The Hittites are certainly never described as a maritime society and the textual evidence reveals a mild diffidence towards the sea and seafarers, often associating them to danger and piracy. Nevertheless, from the XIV century until the fall of the empire, they did interact with coastal and seafaring peoples. The latter’s religious worldview on maritime matters seeped into the Hittite culture and contributed to the refinement of concepts of the sea, of seafaring, and to the development of an eclectic form of maritime devotion.

This paper proposes an analysis of the religiosity of the Hittites towards the sea as we understand it from the texts written in this language. The sea in the Hittite corpus is conceptualised in at least three different forms: the sea as the border par excellence; the sea as a natural numen; the sea as a personified god. Given the conference focus on maritime religion, this paper will only deal with the last two aspects, namely the different ways in which the sea was object of devotion. These draw from different traditions, co-exist and overlap – even within the individual’s experience.

In Hattian (i.e. central Anatolian) context, the sea is almost exclusively understood as a force of nature to which are attributed divine properties. Furthermore, in the majority of texts, the sea is not accompanied by the divine determinative typical of other “actual” gods. As with many other natural elements, it is intrinsically sacred and as such it features in the list of witnesses at the end of treatises and is the object of offers and rituals.

With the conquest of Hurrian territories in Cilicia – known as Kizzuwatna and Tarḫuntašša in the sources – and the contacts with Aegean seafarers along the coast, the concept of the sea and the forms of relative devotion acquire new depth. These interactions likely favoured the transition of the perception of the divine nature of the sea from sacred natural element towards the idea of the personified god, which already existed in the central Anatolian tradition, but was until then entirely marginal – the only instance in which a personified Sea-god appears within an original Hattian context is the myth of Telipinu and the daughter of the Sea. The Hurritization of the Hittite culture also invests the conceptualization of the sea and the adoptions of religious rituals centred on the personified Sea-god. In the Hittite versions of Hurrian originals, the personification of the Sea-god is found at the centre two important mythological narrations: the Song of Ullikummi and the myth of Ḥedammu, both included in the Kumarbi Cycle – which in turn had a lasting influence also on the following Greek tradition, best exemplified by Hesiod’s Theogony. Furthermore, the contacts with the Syro-Levantine world following the Hittite expansion, added a Canaanite character in the construction of the figure of the Sea-god.

The resulting contamination between these diverse traditions can be exemplified by text KUB 56.15, reporting a vow to the Sea performed by the Hittite queen Puduḫepa for the apprehension of Piyamaradu, mercenary, warrior and seafarer. The multiple influences on the concept of a divine sea condensed in this fragment will be disentangled in the course of the paper and contextualised within the wider Eastern Mediterranean maritime tradition.