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.

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.
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 “Earliest 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 to be reunited with their one-time roof mates, and the form of an entire roof can 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 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 century B.C.

Treating tiles as isolated works of art can result in assigning 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 can understand better than ever 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, fragments 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 nearly achieved by tapering or flanges. What had been a random assortment of tiles, therefore, can now be recognized as components 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, covered curved ridge beam covers, and semicircular end cover tiles 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.
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 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 hozenes, 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 tiles built 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
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 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 Phrygian/Ancient 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.

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 Phrygian/Ancient 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.

FOR FURTHER READING


