The Art of Writing at Gordion

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How and why does a cultural group learn to write? The impetus to record a previously unwritten language must be powerful, since it requires adaptation to a new kind of communicative device and thus must reflect and cause alterations in the group that becomes literate. Here I examine the process through which one illiterate society went when it confronted literate ones and the reasons why writing was adopted. The Phrygians, when they settled in central Anatolia in the early first millennium B.C., felt the need to record their language. The script of the Phrygians seems to have been modeled on Greek, so the driving force to write their language may be discerned by investigating similarities of usage between the two. Phrygian writing is well represented at the site of Gordion, where the University Museum has conducted archaeological research since 1950. The site is located approximately 80 miles southwest of Ankara in modern Turkey (Figs. 1, 2), the ancient Anatolia, on a major east-west transportation route which became part of the Persian Royal Road. Since Gordion was inhabited for nearly three thousand years, it received linguistic influences from many groups—Early Bronze Age settlers (whose language is not known), Hittites, Phrygians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and Galatians. The Phrygian script, however, derives directly from the Greek.

Bronze Age Writing at Gordion

The earliest writing at Gordion dates to the Late Bronze Age, 1400-1200 B.C. This phase of the settlement was contemporary with the Hittite Empire, and shared aspects of material culture suggest that Gordion was within the Hittite political and economic sphere. Several Bronze Age seals and seal impressions have been found at Gordion, including a jar handle with the impression of a seal containing Anatolian hieroglyphic characters, as yet undeciphered (Götebock, in DeVries 1981:51). This type of writing is usually called Hittite Hieroglyphic, although it actually represents a Luwian sister language of Hittite that was widely spoken in western and southern Anatolia (Hawkins 1986:38).

Also found in Bronze Age Gordion were pots bearing signs that had been incised before the vessels were fired. Two different signs occur, the arrow (Fig. 3) and the triangle with central line (Fig. 4), both of them several times. Probably identification marks of some sort, these signs are not a form of actual writing, although one, the triangle with central vertical line, may be a simplified form of the Hittite hieroglyph for king. Such signs on pots are distributed widely throughout the Hittite Empire, for example, at Alaca Höyük and Tarsus, as well as at the Hittite capital of Hattusa, the modern Boğazköy (Fig. 5).

The evidence for writing at Gordion during the Late Bronze Age is slight. The graphic symbols used were probably simple recording or identifying devices, and Hittite cuneiform texts on tablets comparable to those found in the Hittite capital and some major Hittite cities are absent. Based on present evidence, therefore, Gordion was not literate in the way that, for example, Hattusa was. Nevertheless, hieroglyphic writing was present at Gordion and may be related to scripts used in the Hittite Empire.

Development of Phrygian Script

The centuries immediately following the collapse of the Hittite Empire in Anatolia (ca. 1200 B.C.) are called the Dark Ages, because we lack both written records and archaeological definition for the period. The Phrygians entered central Anatolia and settled at Gordion during this time, having come from Thrace and Macedonia according to the Greek historian Herodotos (7.73). They are recognized as a distinct people in part through their now-extinct language, which has been assigned to a linguistic group called Thracio-Phrygian, possibly related to the Hellenic branch of the Indo-European language family. Phrygian was only distantly related to languages of the same family that were spoken in Bronze Age Anatolia. It is not fully understood, largely because few long texts are available, so we do not know the extent to which it was affected by the languages with which it came in contact in central Anatolia.

Our knowledge of Phrygian script derives from two sources: early texts in Phrygian alphabet and neo-Phrygian inscriptions written in Greek characters. The early Phrygian alphabetic script has close affinities to the Greek alphabet. Since the earliest Phrygian writing does not occur until the 8th century B.C., considerably after the settlement of the Phrygians in Anatolia, we must ask why these people adopted writing when they did, and why and how they chose an alphabetic script probably based on the Greek system.
The development of the Greek alphabetic system has been a much debated subject. It seems likely that the Greeks were exposed to writing through contacts with the Phoenicians in the northern Levant, and modified the consonantal script of the Phoenicians to create vowels and other characters which the Greek language required. The transmission, which probably took place no later than the first half of the 8th century B.C., could have been accomplished by Greek merchants living in the Levant who perceived the need for a recording system in order to keep up with their trading partners (Jeffery 1981:1-48). Among the earliest Greek writings are graffiti on pottery—words scratched onto a bowl or jar, usually proper names as forms of identification. But complex texts in Greek are equally early, such as the poetry on a jug from Athens and on a cup from Ischia, in Italy.

In order to determine if the process by which the Phrygians assimilated the alphabet was similar, we must examine the oldest Phrygian alphabetic texts, all of which were found at Gordium. Five written texts come from Tomaris MM (Young 1981:273-277), and one from the level of the city generally contemporary with this tumulus, dating to the late 8th or early 7th century B.C. (Brise and Lejeune 1984:mo, G-104). These early texts include 17 letters taken directly from the Greek alphabet—the basic Greek characters which conveyed single sounds, including in the arcic: Greek letter F, or digamma. The Ionic vowels I, Ï, and Emily, and the compound and aspirated consonants θ, ζ, ϑ, Ϗ, and Γ, do not appear in written Phrygian at any stage. Additional information comes from a small number of Phrygian alphabetic texts at Gordium dating from the 7th century B.C., and from the much larger body of texts from the period of the 8th through 4th centuries B.C.

The earliest examples of Phrygian writing at Gordium clearly date to the late 8th and early 7th centuries B.C., but evidence for contact with Greek or Greek-speakers at this time is minimal. Only a handful of late 8th-century Greek Geometric potsherds have been found at Gordium (DeVries 1980: 33-34). Greek historical sources recalled that Midas, probably the ruler of the Phrygians during this period, made diplomatic overtures to the Greeks, dedicating a valuable object in the sanctuary of Apollo at Didyma, and marrying the daughter of the ruler of Kyane, a Greek city in northwestern Anatolia. In addition, the earliest Phrygian alphabetic texts use one character that is also represented in early Greek texts; the letter E of the Archaic alphabet used in northwestern Anatolia (Jeffery 1980:92). Thus, the alphabet seems to have been created not because of commercial exchanges, which appear to have been few; it could rather be considered a concious effort by the Phrygians to make contact with Greek culture.

The process by which the Phrygians acquired their letters did not, however, amount to wholesale borrowing. The alphabetic script of the Phrygian texts is similar to, but not identical with, the Greek script, indicating that the Phrygians modified the Greek alphabet to meet their own needs. This alteration must have taken place almost immediately, for even in the earliest Phrygian inscriptions include letters not found in the Greek alphabet.

They must represent sounds in the Phrygian language not expressed by any Greek letter. Distinctively Phrygian letters found at Gordium include the forms ό, ὸ,  and  while other areas of Phrygia used other non-Greek letters. For example, in inscriptions at the sites of Midas City and Çeşenlik in southwestern Phrygia, the unusual letters Τ and  are found, while in the Phrygian settlement on the site of the old Hittite capital Hattusa the letter η appears in one alphabetic text.

Non-Alphabetic Signs

Before we can determine the source of these uniquely Phrygian letters, another class of graphic symbols that has bearing on the question of the origin and development of the Phrygian script should also be considered. In addition to the Phrygian alphabetic inscriptions on stone and graffiti on ceramic vessels, there are many non-alphabetic marks scratched onto pottery and other objects (Roller 1987a:Part 2A). These marks were evidently a form of non-verbal label. Some of them were incised onto pottery, particularly storage vessels, before firing, but the great majority were scratched onto small bowls, cups, and plates after firing. These non-alphabetic marks outnumber the quantity of alphabetic texts. First appearing on vessels dating from the early 8th century B.C., they anticipate the earliest Phrygian alphabetic texts by about half a century or more. They occur consistently from the 8th century on, with the greatest number found on wares of the 8th through 4th centuries B.C., the same period as the majority of the alphabetic texts. Some of them are very simple, merely lines, Xs, or cross-hatching, the kinds of marks that could occur independently in many societies. Many of the non-alphabetic marks, however, show the recurrence of specific patterns, as if the person who scratched the mark was using a known symbol to convey a specific message, just as a written text would.

Several of these non-alphabetic marks were not original to the Phrygians, but reproduce, to a surprising degree, the kinds of marks found on earlier pottery, including Late Bronze Age wares at Gordium and Hittite vessels from Hattusa. The latter site has yielded pottery with marks applied before firing, marks that were incised in conspicuous places on large storage pithoi (Sesid 1972). With few exceptions, these marks do not appear to be related to a linguistic system, but they were, nonetheless, consciously chosen and placed on the vessel for a purpose, evidently as a form of identification. Among these Hittite marks we find some of the most common non-verbal marks that were incised on the later Phrygian pottery of Gordium. These include symbols such as a trikles, a schematic branch, a swastika, and a closed X resembling an hourglass.

The similarity of these forms may be coincidence, since such marks are common to many cultures. There is, however, evidence suggesting that some kind of relationship with the past does exist, in the form of a gray ware sherds from a level containing material transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Hittite period. These sherds belong to an archaeological context earlier than the first Phrygian alpha-
betic script. The piece bears a mark incised after firing, a triangle with a central vertical line (Fig. 6). This, as we have noted, is the same mark that appears on several Late Bronze Age sherds at Gordian (e.g., Fig. 4), and is probably a form of the hieroglyph meaning king. Since the Iron Age mark was on a small vessel, it is unlikely to have had any real connection with royalty, but it must have had some meaning in the Phrygian context. A clearer demonstration of the Phrygians’ knowledge of the past occurs on another Late Bronze Age vessel, found in a mixed deposit of 5th and 4th century B.C. material (Fig. 7). This too has the Bronze Age sign, the triangle with the central vertical line, and beneath it is a graffiti in Phrygian alphabetic script. How might the Phrygians have learned about hieroglyphic signs?

The Hittite capital at Boğazköy was devastated around 1200 B.C. and may not have been reoccupied for some time, but Gordian may not have been so totally destroyed. The new Phrygian immigrants might have seen Hittite objects at Gordian, and some parts of the Bronze Age population in that area could have survived. Exposure through random chance (as illustrated by Fig. 7) to the Bronze Age practice of using pottery marks could have suggested that graphic symbols could impart a specific message, even though they were not suitable for the complexities that an alphabetic script can convey. Such knowledge could have made the Phrygians aware of the potential power of writing and thus susceptible to the Greek alphabetic system.

In addition to the general concept that graphic symbols can have meaning, Bronze Age material may have provided a source for some of the non-Greek letters in the Phrygian alphabet. Among the earliest Phrygian texts found in Tumulus MM is one including a uniquely Phrygian (i.e., non-Greek) letter, the arrow (Fig. 9). While the phonetic quality of this letter is uncertain, it is one of the signs incised before firing onto the pottery of Bronze Age Gordian. Another link between Phrygian script and earlier symbols is found in a Phrygian text from Boğazköy—a character that looks like a branch (Neuman 1975:79, no. 5) and appears both in Bronze Age hieroglyphic script and on Hittite pottery. Thus, the fusion of the two systems, alphabetic letters and nonverbal symbols, appears to have taken place in the earliest stages of the development of Phrygian script.

Even later, Phrygians continued to use non-verbal marks. Other distinctively Phrygian letters, such as the $\mathbb{W}$ and the $\mathbb{T}$ attestated at Gordian (Fig. 10), as well as the $\mathbb{Y}$ and the $\mathbb{T}$ in texts in south-western Phrygian sites, appear first as isolated marks on Phrygian pottery. At the same time, certain Phrygian letters originally derived from the Greek alphabet appear in conjunction with Anatolian non-alphabetic symbols (Figs. 11, 13), which suggests that the line between alphabetic letters and non-alphabetic marks was not so clear as we make it for analytical purposes. Moreover, there are many vessels with non-alphabetic marks, or with a combination of alphabetic letters and non-alphabetic marks, suggesting that non-alphabetic marks continued to be an acceptable form of communication even after alphabetic writing was known.
Phrygian Use of Writing

The ways in which Phrygians used writing are also important in establishing reasons for the adoption of the alphabet. Prominent among the earliest Greek texts are those consisting of proper names. The first Phrygian texts, the five on objects from Tumuhu MM and one from the mound at Gordium, are also proper names, albeit they are in the majority, comprising about 95 percent of the examples. The few longer texts in Phrygian, including several on stone, almost all appear to be documents associated with Phrygian religious practices, such as dedications or religious proclamations, although there also seem to be historical documents about Mides (the inscriptions at Tyana). The same limited range of subject matter holds true for texts in the Phrygian language from other parts of central Anatolia. Longer inscriptions were carved onto sculptured rock facades in western Phrygia, but they too almost all seem to be religious (Hapels 1971:259-254). Although the extant body of material in the Phrygian language appears more limited in subject matter than that in Greek, we cannot estimate what would have been written on papyrus, parchment, or wax, and thus what has been lost. The number of written texts from Gordium is fairly large, amounting to over two hundred in a period of roughly four centuries, suggesting that writing was not a special skill practiced only by a small group. Since we probably do not have the full range of Phrygian writings preserved, we cannot assess the impact that writing had on society. It has been argued that the ease of Greek alphabetic writing and its widespread dissemination contributed heavily to the development of systematic and logical inquiry characteristic of the Greek intellectual revolution in the 6th century B.C. Since the extant Greek sources far exceed those known from Phrygia, a similar recognition of intellectual achievement cannot, unfortunately, be made for Gordium.

From Phrygian to Greek

A second stage of Greek influence on Phrygian writing occurred in the 4th century B.C., four hundred years after the introduction of the alphabet, when Greek letters and Greek orthography appear on graffiti in pottery. At this time, since there was still considerable overlap between the two script systems, the actual evidence for the shift of script is subtle: the distinctive Phrygian letter forms and Ψ disappear, and several Greek letters not seen before this time, e.g., Η, Θ, Ξ, Φ, are found. Other Greek practices, such as the use of ligatures, occur for the first time. Eventually Greek script supplanted Phrygian, and Greek spelling was used in writing common Phrygian proper names. Also from the 4th century are the earliest examples of texts with words and phrases in the Greek language, suggesting that changes in the writing system resulted from the introduction of Greek speech as well as Greek script. By the end of the 4th century, texts in the Phrygian language had become rare, with most being written in Greek. By the 3rd century B.C. all the written documents at Gordium are in Greek language and Greek script (Roller 1987b:107). This linguistic shift is attributable to profound changes in the political organization of Anatolia after the conquests of Alexander and his legendary feat of cutting the "Gordian knot," by which he gained possession of Asia. The successor states formed from Alexander's empire after his death were strongly Hellenized, so Greek passed from being a lingua franca to the mother tongue of many conquered peoples, the inhabitants of Gordium among them.

Conclusion

The Phrygian writing system drew upon two separate script systems—Anatolian hieroglyphs and the Greek alphabet. Each derived from outside Phrygia, but the reasons for their adoption seem to have varied. During the Late Bronze Age at Gordium, the writing system and the use of non-verbal graphic symbols appear to have been limited to recording ownership. Even this function was lost at the end of the Bronze Age, due to population movements which included that of the Phrygians. The desire to write the Phrygian language caused several centuries later, as a result of exposure to Greek writing. The Phrygian alphabet seems to have been known to a larger percentage of the population than was Bronze Age writing, although the subject matter of extant Phrygian texts is limited in scope. An indigenous element persisted, as non-verbal symbols were frequently used in conjunction with alphabetic writing. The final shift in the writing system, from the Phrygian to the Greek alphabet, occurred when political changes in Anatolia in the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. caused Greek to become the dominant language.

Bibliography


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