KING MIDAS AND THE GORDION KNOT

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My first attempts at working with the Greek written evidence about non-literate societies were skillfully guided by Prof. Alexander Fol. He had a great share in my choosing the Anatolian set of problems: first the Cimmerians and then ancient Phrygia and the Thracian-Phrygian ethnic and cultural parallels. That is why it is a great honour and pleasure for me to offer him this modest work on the occasion of his 70th anniversary.

The ancient literary tradition about King Midas and the Phrygians provided one more proverbial expression to the modern world, besides the "golden touch" and Midas' ass' ears. That's the story of Alexander III the Great who cut the Gordian knot with his sword, thus setting an example for solving an impossible task/labour.

The story is related by the historians of Alexander III and thus is a part of the scholarly discussion about their sources. The recent text-critical studies are somewhat controversial about the reliability and the tradition of the texts about Alexander's march to the East. The value of the royal Ephemerides has seriously been challenged (N.G.L. Hammond is among the very few scholars who still defend their authenticity). Arrian is still the most highly valued historian of the Macedonian ruler, and the vulgata authors receive more attention.1

The story about the Gordian knot has been extensively discussed.2 The account is preserved in Justin's epitome of Pompeius Trogus' work, by Curtius, Arrian and Plutarch.3 The discussion on the dates of the texts will probably continue.4 The comments why the story was not given by Ptolemy cannot lead to positive solutions.5 There are authors who believe that in a certain form the account was present in Ptolemy's work.6 There is no need for this omission of Alexander's general to be

2 Among the more recent studies cf. Mousورة 1982; Roller 1984.
3 Just, 11, 7, 3–16; Curt., 3, 1, 11–18; Arr. Anab., 2, 3, 1–8; Plut. Alex., 18.
4 As well as that on the date of Curtius himself, cf. Carlsen 1993: 41–42.
5 Tarn 1979: 263.
used as an argument in the evaluation of the story: the nature of the story itself is quite instructive.

Arrian's account is the most detailed one. After arriving at Gordium in the winter of 333 BC, Alexander felt a strong desire to go to the acropolis where the palace of Gordios and his son, Midas, stood, in order to see Gordios' wagon and the knot by which the yoke was tied. There was a very popular story about the wagon among the neighbouring population: Gordios was a poor Phrygian who had two pairs of oxen, he was ploughing with the one, while the other was harnessed to his wagon. One day, as he was ploughing, an eagle perched upon the yoke and stayed there until the time came for unyoking the oxen. Anxious about this omen, Gordios went to consult the Telmessian soothsayers, as they were famous for their skills. There he met a young girl who advised him to make a sacrifice to Zeus Basileus. The Telmessian girl went back with him to direct him how to perform the sacrifice. Then Gordios married her and they had a son, Midas.

When Midas was already a young man, handsome and valiant, a civil unrest occurred among the Phrygians. The oracular prophesy was that a king would come in a wagon and would put an end to the unrest. Just at that time, Midas with his mother and father happened to appear before the assembly. Thus Midas became king and ended the civil war. He mounted his father's wagon on the acropolis and dedicated it to Zeus Basileus as a thank-offering to the god for sending the eagle. There was yet another story about this wagon: whoever untied the yoke by which the yoke was fastened to the wagon would gain the rule of Asia. The fastening was of cornel-bark and the ends of the thongs were not visible. Alexander wondered how to unfasten the yoke and finally cut it into two with his sword. Thus, he assumed he had fulfilled the prophesy: thunder and lightning filled the sky during the night; on the next day Alexander offered sacrifice to the gods who had helped him deal with the knot. Arrian quotes Aristotle, according to whom Alexander just took out the pin of the yoke-pole and then he was able to see the ends of the cord and he easily unfastened them.

According to Justin/Trogus, Alexander "was seized by an urge to take this city [Gordium], not so much for its spoils as because he had heard that the yoke of Gordius was lodged there in the temple of Jupiter, and that ancient oracles had foretold dominion over all of Asia for any man who succeeded in untwisting its knot." The story about the dedication of the wagon in the temple is a little different than the one by Arrian.

While Gordios was ploughing, birds of all kinds began to flutter around him. He went to consult the soothsayers in a neighbouring city, where at the city gates he met a young beautiful woman. She foretold him that he was destined to hold royal power, and she offered to marry him. After the wedding, a civil war broke out and the oracle advised the Phrygians to accept as their king the first person they found coming in a wagon to the temple of Jupiter. Gordios was the first person they saw and they hailed him as king. Gordios lodged his wagon in the temple of Jupiter, dedicating it to the majesty of kings. "He was succeeded by his son Midas, who, after receiving religious initiation from Orpheus, filled Phrygia with religious cults."

Curtius and Plutarch do not give a detailed account of the dedication of Gordios' wagon. Both authors named Gordion as the house, the capital city, of the famous Midas. Curtius says that Alexander saw in the temple of Jupiter the wagon in which it was known that Gordios, the father of Midas, rode. The yoke was tightly tied with a series of knots the ends of which were not visible. Both authors state that, according to the local people, whoever loosed the fastening would rule over Asia (οικοπεπέλευς in Plutarch). Plutarch also quotes Aristobulus' version about Alexander taking the yoke-pole (εστιπόρος). The motives of Alexander III to go from Lycia and Pisidia north to Gordium remain unclear, despite Arrian's text about joining there the soldiers who had returned from Macedonia and Parmenio's troops. His strategic goals of strengthening the northern road to the Hellespont do not seem very convincing. Justin's/Trogus' explanation that it was just the legendary wagon that had attracted the Macedonian king to the Phrygian capital city strengthens even more the doubts about the authenticity of the whole episode (possibly a secondary rationalization, because of the fame of the story).

Most scholars accept that Cleisthenes was the major source for Justin/Trogus and Curtius on the Gordian knot story. Although Justin's/Trogus' and Arrian's

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7 Arr. Amb. 2. 3. 1.
8 Arr. Amb. 2. 3. 2-4.
9 Arr. Amb. 2. 3. 4-6.
10 Arr. Amb. 2. 3. 7-8.
11 FGrHist 139 F 7a.
versions are very close, they probably followed different sources.24 According to Schachermeyr, Clearchus picked up the story from Callisthenes.25 Callisthenes was famous for his affinity to curiosities. One of his preserved fragments relates a different story about Midas’ “golden touch.”26 There the Phrygian king dedicated an altar to Zeus and then touched it to turn it into gold.

All variants unanimously mentioned Midas: either his palace/capital city was at Gordium, or he was Gordios’ son. As Midas was considered to be the son of Gordias as early as Herodotus,27 some scholars assume that Alexander’s actions at the Phrygian capital were influenced by the literary tradition about Midas in Macedonia and about the Phrygian migration to Asia Minor.28 Others insist that the sources do not demonstrate any Macedonian origin of the legend.29 However, King Midas was used for ideological purposes by the Macedonian kings and was included in the versions about the emergence of the Macedonian dynasty. The legendary narratives were being elaborated in the 4th century B.C. as well.30 Thus, it was not difficult for Alexander’s historians to make the connection, although this is not evident in the preserved texts. This connection was made by a later author, Marsyas of Phrygia,31 who states that the Mycenaean king was the same one which Midas had driven on his way from Europe to Phrygia.32 Friedrichsmeier’s view that it was Alexander himself who related the already known tradition about Midas in Macedonia with the Gordian oracle, and that the Gordian knot episode started the tradition on the wagon driven by Midas from Europe to Asia,33 is attractive, but can hardly be proven. According to Marsyas, the yoke was fastened with a vine-shoot, which is an eloquent reference to the Dionysiac cult and religion, well attested for the Macedonian royal court. Here, the images on coins of the Deronians should be remembered: a man ploughing with a pair of oxen and an eagle over the yoke.34 The scene has long been interpreted as a royal investiture.35

Rejecting the Macedonian association, modern scholarship accepts that the Gordian knot story reflects genuine local Phrygian traditions and realia.36 Indeed, most ancient authors (Arrian, Curtius, and Plutarch) say that Alexander heard the legend about the dedicated wagon and the oracle about the loosening of the knot from the local inhabitants. However, the Phrygian finds proper so far cannot support such a view. Chariots/wagons are almost completely missing in the Phrygian visual vocabulary of finds. The iron bit and the ivory appliqués for horse-trappings discovered in Megaron 4 do not testify to a chariot.37 The two horse skeletons excavated in Turn KY at Gordium38 are probably riding horses and do not imply the use of a chariot. The only example (incomplete) is the miniature quadriga found in a child’s (princes’?) burial in TurnP at the Phrygian capital. The latter can possibly be interpreted in the context of an initiation and therefore as a royal sign as well. The wagon/chariot was a sign of power and a status symbol in many cultures, so it was not obligatory for the Phrygians to have adopted this royal regalia from the Hittites, as Moiseeva and Marozov think.39

It has already been noted in the literature that, if the Gordian wagon story preserved a true Phrygian core, it should be in the sphere of cult and religion.40 Many researchers consider Justin’s Trogus’ account to be closer to Phrygian cult practices.41 At the end of his text, Justin says that “Midas, who, after receiving religious initiation from Orpheus, filled Phrygia with religious cults, and this, throughout his life, protected him more effectively than an armed guard could.”42 The wedding of Gordias and the Telemessian maiden has long been considered as a sacred marriage of the King to the Mother Goddess (Cybele).43 The story might as well be the literary expression of a folklore variant of a Phrygian ritual situation. That episode can be regarded in view of the Greek literary tradition, supported by the Phrygian epigraphy as well, according to which King Midas was the son and the chief priest of Cybele.44 The association of the wagon with Cybele’s chariot45 could hardly be defended in a Phrygian context:

26 FGrHist 124 F 56 = Plut. Mar. 5.
27 Hdt. 8. 138.
29 Bosworth 1980: 185; Atkinson 1980: 87; Frei also points out the lack of a Macedonian connection in the sources on Alexander.
30 Vassileva (forthcoming).
31 FGrHist 135/136 F4 = Schol. Eur. Hipp. 670. The connection could have been made by the tradition which Marsyas followed, although most scholars believe that he himself made this contamination: cf. Bosworth 1980: 185.
the chariot is found only in Cybele’s Greek iconography, not in the Phrygian representations of the goddess. However attractive the suggestion is to consider the eagle-the birds on Gordias’ yoke in connection with the bird of prey, which was one of the attributes of the Phrygian Mother-Goddess, they most probably belonged to the Hellenic literary and visual image of Zeus.

The appearance of Midas with his mother and father in the wagon in front of the assembly could possibly find a literary match in the episode of Peisistratus’ return to Athens, in a chariot with a young woman dressed as the goddess Athena. The other parallel, though rendered more like a caricature, could be the drunk Odyssean king Kotos I waiting in his room for Athena.

There are two cities bearing the name of Telmessos: one in Caria, on the Halicarnassian Peninsula, and the other one—in Lycia; both of them were famous for their soothsayers. The Lycian city seems to be preferred by modern scholarship. Some believe that the city itself was mentioned in the Gordion episode just because a Telmessian soothsayer, Aristander, was accompanying Alexander the Great. It was Aristander who interpreted the unusual sweating of the statue of Orpheus in Libethra. Greenwalt’s view about “affinities for some kind of ‘Orphic’ doctrine” shared by both Phrygia and Lycia, as well as his noting a common “religious background” for Macedonians, Phrygians, and Lycians, is worth taking into consideration.

Could the association with the Lycian city have reflected a route of ethnic and cultural interactions between Phrygia and Lycia? In the 1980s several tumuli with wooden tombs were discovered in Lycia, at the present-day Badir (Elmalı, not far from Antalya), undoubtedly revealing Phrygian burial customs. They have not yet been published, so their occurrence in Lycia has not been interpreted satisfactorily. It is worth reminding here that Lycia and Caria have probably as numerous rock-cut monuments as Phrygia. It is possible that the Telmessian wife of Gordias was a literary way of marking the typological or ethnic and cultural similarities between the two areas that were noticed by the ancient authors.

The versions about the Gordion knot are among the major arguments of scholars to reconstruct a Phrygian dynastic line in which Gordias was the first king. The legendary nature of the narratives, as well as the fact that Midas is present in all of the versions and the capital/the palace were associated with the latter, suggest an artificial construct for Gordias. Modern commentators justly supposed that most probably it was Midas who was accepted as the first king. Gordias was more a part of the Greek literary tradition featured after the Greek eponymous heroes.

Some scholars assume the existence of several rulers bearing the names of Gordias and Midas, because of Herodotus’ evidence on Adrastos, son of Gordias, son of Midas. Others consider Gordias as a mythological forefather of the dynasty, while Midas—as the first king. However, we have no reliable historical evidence about another Midas, besides the famous king of the Mushkians in the time of Sargon II and Midas from the Old Phrygian inscriptions. A later Midas was suggested because of the mention of Mita, city lord, in a query of Esarhaddon to the god Shamash.

This gave grounds for the restoring of the missing name of a king of the Mushki in another of Esarhaddon’s queries as Mita (Midas). The evidence is small and relies on the restoration of a lacuna, so it could hardly be considered as secure data about a later Phrygian ruler under the same name. Thus, L. Roller is right affirming that Adrastos in Herodotus’ story most probably represented himself as a Phrygian aristocrat by a standard formula, stating that he was the son of Gordias, son of Midas.

The possibility that Gordias was an artificial name created from the city name has already been suggested. This seems very plausible, although the toponym Gordium appeared very late in Greek literature. There is no firm evidence for insisting on the existence of a Phrygian ruler under the same name of Gordias.

In the context of the comparative mythology, the scene of the ploughing Gordias can be interpreted as a sacred plough and thus as an investiture. The universal

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35 Midas is the one who became king in Arrian’s version; Aelian’s story has the eagle foretelling the king’s image for Gordias’ son, Midas, while Polyaeus says that Midas was elected tyrant: Ael. NA 13. 1; Polyaeus 7. 5.
37 Roller 1984: 261.
40 A rock-cut inscription at “Midas City” and on a stone slab from Tyana: Brüghle, Lejeune 1984: M-01a; T-02a, despite the controversy on the dating of the inscriptions.
41 Starr 1990: No. 13, 15; Ivantchik 1993: 68-74; Κολλογιού 1981: 51, note 82, 57 suggested the same on the grounds of Fassener’s restoration in a text from the time of Seneca, as well as on his reading of ‘Gordios’ and ‘Ascania’ in a Luwian inscription, a reading that is far from general acceptance: Merritt 1967: 106, No. 27.
42 Roller 1984: 264.
44 Xen. Hell. 1. 4. 1; for the etymology of the city name cf. Pokorny 1959: 444; Brüghle, Lejeune 1984: 80.
elements in the folklore narrative suggested the parallels with the Irish saga, or the comparison of the Phrygian ruler, respectively Alexander, with the sky king. The wagon is interpreted as that of Zeus or of Ahura Mazda.

Zeus Basileus seems to be a Hellenic abstraction; the name and the epithet were widely used for numerous non-Greek supreme deities who were identified with Zeus. This would match quite well the Phrygian cult practice as well, without the theonym having necessarily been its reflection. The Phrygian male deity, who was barely evidenced in Phrygia in the pre-Hellenistic Age, was later worshipped under the name and the iconography of the Greek Zeus. Numerous dedications to Zeus Brontos, Zeus Bennios and Zeus Sabazios are known from Hellenistic and Roman times.

The story of Gordias and Midas up to the moment of the dedication of the wagon is separated from the account about the prophecy on the united knot. None of the versions mentions its tying by the Phrygian ruler or its purpose. The foretold rule over Asia seems to match too well Alexander the Great’s own ambitions. Thus, the prophecy and the impossible task, should be considered in the context of Greek mythological (i.e. literary) structures where the untying, the loosening, i.e., solving (for example guessing the riddle of the Sphinx) was a royal test. It was acquiring a new knowledge. Not surprisingly, the words ἀκολούθωσι and ἐξίσσωμεν, used by Plutarch to describe the yoke fastening, were also used in reference to the Cretan Labyrinth. The ends of the cornel bark yoke fastening were hidden, not visible, while the knot had no beginning or end, according to Arrian’s variant. The captured, bound Silenos, was brought up by Midas, then set free in order to share his wisdom with the Phrygian ruler. Could the mythographic narratives about the bound and unloosed Silenos have possibly influenced the Gordian knot legend?

Tying and untying can, of course, be considered in the context of ancient fertility magic rites as well. Such an activity was among the royal obligations. However, we do not know to what extent the Hitite examples were relevant to Phrygia, as Moiseeva claims. Thus, in view with the Greek mythographic tradition about king Midas, the previously suggested interpretation of loosening and untying – as a royal test in acquiring new knowledge – seems more plausible. It would possibly be closer to the status of the Phrygian ruler, as far as we know it.

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**KING MIDAS AND THE GORDION KNOT**

Modern scholarship has long noticed the parallel between the Gordian knot and the complexly tied yoke of Priam’s mule-cart, which carried the gifts for Achilles as a ransom for Hector’s body. However, the latter’s omphalos should not be assumed automatically for Gordias’ wagon as well, thus leading to the hypothetical reconstructions of notions setting Gordian at the centre of the world.

Homer really gives a very practical and technically detailed scene of harnessing Priam’s mule-cart. Priam’s sons brought a nine-cubit-long (about 4 metres) yoke-bending. The yoke they fitted properly on to the well-polished pole, at its front end, and put the ring over the peg, and tied it (the tying) three times on each side of the knop, and then fastened it fast in a succession of turns and tucked it in under the hook. Thus, the ends of the binding were not seen, as was the case with Gordias’ wagon yoke. Modern commentators have noticed Homer’s individual language in this scene: a great number of the words are Homerian hapaxae or rare words. The best example is probably the word ἱππαρτος, the wooden peg of the yoke pole; besides here, it was used only by Arrian and Plutarch, both quoting Aristobulus’ variant of the story about the unloosening of the Gordian knot. Aristobulus is reported to have said that Alexander did not cut the knot, but just took out this wooden peg, revealing the ends of the thongs and thus easily unfastening the yoke. One of the forms of the word for the yoke binding, ζυγόδεσσαι, is also used in the description of Priam’s cart and by Plutarch in his account of the Gordian episode.

While preparations were being made, Priam made a libation and asked a good omen from Zeus. Zeus sent a great eagle in response. The Iliad scene and its lexical parallels with Aristobulus’ suggest that the historians of Alexander copied an epic model. The hypothesis seems likely in view of the close relations between the Trojans and the Phrygians as allies (and possibly kinsmen as well) in the Iliad, as well as in the context of the later synonymous use of both ethnonyms in Greek tragedy. Probably Alexander’s desire to perform as the second Achilles also influenced his historians’ choice.  

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56 Von Gutschmidt 1892: 460; Friz 1972: 115–121.
58 Von Gutschmidt 1892: 463.
61 Liddle, Scott 1996: 533, 1613.
62 Art. 2. 2. 7.
63 Theopompos: FGrHist 115 F75c; Arist. Fr. 44 Rose.
64 As Moiseeva 1982: 128, 66a. 82, 83, emphasizing the Hitite practice.
66 Radet 1917: 98–110; Deonna 1918: 39–82. Curtius’ brief geographical description at the beginning of his account on Gordian, where he claims that the Phrygian capital city was equidistant from the Euxine and Cilician Seas, is a literary cliché, geographically incorrect: cf. similar statements about the narrowest part of Asia Minor, where usually Sinope and Herakleia Pontica are mentioned. Hist. 2. 34, Liv. 18. 12; Plin. NH 5. 6; Strabo 12. 1. 3. commentaries in: Atkinson 1980: 85–86.
67 Translation by Richardson 1993: 301.
69 Richardson 1993: 302.
Pearson is right that we shall never know what happened at Gordion (if anything at all). The discussion which variant is more authentic: the more dramatic story with the cutting of the knot, or the one with the taking out of the peg, cannot produce successful results. At least not from the viewpoint of the Phrygian cult and religious practice. However, according to Hellenic myth-making, the unloosing/leaving the meaning of a value trial and of acquiring new knowledge, while the scene of Alexander waving his sword seems to belong rather to the rhetorical approaches of his historians.

The legend variants about the Gordion knot were literary works featured after the Homeric model and did not echo Phrygian legends or rituals, despite the insistence of the ancient writers that these were told by the local people. The narratives display some universal folkloric elements that can be found in many cultural traditions. At present, it is still difficult to estimate the Hittite heritage of the Phrygian culture, so the parallels with the chariot brought to the Hittite king as royal insignia, as well as with the role of the Hittite queen in the royal ritual, cannot be very compelling. The marriage to a Telmessian woman, a soothsayer, could possibly reflect the sacred marriage of the Phrygian ruler with the Mother-Goddess in the ritual. The mentioning of Telmessos herself could probably be a literary featured notice about the observed ethnic and cultural similarities between Phrygia and Lycia.

The known literary tradition on the Phrygian migration from Macedonia, on the Gardens of Midas at the Bermion mountain and the captured Silenos, could hardly be Alexander the Great’s inspiration for his actions on Gordion. A Macedonian association can rather be looked for in the images on the Dorian coins, which could reveal a local royal/aristocratic mythography or folklore, than in the urge to follow the Phrygian migration. The Phrygian-Trojan connection in the epic poems and the desire of the Macedonian kings to copy epic models seem a more plausible basis for the Gordion knot story.

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DARSTELLUNG EINER THRAKISCHEN KATABASIS-SAGE?

Dilyana Boteva

Mit seinen Arbeiten hat Professor Alexander Foi das Bedürfnis nach einer "Interpretatio Thracia" bei der relevanten textkritischen und gegenstandsbezogenen Analyse begründet. Seine theoretischen Reflexionen über die mündliche thrakishe Kultur und den sog. thrakischem Orphismus beeinflussten schon seit vielen Jahren die Entwicklung der Thракiologie.

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3 Herodot erwähnt zwar die orphischen Mysterien (II. 81, 2), nicht aber Orpheus selbst (vgl. Powell 1960: 268). Gemäß West (1983: 40) "Herodotus probably has Orpheus and Musaeus in mind when he says he thinks that the poets said to have written about the gods earlier than Hesiod and Homer were really later". Auf jeden Fall finden wir bei Herodot keine Verbindung Thrakens mit Orpheus.