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Olivier Henry
Ute Kelp

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'Royal' Tombs in Balkan-Anatolian Context. Representations of Status in Phrygian *tumuli*

Abstract

The present paper examines the 'royal' status displayed by the grave goods found in the *tumuli* at Gordion. For some time now it has been clear that the so-called Midas Mound is not the tomb of King Midas. If we are not able to assign any of the tombs to a specific name, however, then what can be made of the grave goods and inscriptions found in Phrygian *tumuli*? *Graffiti* from the tombs provide recurrent names that might be interpreted as cultic titles. It seems that representations of ritual status were more important than political or historical claims. Or, rather, political messages were rendered in terms of ritual status. The interpretation of some of the bronze objects found in the tombs (belts and *fibulae*) supports this suggestion. Thus, we can interpret Phrygian *tumuli* as élite burial monuments, but not all of them can be considered royal.

The research situation is comparable with the problems concerning the 4th century BC Thracian tombs. Although some Thracian royal names of that period are known, none of the tombs can be securely assigned to a certain ruler. Again, the deceased was projected in his symbolic and ritual status rather than in his political capacity as a historical ruler.

Finally, the author considers Phrygian identities displayed by *tumuli* outside the Phrygian heartland. They supplement further pieces of evidence for cultural interactions.

Keywords

Gordion, Phrygian *tumuli*, Thracian *tumuli*, royal burials, ritual status

Gordion, the Phrygian capital city, has been excavated and studied systematically for more than 50 years now. The present paper is prompted by some similar issues which arise when interpreting the rich ('royal') burials in Thrace and Phrygia, as well as by some typological parallels in the burial customs. Although they are asynchronous some observations might be instructive. The Thracian *tumuli* under discussion belong to the 5th – 3rd centuries BC, the most spectacular being dated to the 4th century BC.

In the case of Gordion, there is a necropolis that belonged to the settlement and is fairly well synchronized with it: a situation which is not common in Thrace. Over a hundred *tumuli* are situated near the Gordion City Mound,¹ 35 of them excavated and 23 published.² The largest mound with a height of 53 m and a diameter of 300 m, opened in 1957, was immediately nicknamed 'Midas Mound', or *Tumulus MM*. Its size and the wealth of grave goods clearly spoke of a royal burial. The only name of a Phrygian king securely attested as a

1 Sams 2008, 141.

2 Young 1981; Kohler 1995.

historical figure is that of Midas, active in the late 8th century BC.³ His military and political involvement in south-eastern Anatolia is well documented in Assyrian texts. Two bronze *situlae*, with a ram's and a lion's head respectively, discovered in *Tumulus* MM find close parallels among the vessels depicted on the reliefs of Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad.⁴ These vessels were royal gifts and objects of diplomatic exchange. Further research demonstrated that the two *situlae* could have been manufactured in northern Syria.⁵

The double-pin *fibula* worn by Warpalawa, king of Tabal, in his rock-cut relief at Ivriz belongs to the same type of prestige object, and is usually quoted as evidence for Midas' political relations in the area.⁶ This type of *fibulae* was mainly found in *Tumulus* MM, the closest parallel being MM187A.⁷ Unlike other types of Phrygian *fibulae* that occurred in some number in Greek sanctuaries, double-pin *fibulae* are very rare,⁸ thus a special gift or a votive. So, these elite grave goods seemed to support a date in the time of King Midas for *Tumulus* MM.⁹ However, such objects might have been in longer use. Warpalawa is securely attested in power between 738 and 710 BC, but his reign must have been longer.¹⁰ On the other hand, Phrygian political involvement in south-eastern Anatolia might have started earlier than Midas' first attestation in the Assyrian documents. By the time of the discovery of *Tumulus* MM, it was already clear that a massive destruction had occurred in the Gordion citadel which was then associated with the Cimmerians.¹¹ It is only Strabo's text that speaks about Cimmerian raids in Paphlagonia and Phrygia at the time when king Midas committed suicide by drinking bull's blood (Strabo 1.3.21). This legendary passage was associated with the Destruction Level at Gordion. Unlike the death of the Lydian king Gyges,¹² Assyrian documents are silent on the fate of Midas.

Gradual progress in the archaeological exploration of Gordion showed that the catastrophe was not as disastrous as initially thought and that the city was almost immediately rebuilt.¹³ The Cimmerians looked less and less like the likely culprits and Midas like the less probable occupant of the *Tumulus* MM tomb. The dates for the construction of the tomb provided most recently by dendrochronology are between 740 and 733 BC, too early for

3 Hawkins 1993–1997, 271–273.

4 Muscarella 1998, 152–153; Ebbinghaus 2008, 182–184, figs. 3 and 5.

5 Sams 1979, 45; 1993, 553; Ebbinghaus 2008.

6 Muscarella 1967, 83–84; Boehmer 1973, 151–152; Young 1981, 244–245.

7 Type XII.9 according to Blinckenberg's classification: Young 1981, 160 pl. 76F (MM187A); Caner 1983, 173–174, no. 1170.

8 See for the single piece found on Samos: Boehmer 1973, 151 fig. 2c; Ebbinghaus 2006, 208 fig. 6. The only other animal-headed *situla* excavated in the West, besides Gordion, also comes from Samos: Muscarella 1998, 153; Ebbinghaus 2008.

9 Sams 1994, 17.

10 Hawkins 2000, 430; Börker-Klähn 2004, 169.

11 Already in 1952: Sams 2005, 15.

12 The Assyrian texts of Assurbanipal's reign referring to Gyges' death have more recently been discussed by: Lanfranchi 1990, 110–114 and Ivantchik 1993, 103–105, no. 46.

13 Voigt 1994, 274–275; Voigt/Young 1999, 201–203; Voigt 2005, 31–32.

Midas being buried there.¹⁴ Although on different grounds, even in the early years of excavations R. Young held the opinion that a predecessor of Midas, probably Gordias, was buried in *Tumulus* MM.¹⁵

In addition, the archaeologists found no objects of precious metal among the richest Phrygian grave goods, despite Midas' "golden touch" known from Greek legend. Nonetheless, there was something special: Three of the bronze *phialae* in the tomb bear graffiti on an additionally applied wax band below the rim.¹⁶ None of them mentions Mita/Midas. One reads *Ata*.¹⁷ *Ata*/*Ates*/*Atas* are popular names in Phrygian graffiti and in rock-cut inscriptions, most of which are dedicatory.¹⁸ *Ates* is the dedicator of the inscription/monument to Midas on the most spectacular Phrygian rock-cut façade at 'Midas City'.¹⁹ His compound titles *arkiaevais akenanogavos* suggest a higher religious office.²⁰ *Ates* is also written on four silver objects placed in the wooden chamber of *Tumulus* D near Bayındır in ancient Lycia: two cauldrons, one *phiale* and a ladle. Three more bronze *phialae* bear the same name, while on a fourth one, *Ata* is incised.²¹ The Lycian *tumuli* have not yet been published, although some of the objects found there have already inspired a copious literature.²² According to the preliminary reports, it was a woman who was buried in *Tumulus* D.²³ Comparisons with the Gordion *tumuli* suggested a date in the late 8th – early 7th century BC.²⁴

However, the presence of silver vessels and gold objects in *Tumulus* D point to a later date, probably in the 7th century BC.²⁵ The incision of the letters on the metal itself, instead of on a wax band, also supports a later date.

These are not the names of the deceased. Comparisons with other Near Eastern traditions of inscribing metal vessels and with the later, 4th century BC Thracian practice show that royal names might be expected, although they do not necessarily belong to the buried.²⁶ However, no Phrygian king of the name *Ates* or *Ata* is attested.

Already in the first publication of the Lycian graffiti, the inscriptions were supposed to be 'pious words' by E. Varinlioğlu.²⁷ Could a deity be mentioned? S. Berndt-Ersöz suggested

14 The last known reference to Mita in an Assyrian text is dated to 709 BC: Mellink 1991, 622; Hawkins 1993–1997, 272. See also: DeVries/Sams/Voigt 2005; Sams 2005, 20.

15 Young 1981, 102.

16 Brixhe/Lejeune 1984, G-105, –106, –107.

17 Brixhe/Lejeune 1984, G-107.

18 Brixhe/Lejeune 1984: *Ata*: G-118, –224a, –234; *Ates*: M-01a and W-08; *Atas*: G-128, – 221, Dd-101, G-107.

19 Brixhe/Lejeune 1984, M-01a.

20 Lubotsky 1988, 12, 13.

21 Varinlioğlu 1991; 1992; Brixhe 2004, HP-103–109, 109–15; HP-III, 116.

22 For example: Işık 2001; 2003; Börker-Klähn 2003.

23 Mellink 1990, 140.

24 Özgen/Özgen 1988, 32, 33, nos. 29–62; Pehlivaner 1996, 34, 35, 38–45; in accordance with the previously accepted dates for Gordion.

25 Sams 1995, 1157, 1158: a little later than *Tumulus* MM; Işık suggested a date in the late 7th – early 6th century BC for the ivory and silver statuettes from *Tumulus* D: 2003, 35.

26 For example, see: Vassileva 1992–1993.

27 Varinlioğlu 1992, 16: words used by mystes.

that *Ates* is the Phrygian superior male deity whose name means just ‘Father’ and who is to be paired with *Matar*, the Phrygian Great Goddess.²⁸ C. Brixhe rightly noted that, notwithstanding this possibility, the occurrence of *Ates/Ata* suggests an inferior position to that of the goddess. Thus, it is not very likely that the male deity is invoked on the vessels from Bayındır. The other suggestion for *Ates* is a priest title.²⁹ This seems more probable, especially in view of the name *Ates/Attis* for Kybele’s high priests in Pessinus.³⁰

Siṭidos, probably a name, is scratched on another bronze *phiale* from Bayındır.³¹ The same word is written on one of the three bronze bowls from *Tumulus* MM at Gordion mentioned above. What a surprise it was for the Gordion team when in 2007, fifty years after the opening of *Tumulus* MM, R. Liebhart discovered several names carved on a roof beam at the northwest corner of the MM chamber; *siṭidos* among them.³² One can only speculate about the reason for engraving these words on the wood at such an inconspicuous place, but the occurrence of *siṭidos* seems anything but accidental.

Even before this discovery, in the latest re-publishing of the Bayındır graffiti, C. Brixhe argued for the same date of the burial as that of *Tumulus* MM, i. e. the mid-8th century BC.³³ One might wonder, then, whether one and the same person is being mentioned in Gordion and in Bayındır, as has already been suggested.³⁴ Or, even two identical individuals: *Siṭidos* and *Ata*. Discussing the ivory and silver figurines from *Tumulus* D, F. Işık suggested a date in the late 7th – early 6th century BC.³⁵ If the latter date is confirmed, then the names would refer to different individuals. Unless fully published as a complex, however, the debate about the date and the interpretation of this *tumulus* will remain open.

A similar form, believed to be related to *siṭidos*, *siṭeto* is carved three times on nearby rocks, at Çepni, about 50 km south-west of Afyon.³⁶ In all three inscriptions (W-08–10) this word occurs in combination with *alus*, whose meaning is still obscure. *Ates* is also mentioned in one of the inscriptions (W-08). A formulaic phrase has been suggested. A personal name is very cautiously suggested for *alus*³⁷, thus rendering a name and a patronym? A ritual drink or liquid prescribed for libation has also been proposed for *alus*.³⁸ *Siṭeto* is interpreted as a verbal form. At the present state of our understanding of the Phrygian language, however, this identification is still under discussion.³⁹ A variant of the personal

28 The meaning ‘father’ was first suggested by Brixhe/Drew-Bear 1982, 70, 83 and then accepted by Berndt-Ersöz 2004, 51, 52 who further developed the idea.

29 Religious function according to Lubotsky 1988, 12; Börker-Klähn 2003, 75.

30 Pol. 21.37.4–7; Roller 1999, 193, 194.

31 Brixhe 2004, HP110, 115, 116.

32 Sams 2008, 141–143, see also R. Liebhart’s contribution in the present volume.

33 Brixhe 2004, 109.

34 Thus Börker-Klähn 2003, 77.

35 Kerschner 2004, 115 summarizes the discussion about the date of the *tumuli*.

36 Brixhe/Drew-Bear 1982; Brixhe/Lejeune 1984, W-08–10, 51–5.

37 Brixhe/Drew-Bear 1982, 75.

38 Brixhe/Lejeune 1984, 53.

39 The explanation as a verbal form has recently been criticized by Gorbachov 2008, 94, n. 6.

name *Sitidos* cannot be ruled out either. However, the ritual context of both words *sitidos* and *siteto* is obvious.

So far, the interpretation of *Sitidos* as a personal name seems the most plausible one. Its transformation into a (religious?) title over the course of time offers another option for its understanding, especially if one allows a greater time span between *Tumulus* MM at Gordion and *Tumulus* D at Bayındır. The distance between the two sites should be taken into consideration as well. The same might be true for *Ata/Ates*. These names appear on vessels and a ladle, i.e. their association with drinking and funeral feasts can be assumed. It has been proposed that the four names on the beam of *Tumulus* MM were those of participants in the funeral banquet.⁴⁰ The evidence of the feast has been carefully examined and discussed, offering an opportunity for the reconstruction of the actual laying down of the dead body in the tomb.⁴¹ The funeral bed on which he was laid out outside the mound was eventually disassembled and lowered down into the wooden tomb before the roof was finished.⁴² The vessels with the remains of the meal and the drinks, as well as pieces of exquisitely inlaid wooden furniture, all of them used in the ceremony, were arranged around the deceased. The hypothesis goes that these formed the cultic set of the buried king/noble.⁴³ Why then does *Sitidos* appear on one of the ritual vessels and on a beam above the roof? Could he have been the higher priest in charge of the burial ceremony? Or, does *Sitidos* signify the new status of the deceased? More hypotheses will probably be launched soon.

If future epigraphic discoveries or progress in the study of the Phrygian language confirm that *siteto* is a verbal form, then one might consider the possibility of an action of ritual importance (related to a sacred drink or libation?).⁴⁴

Various historical interpretations of the Bayındır *tumuli* were offered: they are considered as evidence for a Phrygian enclave, a Phrygian dynast,⁴⁵ or a Phrygian outpost⁴⁶ in Lycia. It has also been suggested that a noble Lycian woman was buried under *Tumulus* D.⁴⁷ The grave goods of the Bayındır *tumuli* betray various foreign elements that might have been the result of gift exchange, trade, cultural interactions, etc. The burial custom, however, associates them with Phrygia. Historical evidence is insufficient and cannot offer a reliable interpretation. Nevertheless, Phrygian political and military involvement in south/south-eastern Anatolia in the late 8th century BC might not have been an isolated episode.⁴⁸

40 Sams 2008, 142–143.

41 Simpson 2001 and 2010, 127–135.

42 Simpson 1990.

43 Simpson 2001 and 2010.

44 Such an option has already been suggested for βέννος/βεννεύειν related to the epithet of Zeus Bennios popular in Roman Phrygia, the parallel being ἐνάζειν, σαβάζειν and καβάζειν, discussed within the Thracian context: Φοι 1994, 59–70, 97–101, 177–180; Vassileva 1998.

45 Börker-Klähn 2003, 77.

46 Wittke 2007, 342.

47 Işık 2003.

48 Most recently: Vassileva 2008.

A number of north Syrian traits discerned in Phrygian objects and monuments⁴⁹ speak in favor of continuous contacts. The Old-Phrygian inscriptions on stone from Tyana⁵⁰ can be considered in the same context. On the other hand, elite burials are more likely to display imported prestige goods, and they are also more visible in the archaeological record.

Despite the variety and wealth of the grave goods in the Gordion and Bayındır *tumuli*, hardly all of them can be labeled ‘royal’. But who else if not a royal person was buried in *Tumulus MM*? It is plausible to assume that this huge and imposing enterprise was committed by King Midas for his father, whether Gordias or someone else. If other members of the royal family were buried under these *tumuli*, we simply would not know. Some of the later *tumuli* seem to be very close in date and it is unlikely therefore that all of them were royal.

A similar situation is observed in the 4th century BC Thracian *tumuli*. The numerous stone built tombs – more than 15 – discovered in the last fifteen years or so in just one area belonging to the Odrysian kingdom⁵¹ cannot be assigned to any known ruler. Although we know some names of Odrysian kings from this period, historical identifications have failed so far. A number of these tombs were also built within a short time period and thus can hardly be all ‘royal’. The only suggestion with some viability is that the Big Kosmatka tomb near the city of Kazanlak (south-central Bulgaria) was the burial place of Seuthes III (330–300 BC).⁵² The strongest argument in favour of this identification is the bronze helmet discovered in the chamber with Seuthes’ name in the genitive inscribed on the forehead, i.e. “belonging to Seuthes”.⁵³ The silver jug and the *phiale* from the same assemblage, also bearing Seuthes’ name, cannot provide a decisive argument as these objects could have circulated as gifts, tribute, etc., while the helmet is more of a personal belonging. The idea possibly finds further support in the compelling portrait resemblance of the bronze head discovered in front of the entrance of the tomb with Seuthes III’s image on his coins.⁵⁴

On the other hand, a gold signet ring, discovered in 2007 in a *tumulus* burial near Sliven, to the east of Kazanluk, bears an inscription with the name of a so far unknown ruler or paradynast – Seuthes, son of Teres, the names being written in a version closer to the Thracian language.⁵⁵

Rich Thracian burials offer enough information, however, to suggest a special ritual status of the deceased: gold masks, dismembered bodies (?),⁵⁶ clay objects of magic func-

49 Sams 1993.

50 Brixhe/Lejeune 1984, 258–268: T-01–03; Brixhe 2004, 94–103: T-03.

51 Kitov 2005c; 2007a. They are clustered around the present day towns of Shipka, Muglitzh and the area of ancient Seuthopolis (near modern Kazanlak, Central Bulgaria). Most of the latter tombs were built of baked bricks and date to the end of the 4th and 3rd century BC.

52 Kitov 2005a; Manov 2008.

53 Kitov 2005a, 51, 52 fig. 22.

54 Manov 2008, 33 figs. 2, 3.

55 Kitov/Dimitrov 2008.

56 Kitov 2005b, 24, 25 figs. 5, 11.

tion or amulets,⁵⁷ etc. Stratigraphic and other evidence suggests that some of the tombs were probably used initially as sanctuaries.⁵⁸ Generally, scholars tend to associate these peculiarities with Orphic rites.⁵⁹ Although full understanding is still pending, in most cases a special religious importance of the buried person can be suspected.

The brief comparison between Phrygian and Thracian *tumuli*, although asynchronous, shows that it is better to speak about élite, or aristocratic burials, than to try to associate them with known or unknown rulers. It is not only the insufficient literary or archaeological data that account for the difficulties in naming the noble deceased. Both the Phrygian and the Thracian rulers and aristocrats proclaimed themselves rather by religious messages than by those of historical nature. In neither area can one expect a ‘historical’ text like, for example, the one carved at the entrance of the rock-cut tomb of the Urartian king Argishti I (785/780–756 BC) in Van Kale/Tuşpa.⁶⁰

The ritual status of the deceased was more important and was emphasized through the choice of grave goods and sometimes through short inscriptions. The geometric symbolism of Phrygian rock-cut façades which were cult places for the Mother Goddess was also applied to some of the objects placed in the tombs. Similar patterns are followed on the façades, the wooden furniture and the bronze belts.⁶¹ I have argued elsewhere that the bronze belts which accompanied the deceased in Phrygia might have been signs of their ritual status.⁶² Besides, as in many ancient societies, ceremonial sets of metal vessels and funeral banquets were popular both in Phrygia and in Thrace.⁶³

Thus, it should not be a surprise that the short texts or words inscribed on metal vessels or on the tomb construction itself were religious/cult messages. I would suggest ‘sacred words’, or religious titles for these inscriptions. If the latter is assumed for *sītidos*, then different persons of the same status (or office) might be referred to on the Gordion and Bayındır *phialae*. Could the woman who was buried in *Tumulus D* at Bayındır be a priestess? On the other hand, we have literary evidence about the priestly functions of Phrygian⁶⁴ and Thracian rulers. So, some of the rich burials, but not all, could be those of kings in their capacity as priests.

57 Димитрова 2003, 76.

58 Kitov 2007b.

59 For example: Fol 2000, 184, 185; Фол 2002.

60 Salvini 1995, 152–154.

61 Simpson 1998, 636; Vassileva 2001, 59–60.

62 Vassileva 2005, 96.

63 Simpson 1990 and 2001. On the funeral feast at Thracian burials (not only rich ones) see: Georgieva 1998.

64 Plut. *Caes.* 9.3; Hyg. *Fab.* 274; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.13.3; Hesych. s.v. Μίδα θεός.

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