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Fig. 7: Malatya
(d'après Hawkins 2000, pl. 148)

Phrygian Literacy in Cult and Religion

Maya Vassileva, Sofia

Recent progress in Phrygian epigraphy and the studies on Phrygian cult and religion offer opportunities for a further consideration of the use of Phrygian script. It has already been noted that Phrygian script was mainly used to write short texts related to cult and religious practices, as well as to manifest royal or aristocratic status (Mellink 1993, 295ff.). The analysis of the monuments on which inscriptions occur and the contents of the texts, as far as we can understand them, reveals a type of society which had an alphabet, but was still on the way to literacy.

Most of the Old-Phrygian inscriptions, apart from the graffiti on clay vessels, originate from ritually important contexts: they accompany rock-cut façades, step or other monuments, or were engraved on bronze and silver vessels discovered in the tombs. Texts on stone slabs are rare and often found out of an archaeological context (Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, G-02, G-08, G-09, C-01, P-01-04, T-01-03).¹ Recent discoveries at Kerkenes Dağ might offer an example of a relief of human figure(s)(?) surrounded by an inscription (Summers / Summers / Branting 2004, 7, Fig. 11).

The present paper focuses on certain peculiarities in the placement and the contents of some of the monumental Old-Phrygian inscriptions. Further observations can present an insight into the ritual practices performed in front of the rock-cut monuments. Parallels with the Neo-Hittite, Greek and Thracian world can also contribute to the better understanding of the Phrygian way of using the alphabet.

One of the most famous Old-Phrygian rock-cut façades, the so-called "Areyastis Monument" (W-01; *Fig. 1a*) has provoked a vivid discussion. One of the three texts on the façade (W-01a) is inscribed on the pediment, running along its outer perimeter, encircling the architectural details. The first difficulty faced by the scholars is where to start reading the text (Haas 1966, 194f.; Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, 37ff.; Lubotsky 1988, 11; Janda 1997, 271f.). The doubts remain whether the text consists of one or more sentences. It is usually interpreted as a dedicatory text to the Mother (*Areyastis* being her epithet). However, the presence of the relative pronoun *yos* renders the longest part of the inscription on the fronton unclear and suggests that the text continues in either

¹ Throughout the text the numbers of the Old-Phrygian inscriptions follow the designations introduced by Brixhe / Lejeune 1984 in their *Corpus* and by Brixhe 2002; 2004 in the two *Supplements*.

of the two other inscriptions: W-01b, above the fronton on the undressed rock (which also contains *vos*) and W-01c, on the perpendicular rock left after the execution of the right-hand side of the façade and ending on the lower part of the side post (Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, Pl. 18f.; *Fig. 1b*). According to Alexander Lubotsky there are four sentences in total and the first three comprise a connected text: W-01a continues in W-01b, a boustrophedon whose second line makes a "loop" (Lubotsky 1988, 25). Thus the three inscriptions on the façade would probably present a combination of two dedications and a curse formula.² The curse formula is the standard part of the New-Phrygian inscriptions which are grave stones, but rare in Old-Phrygian texts.³

It is generally agreed that the three inscriptions are contemporary with the façade and were executed in the same time and in the same manner. It has been proposed on archaeological grounds that the inscription on the undressed rock (W-01b) was the first to be made, as the Phrygian façades were cut from top to bottom (Berndt-Ersöz 2003, 100f.). W-01c was obviously done after the side post was already carved.⁴ A short span of time between the executions of each of the three inscriptions can be supposed, despite the identical outline of the letters in them all. Besides, most probably there are two dedicators: *Bonok* and *Ataniyen*, accompanied by titles: *akenanogavos* and *kuryaneyon* (?) respectively. Could these be two separate dedications? Could they have been made on different occasions, during the performance of different rituals in front of the rock-cut façade? As I argued elsewhere, the carving of the rock itself, including the making of inscriptions, could have possibly been a ritual act (Vassileva 2001, 54, 58).

The above research situation could possibly find a parallel in the studies of the Thracian language. As the inscriptions in Thracian are very few,⁵ the data for consideration and conclusions is very restricted. The earliest inscription, a stone slab discovered as a cover lid of a grave in a Thracian tumulus near the village of Kjolmen, northeastern Bulgaria, is dated to the 6th century BCE (*Fig. 2*).⁶ Although it is generally agreed that it made use of the archaic Greek alphabet, scholars attempt at specifying the epichoric alphabets from which the letters had been borrowed and attached different sound values respectively (especially Theodossiev 1997). However, it seems more likely for the Kjolmen text to have

² Although the details remain debatable; cf. the considerations on G-02 below.

³ The relative pronoun *vos/tios* is found in a few more Old-Phrygian inscriptions: B-01, B-03, P-04b and P-06, and the relative indefinite pronoun *ios ni* in P-04a, but the meaning of the texts remains obscure.

⁴ Lubotsky 1988, 25 also thinks that W-01c was added later. For the unfinished decoration of the side-post cf. Börker-Klähn 2000, 88.

⁵ These are: the stone inscription from Kjolmen, cf. below; the text on the gold ring from Ezerovo: Detschew 1976, 566-582, and a couple of very short graffiti on rings and vessels of precious metals: Filow 1934, 63, 130.

⁶ Most recently: Dimitrov 2003, 345-354 with a bibliography on the inscription. Theodossiev 1997 and Woudhuizen 2000-2001 quoted below also give a list of the earlier publications of the text.

used a local script, very close to, but different from the Greek and closer to the Old-Phrygian alphabet (Dimitrov 2005, 230). It is generally agreed that it is a formulaic text. A dedication has also been proposed (Woudhuizen 2000-2001).

Similarly to the "Areyastis monument" the first difficulty faced by the scholars is where to start reading the text as it is written in a circular or rather spiral-like way. The word division also poses difficulties and there are almost as many readings as publications of the text. A recent study based on phonological analysis seems to be the most plausible interpretation so far (Dimitrov 2003, 345-354). The author distinguishes a relative pronoun that can be compared with the Phrygian *ios ni*, thus suggesting a malediction formula for at least a part of the text. He came to the conclusion that this was rather a grave stone inscription with a curse formula, than a dedication (Dimitrov 2003, 350-353). A monument marking a symbolic burial cannot be excluded (Dimitrov 2005, 27).

A number of scholars have long noticed a Phrygian linguistic parallel in the Kjolmen inscription: *dakat*, or *dakatr* depending on the sequence division (Orel 1994, 361; 1997, 358; Woudhuizen 2000-2001, 296ff.; Theodossiev 1997, 223). The word *addaket* is attested in Neo-Phrygian texts and possibly has a graphic variant in the Old-Phrygian *daΨet* in the "Areyastis Monument" (W-01b; Brixhe 2004, 52). The present state of Thracian linguistics and the research on the Kjolmen inscription in particular can hardly justify its assignment to Phrygian language⁷ or its definition "as a blend of Phrygianising and Luwianising elements" (Woudhuizen 2000-2001, 301).

The way of writing in a circle (or in a spiral) on the Kjolmen inscription has long attracted attention and has most often been compared to a stone slab from Gordion⁸ (Kaloyanov 1993, 72f.). The Phrygian monument bears the contours of two human feet, which can be possibly related to one of the words in the inscription: *podas* (this image reflects a common Mediterranean tradition) (Fig. 3). The editors of the Phrygian *Corpus* suggest very cautiously a combination of a dedication and a curse formula, introduced by the relative pronoun *ios* (Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, 87). Another similar stele was found at Karahüyük (C-01), not far from Gordion. The monument is too fragmentary for a plausible interpretation of the text, but the outline of a foot can still be seen: the letters surround the image (Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, 220).

Judging from the occurrences of the relative pronoun *vos/ios* and the relative indefinite pronoun *ios ni*, a few more Old-Phrygian inscriptions could have contained malediction formulae. One is the longest text from Germanos.

⁷ Orel 1997, 356ff. (Th-02), although stating that it is "fairly close to Phrygian", but not identical.

⁸ G-02, no secure archaeological context, 6th century BCE(?): Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, 85. A possible special value in such way of writing might have been meant by Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* 6.381f. when speaking of the Etruscan verses: "not unwinding Etruscan poems from back to front, searching in vain for signs of the gods' hidden will": Bonfante / Bonfante 2002, 55, differently interpreted by the authors as referring to the Etruscan writing from right to left.

Bithynia, which is placed below a rather inconspicuous triangular niche and its meaning remains obscure (B-01); a parallelepiped stone piece, probably incomplete today, again from Bithynia (B-03) and again with a very unclear text which possibly contains an epithet in dative, feminine: *evtevevav*; a similar stone from Höyük in Pterna, inscribed on three sides (P-04a-c: P-04a containing *ios ni*, P-04b containing *ios*, while the verb for dedication *edaes* is preserved on the third side, P-04c). Thus, curses could have been engraved both on rock-cut monuments, mainly façades, and on stone slabs or stelae.

"Circular" (or rather running around) design of the inscriptions, as discussed above, might have possibly existed on some of the other rock-cut façades. Unfortunately, most of the sites are in a very bad state of preservation and it is impossible to tell whether there had been inscriptions running along the three sides of their pediments. There are seven rock-cut façades with inscriptions. "The Broken Monument" at Midas City bears an inscription above the right side of the gable field (M-05) as does the small façade at Findik (W-06). Only a few letters can be read on the tie-beam of the pediment in Arslankaya (W-03). The arrangement of the inscriptions at Maltaş might have matched the situation on the "Areyastis monument": one is on the lintel above the niche (W-05b) and the other along the left-side post (W-05a). A dedication is placed in a semicircle above the fronton of a smaller façade near Kümbet (W-02).

Like the "Midas Monument", the "Areyastis Monument" was also once considered a tomb. Now, all agree that the façades and most of the other rock-cut Phrygian monuments were devoted to the worship of the Great Mother Goddess, Kybele. Her association with the burial rites has been noted, but seems to be less accentuated (Buluç 1988; Roller 1999, 102ff.). As the malediction formulae are usually related to the disturbances and damages of graves in the later Neo-Phrygian texts,⁹ their presence on some of the Old-Phrygian rock-cut monuments can possibly supplement our understanding of Goddess' functions and domains. A symbolic grave or a shrine would not have contradicted the function of a sacred place of the Goddess. The rock, the façade or other rock-cut monument could have been considered a symbolic grave of the king (aristocrat), at the same time being a place for the worship of the Goddess, possibly the goddess herself: it marked her epiphany (Fol, V. 1998; 2000; 2001; Fol, A. 1994, 256-264; 2002, 314; Börker-Klähn 2000, 90f.; 2000a, 49). The ritual importance of the rock itself is demonstrated by the placement of an inscription on an undressed spot next to an impressive façade (as is the case with the "Midas Monument" M-01a and with the smaller Kümbet façade W-02).

Thus, possibly, the nature of the early written texts in Phrygia and in Thrace should not be strictly defined as dedicatory or funerary, as they often were both. The suggestion can find support in some of the Neo-Phrygian texts where the curse formula is directed against the violators of the grave or the monument, or the stone, the sepulchral chamber, the stele, etc. in one and the same inscription (depending on the meaning of the different words related to the monument:

⁹ In general the curse formula is not uniquely applied to graves, of course. Cf. below.

semou(n), *knouman*, *manka*, etc.), e.g. the protected item was not addressed only as a grave (Haas 1966, 77f.; Lubotsky 1998, 416).¹⁰ The grave-stones on which the Neo-Phrygian inscriptions are carved are often shaped as doors with several panels or gable-roofed façades (see for example: Brixhe / Drew-Bear 1997, Figs. 4, 6, 7, 9f., 13, 24). Alexander Lubotsky noted a parallel between the Neo-Phrygian curse formulae and the Luwian ones found at Karkamiš: the latter meant a monument dedicated to Kubaba,¹¹ thus providing even a better comparative context. To go further with the parallels: all of the inscriptions in Thracian language originate from graves.

Some of the above considerations might not be restricted to Phrygian and Thracian scribal practices only. A part of one of the earliest Greek inscriptions, on "Nestor's Cup" from Pithekoussai, is believed to be structured after a curse formula (Powell 1991, 366f.). It is also a metric text, a hexameter (and a Homeric reference at that), like the other earlier graffito on the Dipylon oinochoe (Jeffery 1961, 68, Pl. I.1, 235, Pl. 47.1). Both vessels were found in graves. Barry Powell's theory about the adoption of the Greek alphabet for the needs of the epics is not generally accepted, but his observations on the earliest metrical texts should be taken into account when considering the aristocratic and ritual milieu of their use. B. Powell is right in stressing the fact that "from the first one hundred years of Greek alphabetic writing there is not a single public inscription" (Powell 1991, 367), they are dedications, epithaphs, etc. and a lot of them in hexameter.

A number of Old-Phrygian inscriptions have been suspected of being metric ones: M-01d, W-08, W-10, P-04a.¹² Scholars have long searched for rhythmic patterns in New-Phrygian texts.¹³ A. Lubotsky demonstrated that New-Phrygian malediction formulae were often metrical, conforming to a dactylic rhythm. Martin West distinguishes other verse forms in the New-Phrygian curse formulae and argues in favour of their ancient origin (West 2003). He compares them with Vedic patterns and concludes that they belong to the ancient Indo-European heritage. This discussion poses the question about the direction of borrowings: did the Phrygians adopt the verses from the Greeks? M. West opted

¹⁰ Cf. Börker-Klähn 2000, 90 who suggests that *sikeneman* in M-01b, "Midas Monument", might have denoted the entire façade as it was perceived as a stele: comments and other suggestions in Berndt-Ersöz 2003, 93.

¹¹ Lubotsky 1998, 420 on the grounds of Hawkins 1981, 162 (KARKAMIŠ A 3). The formula itself, με ζεμελωσ κε δεωσ κε, 'among men and gods', ranks amongst the most ancient Indo-European patterns, West 2003, 86.

¹² Bayun / Orel 1988, 178, 184ff.; 1988a, 133f.; Orel 1997, 19, 49, 52. Orel 1994, 362 stated first that the Kjolmen inscription is a metric text and then he proclaimed as such the rock-cut inscription from Sitovo, Central Southern Bulgaria: Orel 1997, 355. His unsatisfactory work on both inscriptions cannot support such a claim. Cf. the critic in West 2003, 78.

¹³ Since William M. Ramsay and William M. Calder, cf. the earlier bibliographies in Lubotsky 1998, 413 and West 2003, 77.

for an independent development. The conservative Phrygian tradition also preserved the context which required these verse forms to be used for centuries.

Greek literary tradition famed the Phrygians for their musical skills, especially in the mourning songs (Soph. frg. 217, 378 Nauck; Eur. *Troj.* 151, 545, *Bacch.* 129, 159). Their king Midas was known as inventor of musical instruments and the sound of cymbals, flutes and tympan accompanied the worship of the Mother of Gods (Plin. 7.204; Athen. 14.617b; Suid. s.v. *elegos*; Vassileva 1997, 16f.). As M. West supposed, some of the curse formulae "could have been intoned or sung at a funeral".¹⁴ The melic declamatory performance has long been considered a major part in Thracian elite ideology, specifically in Orphic rites.¹⁵ The magic texts seem to be a considerable part of Orphic literature. Magic incantations included a prayer, an oath, or a curse formula (Fol, A. 2004, 19). The incantations written in Greek always have the god's name in accusative. In a magic text the naming of a god is understood as an incantation, as provoking the divine power to act and to interfere. We can consider the malediction formulae as magic texts: the violators of the grave or monument should be punished by the god (or pay penalty) and the god's name is invoked (Τη / Τιας / Τιαυ in some of the New-Phrygian texts).¹⁶

It has been argued that the hymn was the typical form of worship of the Great Mother Goddess (Kybele) in Greek written tradition.¹⁷ Hymns reflected the rites performed. The same is valid for the curse formulae / incantations.

The goddess known to the Greeks as Kybele was called just Mother by the Phrygians: *matar / mater*. In Old-Phrygian inscriptions *matar* is usually mentioned in nominative or in dative cases, mostly in dedicatory inscriptions. The only two instances where her designation occurs in accusative, *materan*, are on the "Areyastis Monument" and in the graffiti in the big niche on the "Midas Monument" (W-01a and M-01d). The proposed translation of the dedication on the "Areyastis Monument" reads as follows: "Bonok, the high priest (?) ... **placed** / dedicated (this) Mother Areyastis" (bold face mine; Lubotsky 1988, 16, 25). This phrase can find parallels in a number of dedicatory inscriptions to Kubaba in Luwian hieroglyphic found at Karkamiš: "I myself *seated* them (Karhuhas and Kubaba)", "I *re-established* Kubaba", "This ATA Kubaba I Panamuwatis ... *seated*" (italic face mine; Hawkins 1981, 150, 152, 167, KARKAMIŠ A 11b, A 23). "Establish" and "seat" refer to a goddess' image or

¹⁴ Suggested for the Indo-Europeans from which no grave-stones have survived (West 2003, 86).

¹⁵ Fol, A. 1986 passim. About recitations and dramatic dialogues in Hittite ritual texts, charms and spells included, cf. Watkins 1995, 135-151.

¹⁶ West 2003, 78 with fn. 7. He relates the Phrygian word τεικμενος with the Greek στίζω "prick" and with its use in magic papyri.

¹⁷ Cf. the comments of R. Wagman on the Epidauros Hymn to the Mother of Gods, considering an ancient tradition of metric formulaic language in her cult, Wagman 1995, 110-130; Vassileva 2001, 52.

temple. All these inscriptions, steles, door-jambs, reliefs, etc., end with the Goddess' invocation by means of a curse (Hawkins 1981, 147ff.).

There is one more parallel to be drawn between the "Areyastis Monument" and a Luwian inscription. Although with various readings, the part of the Old-Phrygian inscription containing the curse might be interpreted as: "whoever ... and may put his own name on this ... Mother, let he himself be cursed by the Mother herself" (Lubotsky 1988, 22, 25; other translations in Janda 1997, 274; Bayun / Orel 1988, 181ff.). An inscription of King Yariris of Karkamiš reads: "I made my image for myself ... (and) for me Kubaba will receive (it) placed at (her) foot".¹⁸ One cannot fail to notice that the reflective way of expression (his own name, his own image, the goddess herself) is very similar both in the Old-Phrygian and in the Luwian texts. Thus, I would suggest that some of the Old-Phrygian inscriptions might have been invocations or dedications accompanied by malediction formulae, or vows.

There are a few more examples of graffiti in the central or side niches of façades where *matar* is mentioned: in most of the cases the text is not complete, so we cannot be sure about the case ending.¹⁹ It is suggested that the graffiti in the central niche of the "Midas Monument" were scratched at a later date (Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, 6). Any date specification or even relative chronology for the graffiti on other monuments would be just a hypothesis. However, these graffiti might have been individual incantations, dedications or vows made at recurring rites and festivities. They were not probably any more mystery rites or the mystery setting had already been profaned.²⁰

The above considerations touch upon only a few aspects of the wide range of problems related to the Phrygian literacy. Further research will probably demonstrate more examples of adoption of Near Eastern (mainly Neo-Hittite) elements in Phrygian culture. However, we will probably never find historical texts (annals) or records of military victories after the model of the Near Eastern monarchies. The typological parallels speak in favour of similar societies in Phrygia and Thrace and a common way of using the alphabetic script in ritual context. New evidence and further progress in Phrygian and Thracian linguistics will elucidate some of the questions so far posed. In terms of language Thrace was much quicker Hellenized and Odrysian kings expressed their doctrinal and political declarations in inscriptions in Greek (Fol, A. 2000, 67). Still the indigenous beliefs and rituals can be detected in those very short texts. Phrygia obviously was exposed to different contacts and was Hellenized later. Parallels

¹⁸ Hawkins 1981, 149, 155, interpreted as "he dedicated his own likeness to her".

¹⁹ The second graffito in M-01d: *matera* and *materev* in M-01e, immediately to the right of the big niche; *materan* in the niche of Arslankaya, but Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, 45 doubt its authenticity: the present state of the monument did not allow the authors of the *Corpus* to verify the existence of an inscription in the niche of the Maltaş façade (Brixhe / Lejeune 1984, 47).

²⁰ An indirect evidence for mystery rite could possibly be seen in the opened rock-cut two-wing doors of the central niche at Arslankaya, cf. Vassileva 2001, 58.

can be found in early Greek writing as well, but the historical and cultural development took quite another turn in Hellas. The conservatism of Phrygian practice can be followed in the New-Phrygian texts from the Roman Imperial time. Phrygian and Thracian inscriptions were part of the rites performed (no matter how unclear they are to us) and the literacy in these countries came closer (if not identical) to a sacred language.²¹ A carved (or scratched) inscription was another way to invoke the deity. A good example can be found in the New-Phrygian texts, some of which are bilingual: Greek and Phrygian. However, most often they are not bilingual in the strict sense of the term: they are rather complementary. There is an example where it is evident that the commissioners of the grave stele were Greek speakers but still they incorporated the Phrygian curse formula at the end of the epitaph.²² This is an evidence for the ritual and possibly magic value of the Phrygian formulae. Probably some of the other Phrygian inscriptions – on bronze and silver vessels, on small figurines and other objects – could be interpreted in a similar way.

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²¹ On the sacred character of writing and especially that on stone in Indo-European context cf. Bader 1988. The words for writing originate from **pei-k/g-*, "incise". Similarly, the Etruscans probably considered their script as magic: Bonfante / Bonfante 2002, 55.

²² Probably metric texts had a similar importance: here the Greek part is an epigram: Brixhe / Drew-Bear 1997, No. VI, 98-102. Another example of a Greek epigram and Phrygian malediction formula in: Haas 1966, No. 82.

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Fig. 1a: The Areyastis Monument
(Photo M. Vassileva)



Fig. 2: The Kjolmen Inscription, Northeastern Bulgaria.
(Courtesy of the Archaeological Institute and Museum, Sofia, Inv. No. 6558)



Fig. 3: The Gordion Inscription G-02
(Courtesy of the Gordion Project)