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Dictionary Definition. Thetis n : (Greek mythology) one of the 50 Nereids; mother of Achilles by Peleus Thetis in Hebrew: (מיתולוגיה) **תטיס**. Thetis in Latin: Thetis.

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עם זאת, השאיפה להטביע שלוש סירות ישנות, אשר מולאו בבטון: "**תטיס**" (Thetis), "איפיגניה" (Iphigenia) ו"אינטרפיד" (Interpid), באופן שיחסום את מבואות הנמל, הצליחה רק בחלקה.

Thetis

Not be confused with the sea-goddess **Tethys**, or **Themis**, the embodiment of law. For other uses, see **Thetis** (disambiguation)

“Thetys” redirects here. For the animal genus, see **Thetys** (salp).

Thetis (/ˈθeɪtɪs/; Ancient Greek: Θέτις, [tʰétis]), is en-



Head of Thetis from an Attic red-figure pelike, c. 510–500 BC, Louvre.

countered in Greek mythology mostly as a sea nymph or known as the goddess of water, one of the fifty Nereids, daughters of the ancient sea god Nereus.^[1]

When described as a Nereid in Classical myths, Thetis was the daughter of **Nereus** and **Doris**,^[2] and a granddaughter of **Tethys** with whom she sometimes shares characteristics. Often she seems to lead the **Nereids** as they attend to her tasks. Sometimes she also is identified with **Metis**.

Some sources argue that she was one of the earliest of deities worshipped in **Archaic Greece**, the oral traditions and records of which are lost. Only one written record, a fragment, exists attesting to her worship and an early **Alcman** hymn exists that identifies Thetis as the creator of the universe. Worship of Thetis as the goddess is documented to have persisted in some regions by historical writers such as **Pausanias**.

In the **Trojan War** cycle of myth, the wedding of Thetis and the Greek hero **Peleus** is one of the precipitating events in the war, leading also to the birth of their child **Achilles**.

1 Thetis as goddess

Most extant material about Thetis concerns her role as mother of **Achilles**, but there is some evidence that as the sea-goddess she played a more central role in the religious beliefs and practices of **Archaic Greece**. The pre-modern etymology of her name, from *tithemi* (τίθημι), “to set up, establish,” suggests a perception among **Classical Greeks** of an early political role. **Walter Burkert**^[3] considers her name a transformed doublet of **Tethys**.

In *Iliad* I, **Achilles** recalls to his mother her role in defending, and thus legitimizing, the reign of **Zeus** against an incipient rebellion by three **Olympians**, each of whom has pre-Olympian roots:

You alone of all the gods saved Zeus the Darkener of the Skies from an inglorious fate, when some of the other Olympians—**Hera**, **Poseidon**, and **Pallas Athene**—had plotted to throw him into chains... You, goddess, went and saved him from that indignity. You quickly summoned to high Olympus the monster of the hundred arms whom the gods call **Briareus**, but mankind **Aegaeon**,^[4] a giant more powerful even than his father. He squatted by the Son of **Cronos** with such a show of force that the blessed gods slunk off in terror, leaving Zeus free

—E.V. Rieu translation

Quintus of Smyrna, recalling this passage, does write that Thetis once released Zeus from chains; but there is no other reference to this rebellion among the **Olympians**, and some readers, such as **M. M. Willcock**,^[5] have understood the episode as an *ad hoc* invention of **Homer**’s to support **Achilles**’ request that his mother intervene with **Zeus**. **Laura Slatkin** explores the apparent contradiction, in that the immediate presentation of Thetis in the *Iliad* is as a helpless minor goddess overcome by grief and lamenting to her Nereid sisters, and links the goddess’s present and past through her grief.^[6] She draws comparisons with Thetis’ role in another work of the **epic Cycle** concerning **Troy**, the lost *Aethiopsis*,^[7] which presents a strikingly similar relationship—that of the divine Dawn, **Eos**, with her slain son **Memnon**; she supplements the parallels with images from the repertory of archaic vase-painters, where **Eros** and Thetis flank the symmetrically opposed heroes with a theme that may have been derived from traditional epic songs.^[8]

Thetis does not need to appeal to Zeus for immortality for her son, but snatches him away to the White Island *Leuke* in the Black Sea, an alternate Elysium^[9] where he has transcended death, and where an Achilles cult lingered into historic times.

2 Thetis and the other deities



Immortal Thetis with the mortal Peleus in the foreground, Boeotian black-figure dish, c. 500–475 BC - Louvre.

Pseudo-Apollodorus' *Bibliothēke* asserts that Thetis was courted by both Zeus and Poseidon, but she was married off to the mortal Peleus because of their fears about the prophecy by Themis^[10] (or Prometheus, or Calchas, according to others) that her son would become greater than his father. Thus, she is revealed as a figure of cosmic capacity, quite capable of unsettling the divine order. (Slatkin 1986:12)

When Hephaestus was thrown from Olympus, whether cast out by Hera for his lameness or evicted by Zeus for taking Hera's side, the Oceanid Eurynome and the Nereid Thetis caught him and cared for him on the volcanic isle of Lemnos, while he labored for them as a smith, "working there in the hollow of the cave, and the stream of Okeanos around us went on forever with its foam and its murmur" (*Iliad* 18.369).

Thetis is not successful in her role protecting and nurturing a hero (the theme of *kourotrophos*), but her role in succoring deities is emphatically repeated by Homer, in three *Iliad* episodes: as well as her rescue of Zeus (1.396ff) and Hephaestus (18.369), Diomedes recalls that when Dionysus was expelled by Lycurgus with the Olympians' aid, he took refuge in the Erythraean Sea with Thetis in a bed of seaweed (6.123ff). These accounts associate Thetis with "a divine past—uninvolved with human events—with a level of divine invulnerability extraordinary by

Olympian standards. Where within the framework of the *Iliad* the ultimate recourse is to Zeus for protection, here the poem seems to point to an alternative structure of cosmic relations"^[11]

3 Marriage to Peleus and the Trojan War



Thetis changing into a lioness as she is attacked by Peleus, Attic red-figured kylix by Douris, c. 490 BC from Vulci, Etruria - Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

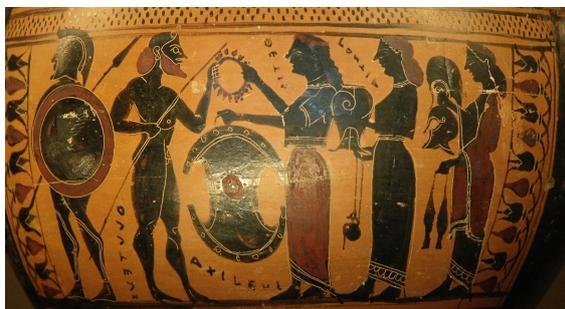
Main article: Judgement of Paris

Zeus had received a prophecy that Thetis's son would become greater than his father, like Zeus had dethroned his father to lead the succeeding pantheon. In order to ensure a mortal father for her eventual offspring, Zeus and his brother Poseidon made arrangements for her to marry a human, Peleus, son of Aeacus, but she refused him.

Proteus, an early sea-god, advised Peleus to find the sea nymph when she was asleep and bind her tightly to keep her from escaping by changing forms. She did shift shapes, becoming flame, water, a raging lioness, and a serpent.^[12] Peleus held fast. Subdued, she then consented to marry him. Thetis is the mother of Achilles by Peleus, who became king of the Myrmidons.

According to classical mythology, the wedding of Thetis and Peleus was celebrated on Mount Pelion, outside the cave of Chiron, and attended by the deities: there they celebrated the marriage with feasting. Apollo played the lyre and the Muses sang, Pindar claimed. At the wedding Chiron gave Peleus an ashen spear that had been polished by Athene and had a blade forged by Hephaestus. Poseidon gave him the immortal horses, Balius and Xanthus. Eris, the goddess of discord, had not been invited, how-

ever. In spite, she threw a golden apple into the midst of the goddesses that was to be awarded only “to the fairest.” In most interpretations, the award was made during the Judgement of Paris and eventually occasioned the Trojan War.



Thetis and attendants bring armor she had prepared for him to Achilles, an Attic black-figure hydria, c. 575–550 BC, Louvre.

In the later classical myths Thetis worked her magic on the baby Achilles by night, burning away his mortality in the hall fire and anointing the child with ambrosia during the day, Apollonius tells. When Peleus caught her searing the baby, he let out a cry.

Thetis heard him, and catching up the child threw him screaming to the ground, and she like a breath of wind passed swiftly from the hall as a dream and leapt into the sea, exceeding angry, and thereafter returned never again.

In a variant of the myth, Thetis tried to make Achilles invulnerable by dipping him in the waters of the Styx (the river of Hades). However, the heel by which she held him was not touched by the Styx’s waters, and failed to be protected. In the story of Achilles in the Trojan War in the *Iliad*, Homer does not mention this weakness of Achilles’ heel. A similar myth of immortalizing a child in fire is connected to Demeter (compare the myth of Meleager). Some myths relate that because she had been interrupted by Peleus, Thetis had not made her son physically invulnerable. His heel, which she was about to burn away when her husband stopped her, had not been protected.

Peleus gave the boy to Chiron to raise. Prophecy said that the son of Thetis would have either a long but dull life, or a glorious but brief life. When the Trojan War broke out, Thetis was anxious and concealed Achilles, disguised as a girl, at the court of Lycomedes. When Odysseus found that one of the girls at court was not a girl, he came up with a plan to reveal the truth. Raising an alarm that they were under attack Odysseus knew that the young Achilles would instinctively run for his weapons and armour, thereby revealing himself. Seeing that she could no longer prevent her son from realizing his destiny, Thetis then had Hephaestus make a shield and armor.

When Achilles was killed by Paris, Thetis came from the sea with the Nereids to mourn him, and she collected his

ashes in a golden urn, raised a monument to his memory, and instituted commemorative festivals.

4 Thetis worship in Laconia and other places



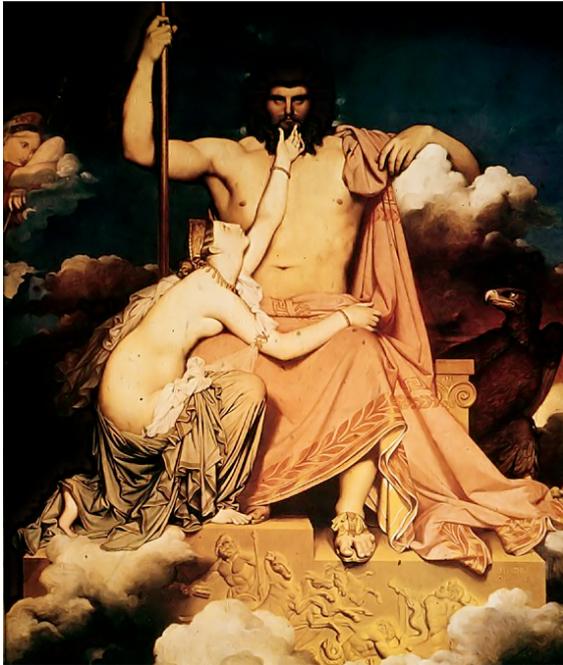
Thetis and the Nereids mourning Achilles, Corinthian black-figure hydria, 560–550 BC; note the Gorgon shield, Louvre

A noted exception to the general observation resulting from the existing historical records, that Thetis was not venerated as a goddess by cult, was in conservative Laconia, where Pausanias was informed that there had been priestesses of Thetis in archaic times, when a cult that was centered on a wooden cult image of Thetis (a *xoanon*), which preceded the building of the oldest temple; by the intervention of a highly placed woman, her cult had been re-founded with a temple; and in the second century AD she still was being worshipped with utmost reverence. Accseniorssenians, who had revolted, and their king Anaxander, having invaded Messenia, took prisoners certain women, and among them Cleo, priestess of Thetis. The wife of Anaxander asked for this Cleo from her husband, and discovering that she had the wooden image of Thetis, she set up the woman Cleo in a temple for the goddess. This Leandris did because of a vision in a dream, but the wooden image of Thetis is guarded in secret.^[13]

In one fragmentary hymn ^[14] by the seventh century Spartan poet, Alcman, Thetis appears as a demiurge, beginning her creation with *poros* (πόρος) “path, track” and *tekmor* (τέκμωρ) “marker, end-post”. Third was *skotos* (σκότος) “darkness”, and then the sun and moon. A close connection has been argued between Thetis and Metis, another shape-shifting sea-power later beloved by Zeus but prophesied bound to produce a son greater than his father because of her great strength.^[15]

Herodotus^[16] noted that the Persians sacrificed to “Thetis” at Cape Sepias. By the process of *interpretatio graeca*, Herodotus identifies the deity of another culture as the familiar Hellenic “Thetis” a sea-goddess who was being propitiated by the Persians.

5 Thetis in other works



Jupiter and Thetis, *Ingres*: “She sank to the ground beside him, put her left arm round his knees, raised her right hand to touch his chin, and so made her petition to the Royal Son of Cronos extquotedbl (*Iliad*, I.)

- Homer's *Iliad* makes many references to Thetis.
- Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* IV, 770–879.
- *Bibliotheca* 3.13.5.
- In 1981, British actress Maggie Smith portrayed Thetis in the Ray Harryhausen film *Clash of the Titans* (for which she won a Saturn Award). In the film, she acts as the main antagonist to the hero Perseus for the mistreatment of her son Calibos.
- Thetis appears as a high-ranking monster-of-the-day in the first season of the anime series *Sailor Moon*. She controls sea water.
- In 2004, veteran actress Julie Christie portrayed Thetis in a short scene in the film *Troy*.
- Thetis also appears in the fictional book series *Succubus Blues* by Richelle Mead.

6 Notes

- [1] “NEREUS : Sea-God, the Old Man of the Sea | Greek mythology, w/ pictures”. Theoi.com. Retrieved 2013-05-04.
- [2] Hesiod, *Theogony* 240 ff.; her mother was Thalassa according to Lucian, *Dialog of the Sea Gods*, 11, 2.

- [3] Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, 1993, pp 92-93.
- [4] The “goatish one”
- [5] M. M. Willcock, “Ad Hoc Invention in the *Iliad*,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* **81** (1977), pp. 41-53.
- [6] Slatkin, “The Wrath of Thetis” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974)**116** (1986), pp 1-24.
- [7] The summary by Proclus survives.
- [8] “When Achilles fights with Memnon, the two divine mothers, Thetis and Eos, rush to the scene—this was probably the subject of a pre-Iliad epic song, and it also appears on one of the earliest mythological vase paintings.” (Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* 1985, p 121.
- [9] Erwin Rohde calls the isle of Leuke a *sonderelysion* in *Psyche: Seelen Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* (1898) 3:371, noted by Slatkin 1986:4note.
- [10] Pindar, Eighth Isthmian Ode.
- [11] Slatkin 1986:10.
- [12] Ovid: *Metamorphoses* xi, 221ff.; Sophocles: Troilus, quoted by scholiast on Pindar’s Nemean Odes iii. 35; Apollodorus: iii, 13.5; Pindar: Nemean Odes iv .62; Pausanias: v.18.1
- [13] Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 3.14.4–5
- [14] The papyrus fragment was found at Oxyrhynchus.
- [15] M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *Les Ruses de l’intelligence: la mētis des Grecs* (Paris, 1974) pp. 127–64, noted in Slatkin 1986:14note.
- [16] Herodotus *Histories* 6.1.191.

7 External links

- Thetis: very full classical references
- Slatkin: The Power of Thetis: a seminal work freely available in the University of California Press, eScholarship collection.
- Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). extquotedblThetis extquotedbl. *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

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