

# Recovering the Lost Art of Phrygian Roof Tiling

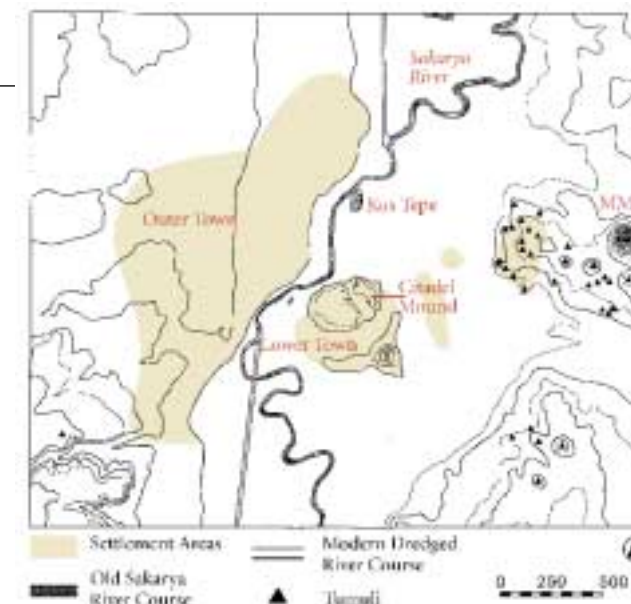
Practical and aesthetic elements converge in clay, reflecting Greek artistic temperament

Story & Artwork By Matt Glendinning



An impressive sight must have greeted a visitor entering the fortified citadel of Gordion in the early sixth century B.C. After suffering devastating destruction by fire around 800 B.C., the Phrygian capital, in what is now central Turkey, was restored to its former grandeur in the eighth century.

Pendent frieze panel with four oblique squares. Although common in all of Phrygian art, geometric designs on tiles may have had specific religious connotations, as seen in the cult façades at Midas City.



A monumental entranceway led visitors between imposing rectangular towers before opening onto a vista of large megaron-like buildings, their design and plan clearly imitating the elite residences, storage facilities, and workshops of the earlier city. At a time when the Greeks were just emerging from a so-called dark age, the Phrygians commanded tremendous wealth and resources, inspiring legends about a late-eighth-century king named Midas and his golden touch. Even in the sixth century, Gordion remained a thriving economic and cultural hub of central Anatolia.

Gleaming in the sun, the buildings of the citadel would have caught the eye of the passerby, not only because of their size and impressive squared stone masonry, but also because of a relatively new feature — architectural terracottas. An invention of the Greeks a century earlier, baked clay tiles were first used as a practical means of waterproofing temple roofs. But like other ancient cultures, the Phrygians developed tiling into an expressive art. Molded in relief and brilliantly painted, the Gordion terracottas served as a medium of aristocratic display, a visual way for the city's rulers to boast of their continuing prosperity and power.

TOP LEFT: Heraldic animal compositions, as shown here and in the frieze panel on page 30, may have carried aristocratic connotations, perhaps serving as a coat of arms. TOP RIGHT: Gordion. Environs and Citadel Mound. RIGHT: Raking sima (gutter). The upright panel prevented water from seeping over the gabled edge of a pitched roof. Greek influence is reflected in the alternating star and scroll motifs.

The seventh and sixth centuries B.C. were a dynamic period in Anatolian history. Ionian Greeks on the west coast were taking bold strides in architecture and philosophy. The Lydians, under the Mermnad dynasty, were using electrum to mint some of the earliest known coins and to build elaborate palaces. And far to the east, the lengthening shadow of the Persian Empire was beginning to fall on Anatolia. Situated at the nexus of these potent cultural forces, the Phrygians drew inspiration from their neighbors, even as they were ultimately engulfed by them. Despite the Lydians' occupation of central Anatolia early in the sixth century, and the Persians' around 550 B.C., Gordion continued to prosper. Indeed, increasing amounts of imported Lydian and Greek pottery, together with major building activity involving architectural terracottas, testify to a cultural flourishing at Gordion around 600 B.C. The decorated tiles rank among our best evidence for reconstructing this important period of interaction and change.



### A TILE TREASURE TROVE

The modern discovery of Phrygian tiles at Gordion began with the excavations of a number of fragmentary terracottas by two Austrian brothers, Gustav and Alfred Körte, during their single campaign in 1900. Large-scale excavations were conducted at the site between 1950 and 1973 under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the direction of Rodney S. Young. In addition to finding thousands of architectural tiles, Young captivated both archaeologists and the lay public with his sensational discovery of a citadel of the ninth century B.C., together with contemporary burials beneath earthen tumuli (grave mounds). Gordion is best known for this “Early Phrygian” period.

More recent digging since 1988 has been directed by Mary M. Voigt of the College of William and Mary, with G. Kenneth Sams of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, serving as overall project director. Voigt has continued Young’s exploration of a later phase of the citadel, the “Middle Phrygian,” built over its ruined predecessor in the eighth century B.C. Until recently, little scholarly attention had been paid to this era at Gordion because the stratigraphy (layered sediments) was heavily disturbed and the buildings were poorly preserved. But new clues about the citadel’s topography are beginning to emerge from the tiles, which Voigt’s excavations have shown to be products of the late Middle Phrygian period, the sixth century B.C.

In the 50 years since digging began in earnest at Gordion, building tiles have become an important component of classical archaeology. Made from a cheap and abundant natural resource, clay tiles were used at many Mediterranean sites and compose an important source of information about ancient architecture. As thick slabs of baked clay, tiles are nearly indestructible and can survive in the ground for thousands of years. On rare occasions archaeologists find an entire roof in a collapsed, undisturbed position, which eliminates any question about which tiles worked together on a single building. At Gordion, however, tiles are most often found alone or in small groups in reused, secondary contexts, such as floor paving slabs or drain channels. But even such scattered pieces are potentially informative.

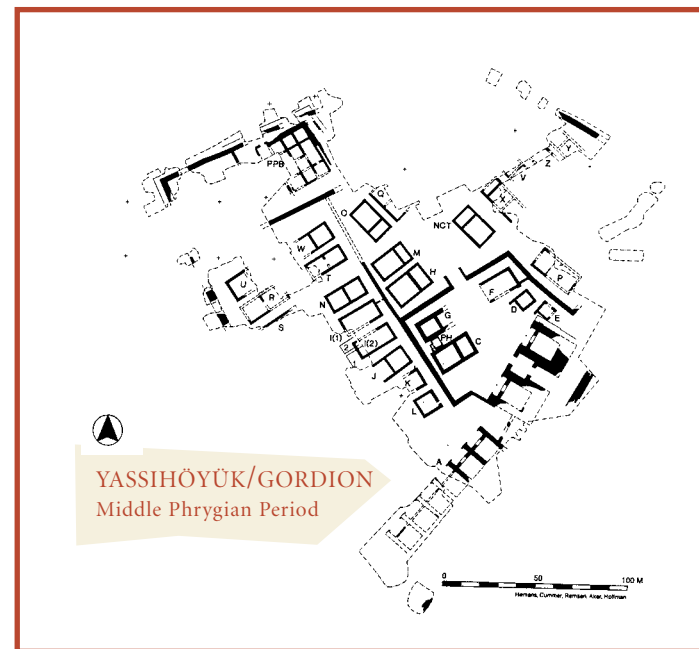
The tiles of a given roof are related in size, shape, fabric, and decoration because they are standardized modules designed to fit together in repeating combinations. These characteristics allow pieces from different contexts



TOP: Frieze panel with antithetical goats. BOTTOM: Gordion. Plan of the Middle Phrygian citadel, built in the eighth century B.C. in deliberate imitation of its ruined predecessor.

to be reunited with their one-time roof mates, and the form of an entire roof to be extrapolated from just a few pieces. Terracottas also bear a relationship to the building they were meant to protect; pan tile width, for example, is often related to rafter spacing and building length. At Gordion, therefore, even reused tiles stand a chance of being reassociated with the poorly preserved foundations of the settlement.

Ancient tiles were also works of art. Many, particularly those lining the edges of a roof, were molded in relief and painted, and so iconography — the analysis of



YASSIHÖYÜK/GORDION  
Middle Phrygian Period

decorative motifs — is an important component of the study of tiles. Styles of decoration can be compared among sites, providing a gauge for interregional contact. Decoration also tended to change from one period to the next, so that, like pottery, tiles are often chronologically diagnostic. For these reasons, investigators have spent a lot of effort working out the progression of tile styles, at least in Greece. More work needs to be done in Turkey.

In 1966, Swedish archaeologist Åke Åkerström published a study synthesizing much of the evidence for roof tiles in Anatolia, including many of the Gordion terracottas. His monograph remains

the primary reference work in this field, but it focused almost exclusively on decoration, a limited and risky approach also adopted by a number of more recent scholars. Some authors have cited subjective stylistic considerations to date some of the Gordion tiles to the early seventh century B.C., others to the second half of the sixth century, and still others the second half of the fifth.

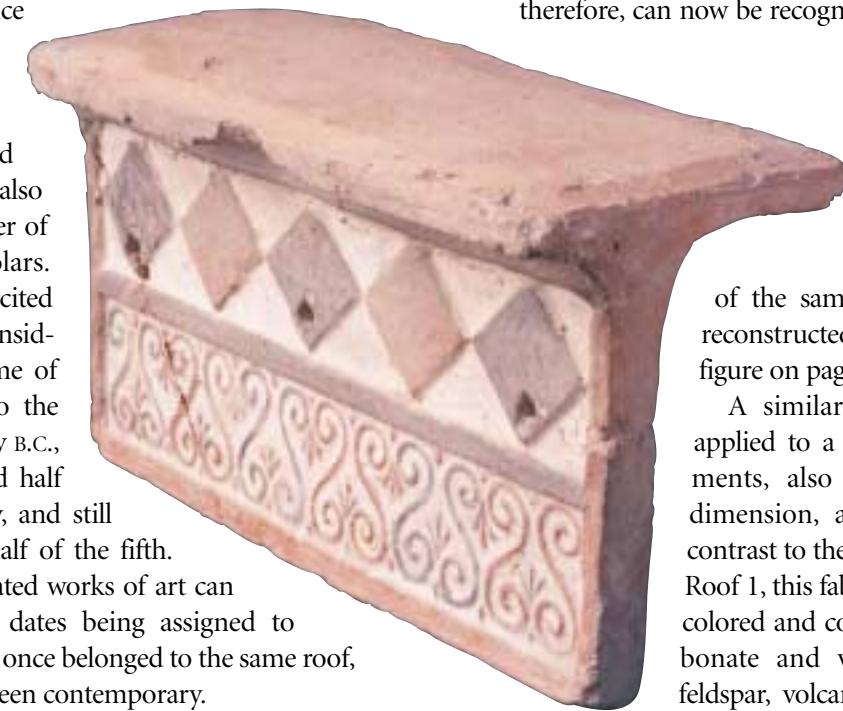
Treating tiles as isolated works of art can result in unrelated dates being assigned to pieces that may have once belonged to the same roof, and so would have been contemporary.

Current research is revising and expanding upon this method, approaching the tiles first and foremost as interrelated components of actual roofs. If we can first identify all surviving parts of a roof, through shared characteristics such as fabric, form, surface treatment, and archaeological contexts, then we stand a much better chance of understanding the date of the roof as a whole, and so the historical significance of the tiles.

### TWO TELLTALE ROOFS

Among the many thousand preserved fragments at Gordion, a group of 613 tiles stands out distinctly. The relief work on the surfaces is crisp, and the red, white, and black paint is particularly well preserved. The fabric is characterized by visible inclusions (for example, frag-

ments of volcanic glass, mica, and polycrystalline quartz) and a well-defined transition between the gray core and reddish surface oxidation. Six tile types fit into this group: pans, covers, and ridge beam covers decorated with a white lozenge; a raking sima (gutter) adorned with alternating stars and scrolls; a lateral sima decorated with “tongues” above and painted blossoms flanking the spout; and a pendent frieze carrying lozenges and double scrolls. These tiles were clearly designed to be deployed together, as adjacent pieces correspond in length or width and overlapping is neatly achieved by tapering or flanges. What had been a random assortment of tiles, therefore, can now be recognized as components



Pendent frieze plaque. The hallmark of the Phrygian tile tradition, the terracotta frieze offered a convenient medium for decoration.

of the same roof and can be reconstructed as shown in the figure on page 32 (Roof 1).

A similar approach can be applied to a group of 478 fragments, also related by fabric, dimension, and decoration. In contrast to the orange-gray clay of Roof 1, this fabric is distinctly buff colored and contains calcium carbonate and visible particles of feldspar, volcanic rock, glass, and quartz. Surface decoration consists

of an overall red or buff slip. Five basic tile types are involved: spouted eaves tiles, flat pans, curved covers, curved ridge beam covers, and semicircular end cover tiles with antefixes (vertical “face plates”). Again, the tiles fit together with puzzlelike efficiency, including a notch for the end cover tiles to fit over the raised gutter at the eaves. The roof can be reconstructed as shown in the figure on page 33 (Roof 2).

A reassembled roof provides more historical information than do the tiles individually. Although the idea of tiling probably came to Anatolia from Greece, Roof 1 betrays distinctly Anatolian design features, such as the use of pendent frieze plaques, broad swaths of patterning across the pans and covers, and a pipelike ridge cover

(the apex of similar Greek roofs was covered in an entirely different manner). Roof 2 is equally Anatolian because the spouted-eaves design does not occur in mainland Greece and is quite common in Phrygia. Both roof types also seem to have been mass produced for deployment on numerous buildings, in contrast to the usual Archaic Greek practice of creating a tiled roof for one specific structure, often a temple.

Components of both roof designs are known from at least four other Anatolian sites: Roof 1 is paralleled at Miletus, Didyma, Sardis, and Düver; Roof 2 at Neandria, Sardis, Düver, and Pazarlı. The highly decorated roof shows an especially strong connection to western Anatolia and Ionia, while the other seems more at home within Phrygia. In both cases, the tiles are as well made and vividly decorated as contemporary examples

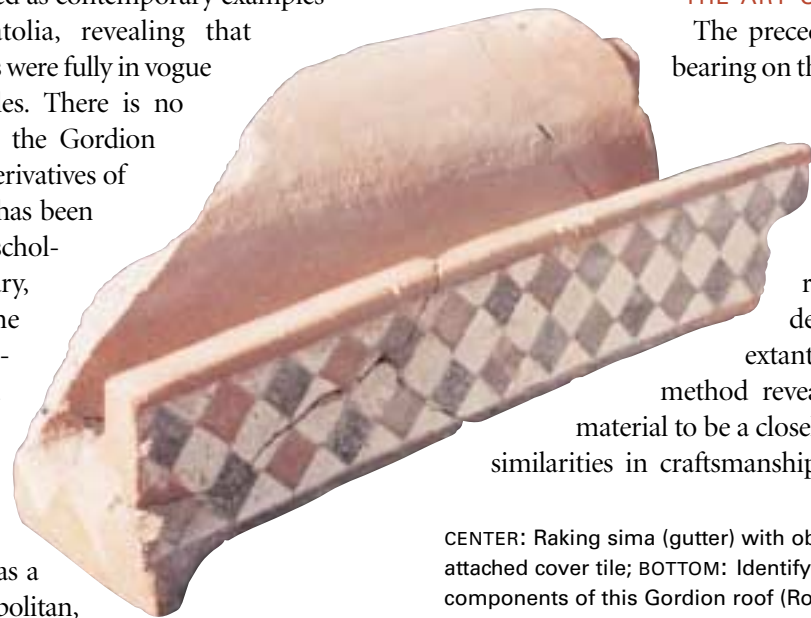
anywhere in Anatolia, revealing that Gordion tile makers were fully in vogue with the latest styles. There is no reason to interpret the Gordion tiles as provincial derivatives of

Ionian models, as has been suggested by some scholars. On the contrary, corroborating the evidence of ceramics, small finds, and recent excavation, tiled roofs contribute to a picture of late Middle Phrygian Gordion as a prosperous, cosmopolitan, and well-connected regional center.

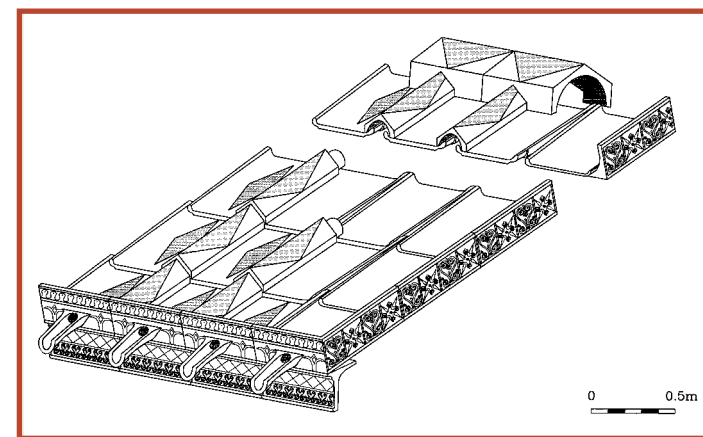
Roofs 1 and 2 also have close parallels at the Lydian capital of Sardis, another site in Anatolia with well-preserved terracottas. Similarities are unusually deep, involving not only decoration but also design and techniques of manufacture. Since the Gordion terracottas as a whole exhibit no diachronic development in design, style, size, or decoration, it can be assumed that tiling was imported to the site as an already developed tradition. Lydian influence seems the most logical explanation. Historical and archaeological considerations suggest that the Lydians expanded into central Anatolia in the early sixth century B.C. The tiles may help substantiate the commonly held theory that Gordion was occupied by

the Lydians at that time.

Reanalysis of the excavation accounts confirms a sixth-century date for both roofs. Elements of Roof 2 were recovered in the 1950s from a layer of burned debris on the Küçük Höyük (a small mound to the southeast of the Citadel Mound), its destruction commonly dated to the mid-sixth century B.C. Many of the extant pieces of Roof 1 were recovered from fifth-century floors (for example, in Building A), but some tiles were found stratified at deeper levels, suggesting an earlier origin for this roof design. Firm parallels at Sardis can be dated contextually to before ca. 550 B.C. Roofs 1 and 2, then, are probably contemporary, as details of workmanship also suggest.



CENTER: Raking sima (gutter) with oblique checkerboard and attached cover tile; BOTTOM: Identifying and reassembling the components of this Gordion roof (Roof 1) allow archaeologists to see the Phrygians' close cultural ties to western Anatolia.



#### THE ART OF GORDION TILES

The preceding analysis has great bearing on the art historical study of Gordion tiles. Roof reconstruction at Gordion is made possible by considering factors such as fabric, dimension, and design. If applied to all extant tiles at the site, this method reveals the entire body of material to be a closely knit group. Pervasive similarities in craftsmanship suggest that most of



LEFT: Lateral sima (gutter). A long spout jettisoned water well away from the mud brick and wood walls below. BOTTOM: A design typical of central Anatolia, this Gordion roof (Roof 2) can be dated stratigraphically (by rock layers) to the mid-sixth century B.C. or earlier.

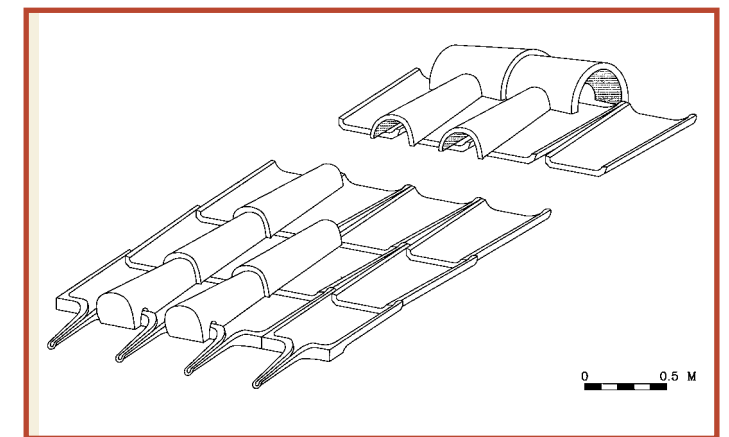
the Gordion tiles were produced by one or two related workshops over a limited period of time. Technical details thus provide a framework for interpreting the many tiles that cannot be assigned to specific roofs: All were designed, decorated, and deployed as a program.

The Anatolian tile tradition is well known for its exuberant decoration, primarily by means of patterns painted on pans and covers and relief-molded friezes. The Gordion tiles show great diversity in decoration, a mixture of Greek, Near Eastern, and local tastes. While some argue that this eclecticism reflects the Phrygians' artistic impotence and lack of originality, a more conscious and expressive purpose seems possible.

Since tile technology first reached western Anatolia from Greece around 600 B.C., it comes as no surprise to find Greek decoration on some of the Gordion tiles. The stars and scrolls on the raking sima, together with stars and heraldic felines on some antefixes, are all closely paralleled in Ionian and mainland Greek art. What is surprising, however, is that the inspiration does not come from Greek tiles, but from minor arts, such as small objects of wood, metal, ivory, bone, or cloth. Many of the Gordion designs find close parallels in the decorated borders of metal, paint, or textile often applied to Greek statues, furniture, and the like, in order to enhance their appearance and worth. In sixth-century Anatolia, decorated tiles often appeared in a secular context (on palaces and elite residences), rather than a religious one (on temples and treasuries) as in Archaic Greece, and this may help explain the mimicry of fancy Greek trimmings. Perhaps rejecting what they saw as

the religious connotations of Greek tile decoration, Anatolian potentates may have preferred designs thought to evoke an air of wealth and prestige.

A second group of tiles at Gordion, adorned with lozenges, checkerboards, and squares, reflects a deeply rooted central-Anatolian taste for geometric decoration. Some scholars have seen such decor as a banal holdover from the Early Phrygian period, when arts such as pottery and inlaid furniture were decorated with intricate geometric patterns. But uncannily similar designs also appear at Midas City on a series of rock-cut architectural façades thought to be ceremonial backdrops for the cult of the Phrygian goddess Kybele. One wonders if the geometric tiles carried some innate religious symbolism to the Phrygians, or if the tiled buildings served cultic as well as political or residential purposes. Kybele is often depicted in association with lions and bulls, frequently arranged in heraldic poses. Should we then be permitted





TOP LEFT: Antefix with heraldic felines, a motif with Greek and Near Eastern connections; BOTTOM: Hunting from a horse-drawn chariot was a defining prerogative of Near Eastern royalty, whom the Phrygian elite tried hard to emulate.



TOP RIGHT: Antefix with painted star, a design with close parallels in Ionia; OPPOSITE: Frieze panel with antithetical goats

to view a lion-bull panel at Gordion, or the feline antefix, as a religious emblem? While these questions must remain tentative and speculative, they nevertheless signal ways that a neglected category of artifact can bring a fresh perspective to the study of Phrygian history.

A third group of terracottas is decorated with figural motifs ultimately derived from traditional Near Eastern prototypes. Panels depicting hunting from a horse-drawn chariot, antithetical animals, and a duel often referred to as Theseus and the Minotaur all draw on a rich heritage of Syro-Hittite and Assyrian art of the 12th through 8th centuries B.C. A Hellenocentric viewpoint might interpret the use of such images in the sixth century as hackneyed, derivative, or old fashioned. From a Near Eastern perspective such images were often symbolic of royalty. Hunting in chariots, for example, was the royal act par excellence, as shown by relief sculpture from the ninth-century palace of Assurnasirpal at Nimrud. Heraldic animal compositions seem to have carried a variety of meanings, such as apotropaism and fertility. And combat

against mythical or hybrid monsters was one of the most common Near Eastern expressions of a ruler's physical prowess and right to rule, as epitomized by the many exploits of Gilgamesh.

Civilizations on the periphery of the Near Eastern world often drew inspiration from such traditional iconography. The Mermnad dynasty at Sardis, for example, is thought to have emulated eastern royalty by deliberately incorporating lion imagery into Lydian art. The medallion featuring confronting lion and bull heads on Lydian gold staters (coins) was an eastern emblem, adopted as a sort of coat of arms by the Lydian royal house. The Gordion tiles probably reflect a similar artistic synthesis. Their old-fashioned appearance arguably

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Matt Glendinning teaches ancient history at Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia. With a Ph.D. in classical archaeology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Glendinning has excavated both in the United States (in Arizona) and abroad (in Spain, Greece, and Turkey) and has taught archaeology at both the college and secondary levels. His work on the architectural terracottas at Gordion has appeared in the journal *Hesperia* and in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*. Glendinning is also the director of the Cambridge Prep Experience, a summer program for adolescents at Cambridge University in England.



Matt and his wife, Katherine, in the field

stems from active and purposeful imitation rather than from passive, provincial conservatism. The decorative program as a whole seems intended to send a message.

#### PIECING TOGETHER A LEGACY

A new approach to the Gordion tiles is leading to a deeper appreciation of Phrygian history and art. By bringing the tiles back into their original groupings, archaeologists are gaining a better understanding of the citadel's topography and an opportunity to explore connections with other regions of Anatolia. Reassembling whole roofs is a necessary first step toward understanding how the Phrygians used decorated tiles, and what meaning they attributed to them.

In his *Histories*, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote that Phrygian rulers in the sixth century continued to carry the traditional royal names Midas and Gordias. It is unclear, however, whether the Phrygians enjoyed real sovereignty at that time or had become a vassal state of the Lydian Empire. Regardless, the decorative tile program at Gordion suggests the appearance, if not the reality, of continuing local power and authority.

The Gordion tile makers purposefully draped their citadel with the imagery of aristocratic ideology. Deliberately old fashioned and charged with royal symbolism, the tile designs served as advertisements for the ruling elite by alluding to aristocratic ideals and evoking an air of prestige. The Greek and Near Eastern designs conjured a suitably cosmopolitan aura, while the geometric motifs boasted of the Phrygians' Anatolian heritage.

Our ancient visitor, casually wandering among the buildings of the citadel and awaiting his audience with the ruler, could hardly have missed the implied message: The legacy of Midas endures.

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