and widespread the beliefs surrounding the sea truly are (Aça, 2020).

Fishing is not only an economic labor for the people of the Eastern Black Sea; it is also a kind of agreement with nature. Practices such as praying before going to sea, taking the first step on the boat with the right foot or not fishing on certain days are part of this belief. Furthermore, the common saying among fishermen "the sea is no joke" draws attention to both the physical power and the spiritual dimension of the sea in another way. The hunting journey, which is accepted as a part of the hunt in mythic imagination, is often symbolized as a journey to the world of the sacred. This journey involves processes in which communication with higher beings -who are considered the owners and rulers of the nature, which also includes the game animals- reaches its highest level. Modern/scientific thought, which often preserves the codes of mythic thinking through symbols, has turned many practices that contain sacred messages about the beginning of the hunting journey into imitative practices that are often continuous, as in other areas of social life. The change in the worldviews of societies through various factors has not denied the acceptance and perceptions of the past, and has made the practices that preserved their continuity compatible with the current worldview (Bayat, 2009: 4-6).

Many fishing rituals that bear traces of mythological consciousness contain clear references to the importance of the Black Sea in the traditional worldview. When a new boat is to be launched into the sea, practices such as the owner sacrificing an animal and smearing its blood on the boat, delighting children with various gifts and treats in return for having them throw stones after the boat, keeping people believed to bring misfortune away from the vessel, and hanging various objects like animal skulls, horseshoes, evil eye beads, pine kindling, eggshells, chicken droppings, baby shoes, or old sandals on different parts of the boat — all within the framework of beliefs in luck and the evil eye — bear traces of interpretations and traditions that reach back to mythological times (Aça, 2020).

Conclusion

In Eastern Black Sea folk culture, the sea is not only a physical reality but also a character, a teacher, and sometimes an examiner. This culture, which is shaped by rituals, beliefs and narratives, regards the sea as both sacred and a being to be treated carefully. This strong bond with the sea is one of the deepest traces of cultural memory passed down from generation to generation. On the other hand, the deep respect for nature in the Eastern Black Sea also manifests itself in the relationship with the sea. The sea is a symbol of a mutual balance between human and nature. Behaviors such as polluting the water, killing fish for no reason or throwing garbage into the sea are considered not only environmental but also moral wrongs. While obvious factors such as industrial fishing, the increase in micro and macro pollutants, and the human-driven transformation of the coastal landscapes negatively impact the natural and cultural awareness centered on the Black Sea, the region's rich mythological, historical, cultural and traditional heritage continue to serve as a strong reference point for preserving ecological balance and ensuring the sustainability of the Black Sea's aquatic basin.[2]

2 Translator: İrfan Keşoğlu, Proofreading: Gülcan Ergün.

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