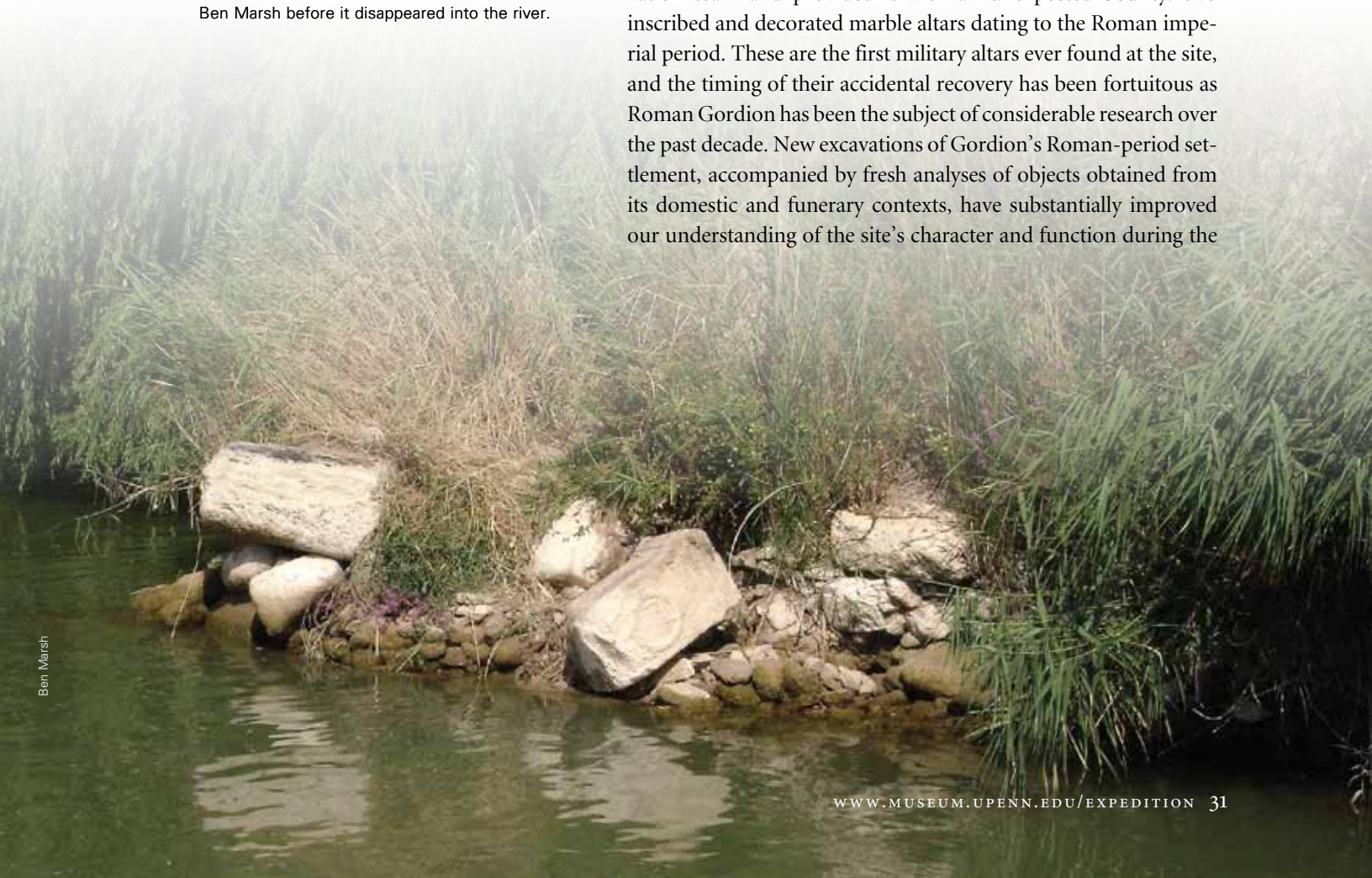
"To the Victory of Caracalla"

New Roman Altars at Gordion

BY GARETH DARBYSHIRE, KENNETH W. HARL, AND ANDREW L. GOLDMAN

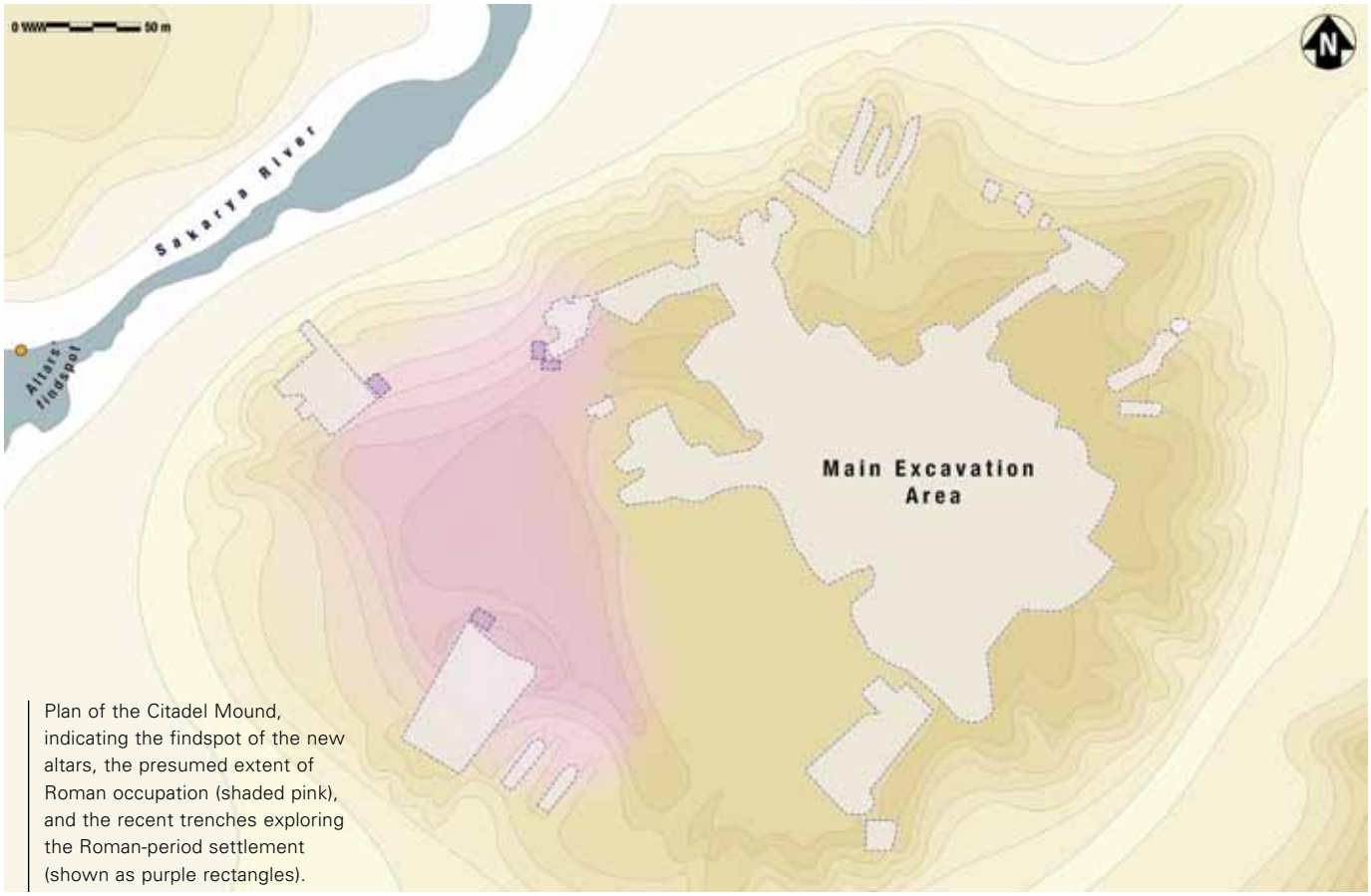
Below, the first altar (S-113) was noticed on the banks of the Sakarya River in 2007. It was photographed by Ben Marsh before it disappeared into the river.



Ben Marsh

Ask any archaeologist whether chance finds are a crucial source of information and the answer you will receive—if he or she is being candid—is yes. Chance finds perform a substantial role in helping us to reconstruct the past. Even with all our methodically planned excavations, our carefully strategized surveys, and our increasing scientific expertise, we are often beholden to the unanticipated gifts of Lady Luck, she who was once known to the Romans as Fortuna and to the Greeks as Tyche.

This was exactly the case at ancient Gordion in central Turkey during the summer of 2008, when fortune smiled upon the excavation team and provided it with an unexpected bounty: two inscribed and decorated marble altars dating to the Roman imperial period. These are the first military altars ever found at the site, and the timing of their accidental recovery has been fortuitous as Roman Gordion has been the subject of considerable research over the past decade. New excavations of Gordion's Roman-period settlement, accompanied by fresh analyses of objects obtained from its domestic and funerary contexts, have substantially improved our understanding of the site's character and function during the



Plan of the Citadel Mound, indicating the findspot of the new altars, the presumed extent of Roman occupation (shaded pink), and the recent trenches exploring the Roman-period settlement (shown as purple rectangles).

G. Pizzorno and G. Darbyshire

1st to early 5th centuries CE. However, many questions remain unanswered as we continue to explore this later phase of Gordion's long occupation. These chance finds not only verify and amplify recent discoveries concerning a longstanding Roman military presence at Gordion, but they also hint at a hitherto unsuspected event in the site's long history: the possible visit of a Roman emperor to the auxiliary soldiers once stationed there.

The Recovery of the Roman Altars

Now housed safely at the Gordion Museum, the two altars were rescued by members of the Gordion Project, the archaeological team that has worked at the site since 1950 under the aegis of the Penn Museum.

The random discovery of objects that provide valuable information is no rarity at Gordion. A site of considerable size and prosperity, the ancient city and its immediate hinterland continue to produce a hodgepodge of stray finds on an almost annual basis. For example, in recent years the intensification of plowing in the fields near the Citadel Mound has led to several exciting recoveries including the inscribed tombstone of a Roman auxiliary soldier. The accidental exposure of the new altars—designated S-113 and S-114—was due to both natural and man-made factors affecting the Sakarya River, which today is channeled alongside the western flank of Gordion's Citadel Mound (in antiquity it flowed at the east side). Known as the Sangarios in ancient times, the river remains the region's principal water source. In 1893, it played a pivotal role in the site's rediscovery, when the German classical philologist Alfred Körte followed clues from ancient literary sources that specified Gordion's location on the river. The Sakarya is now considerably lower than it was in Körte's time owing to the recent intensification of agricultural irrigation drawing off its water. This, combined with the seasonal ebb of the river in the dry summers, has resulted in previously submerged features now becoming visible, among them the two Roman-period altars.

The altars first drew notice during the summer of 2007, when geomorphologist Ben Marsh was conducting work on the east bank of the river. Across the water he noted one altar (S-113) free of the western bank and lying at the water's edge, with some of the stone's decorative motifs clearly visible. Apparently no one on the Gordion team had noticed the block before, so it may have only recently eroded out of the bank. He photographed the stone and brought it to the attention of others on the team. Much to his surprise, when Marsh returned a few days later to the riverbank to examine the block with Gareth Darbyshire, Gordion's archivist and a long-time researcher with the project, the stone had entirely vanished. Where could it have gone? Certainly the stone's size was such that it was impossible for even four men to carry it, and no drag marks were evident along the steep riverbank. Perhaps more importantly, no stone fragments remained on the bank to indicate that the altar had been smashed on the spot in a deluded search for gold hidden inside—a commonly held traditional belief in the region. After a thorough investigation yielded no evidence to indicate the monument had been either dragged away or destroyed, Marsh and Darbyshire concluded that it had slumped into the river and now lay submerged in the water's murky depths.

As there was no time left in 2007 to attempt a rescue, the altar remained where it was until the following season, when Darbyshire and Vahap Kaya, an archaeologist at the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara and the Gordion commissar of the Turkish General Directorate of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, decided to fish out the

With the help of a six-man recovery team and the use of a backhoe, Altar S-113 was lifted from the Sakarya.

Conservators (left to right) Lauren Horelick, Cricket Harbeck, and Tara Hornung, working on altar S-113. On both altars, up to a 1/2 inch thickness of river concretion was removed by manual reduction using chisels and scalpels, enough to reveal the inscriptions and decorative motifs.

Zekeriya Utğu (top), Penn Museum Gordion Archive (bottom)

Left, after the front of altar S-114 was cleaned, a winged Victory and a dedicatory inscription to Caracalla were revealed. Middle, conservators uncovered a thick laurel wreath with looped fillets on the side of altar S-113. Right, a shield with javelins was discovered on the cleaned rear of altar S-113.

elusive monument. They formulated a plan to retrieve the hefty object using tackle and a backhoe hired from a private, non-archaeological concern working in the nearby village of Yassıhöyük. In addition to Darbyshire and Kaya, the recovery team included Zekeriya Utğu, chief guard of the Gordion Project, Onur Soysalan of the Gordion Museum, and Satılmış Yılmaz from the village, each of whom volunteered to act as divers in the operation, as well as Brian Rose, Gordion Project co-director and Deputy Director of the Penn Museum, and Richard Liebhart, another long-time Gordion researcher. The venture proved more complex than anticipated, as the riverbank provided neither much firm ground nor room-for-maneuver for the backhoe operator. Furthermore, the divers eventually discovered that the stone had slumped into a deeper part of the river, a plunge-pool up to four meters deep. Fortunately, the water level in 2008 was even lower than usual due to a drought, a circumstance that enabled the team to complete the recovery successfully in a single day.

Even before the first diver hit the water, a new surprise awaited the team. During the clearance of vegetation preparatory to the recovery of the first altar, a second marble altar (S-114) was found embedded in the riverbank. It lay jammed against a column drum, part of an extensive jumble of stones that included large re-used cut blocks (*spolia*) and smaller fieldstones. The first altar (S-113) appeared to have been part of the same mass, presumably the collapsed fabric of a monumental wall that had been truncated by the river. The date, precise character, and extent of this wall remains uncertain, as the area is masked by thick riverbank vegetation and has seen no formal archaeological survey or excavation, lying as it does on the border of the zone in which the Gordion Project is permitted to carry out its archaeological work. But even a cursory investigation of this intriguing, collapsed structure has proved useful, allowing the team to determine that the altars had been reused and were not in their original archaeological context, and that the construction of the monumental structure post-dates the manufacturing date of the altars.

With the bank now cleared, the rescuers focused on locating the altar in the river, no easy task given the darkness and coldness of the Sakarya's water and the presence of many other blocks on the riverbed. With the approximate size of the altar and the character of its decorative relief motifs in mind, the stone was eventually located after repeated diving and blind touching of underwater objects. With some difficulty a cable harness was then fastened around the block, and the other end of the cable

Penn Museum Gordion Archive

was secured to the backhoe that was then skillfully used to haul the stone from the water. The altar was carried by the backhoe to the museum in Yassıhöyük and positioned in the courtyard, where it was given preliminary treatment by members of the Gordion Project conservation team. The second altar (S-114) was removed from the riverbank shortly afterwards, for its own safety, and also taken to the museum via the backhoe, where it was set up next to the first one for conservation treatment and display.

The Altars' Decoration and Inscriptions

Although conservation has not yet been completed, initial cleaning of the altars has revealed a wealth of intriguing detail. In size and decoration, the two altars, both nearly complete, are virtually identical. Slightly over one meter in height and half a meter in thickness, and almost square in cross-section, they carry elaborate relief decoration on all four sides. Below the flat top is an upper zone of moldings, with evidence on S-114 that the four corners of this zone were each originally adorned with a palmette. The front of the twin monuments carries a depiction of draped, winged Victory striding forwards and carrying a palm branch—a typical symbol of triumph—in her outstretched right hand. Victoria is the Roman equivalent of Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, who was worshipped by members of the Roman army. It is also on this face that the inscriptions occur, discussed below. Not surprisingly, the sides and rear of the altars display further military imagery of a Roman type: a thick laurel wreath with looped fillets on each of the pair of side panels, while the rear face carries a round shield behind which are three diagonally-set javelins or spears. These symbols are standard fare on military altars found throughout the Roman Empire, and the presence of such altars at Gordion adds further support to the recent discovery that Gordion served as a minor military base during the Roman imperial period.

That such altars should be found even at a small, rural garrison site like Gordion is not unexpected. Altars are ubiquitous at military installations of all kinds from northern Britain to the banks of the Euphrates, and their dedicatory inscriptions represent one of our best sources of information about the identity of soldiers and officers, the location of specific garrison sites, Roman military deployment strategies, and religious customs among the army units. Although the Gordion altars were not found *in situ*, excavation of Roman forts in Britain and elsewhere indicates that such monuments could be set up at a number of locations, including the main headquarters building (*principia*) and along the edges of the parade ground. According to inscriptions carved into the façade, commanders or whole units were normally responsible for their dedication. Exactly how such monuments were funded and purchased, at what would have been a considerable expense for those involved, remains unclear.

Zekeriya Utğu

Part of the rescue team with altar S-113 at the Gordion Museum. Left to Right: Zekeriya Utğu, Gareth Darbyshire, Onur Soysalan, and Vahap Kaya.

Military altars like those from Gordion could serve a number of purposes. Many were dedicated to Jupiter the Best and Greatest (*Iuppiter Optimus Maximus*), although other deities, notably Mars, Hercules, and Victory, were also well represented. The rites and sacrifices by military units, which would have taken place in front of such relatively small altars, were offered on numerous occasions, including official thanksgiving ceremonies, the celebration of public holidays, and special festivals in honor of deities or the imperial cult. In the case of the Gordion altars, the character of the dedication (see below) suggests that they were used for the latter purpose, for offerings on behalf of the health (*pro salutate*) of the emperor. That hundreds of such monuments have survived across the Empire is clear testimony to the strong sense of pride, duty, and piety that these soldiers possessed.

The Emperor Caracalla and his Parthian War

Noteworthy for their decorative carving alone, the two new altars generated yet more excitement and proved even more remarkable as their initial cleaning proceeded, and conservators detected inscriptions on the front face of each altar, above and alongside the depiction of the Victories. Although only one of these inscriptions is fully visible, that on altar S-114, the information it contains provides us with exactly the data we need for dating the twin monuments and for identifying the soldiers who dedicated them. The three lines above the figure of Victory read, in typically abbreviated Latin, "VICTORIAE/IMP. M. AVR. ANTONINI/PIIFELIC AVGVST" ("To the victory of Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Felix Augustus") clearly identifying the recipient of this dedication as the emperor better known as Caracalla. Below, on either side of and

Caracalla

The emperor Caracalla (reigned 198–217 CE) was born as Lucius Septimius Bassianus in 188 CE. The son of the emperor Septimius Severus (reigned 193–211 CE), he was said to have possessed the savagery of Caligula and the paranoia of Nero. In 198, Caracalla, then age ten, was declared co-emperor with his father, a leading senator who had battled his way to the throne during a brutal civil war. Septimius Severus sought legitimacy by having the Senate vote retroactively his adoption by Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161–180 CE), the deceased emperor who was already revered as the noblest of rulers. Caracalla was then renamed Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and so became the new Marcus Aurelius. He is, however, best known by his nickname, taken from the Gallic cloak that he popularized among the Roman soldiery, men who were fiercely devoted to him as a comrade in arms. The nickname was an ominous sign, for another emperor who was the darling of the army, the mad Caligula, also owed his nickname—"Little Boots"—to the soldiers.

A tough veteran, Caracalla campaigned on the Rhine in 213, and then, in the next year, declared war against Parthia, Rome's rival in the East. At issue was the strategic plateau of Armenia, but Caracalla likely aimed to strike south at the twin Parthian capitals of Ctesiphon and Seleucia on the Tigris, just like his father had done in his successful Parthian War fifteen years earlier. After marching through Anatolia in 214–15, he arrived in Syria and prepared to invade Parthia. However, in 217 he was assassinated on orders of his Praetorian Prefect, Macrinus. Macrinus feared his suspicious imperial master, who in 202 had engineered the death of his predecessor Gaius Fulvius Plautianus, the kinsman and powerful prefect of Septimius Severus. Macrinus (reigned 217–218) promptly ordered the deification of his murdered master, and concluded an unpopular peace with the Parthians. Within fourteen months, Macrinus himself was overthrown and executed when the eastern army rallied to an adolescent cousin and namesake of Caracalla, the notoriously depraved Elagabalus (reigned 218–222) who was rumored to be Caracalla's illegitimate son.

beneath the Victory, we read that the altar has been dedicated *by the cohors I Augusta Cyrenaica* ("COH. PRIM./AVG. CYR./ANTONINIANA"), an auxiliary cavalry unit known to have been stationed in the province of Galatia during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. Several inscriptions dedicated to this unit have been recovered in Ankara (ancient Ancyra), and it was likely the principal unit operating in northern Galatia at that time. The title *Antoniniana* that follows the unit's name is an honorific likely to have been bestowed by Caracalla himself, a mark of distinction that many auxiliary units were eager to claim. On the other altar, S-113, there is a dedication "Victoriae" on the upper molding, but the rest of the inscription below appears to have been deliberately erased (see below).

The reverse of a bronze coin of Pergamon struck during Caracalla's imperial visit in 214 CE; the emperor is greeted by the goddess of the city holding the cult statuette of Asklepios. (cf. *SNGFrance 2232*).

Beyond its value in furnishing the name of one of Gordion's garrisons (another, that of the *VII Breucorum Equitata*, is provided by the tombstone mentioned earlier), the new inscription provides fresh evidence directly relating to Caracalla's Parthian War of 215–217 CE. Caracalla was sole ruler of the Roman Empire between 212 and 217 CE, and he was one of a half-dozen or so ambitious leaders during the Roman Republic and Empire who set forth to conquer Rome's eastern neighbor, Parthia, in what is now modern Iran and Iraq. In both modern and ancient times, few military expeditions were as arduous and costly as those aimed at subduing this area, and many would-be conquerors failed to survive the venture altogether. The principal invasion route ran through the heartland of Anatolia, a region justifiably known as the crossroads of Europe and Asia. The impact of armies passing through was usually transitory but burdensome, demanding substantial resources bought from, donated by, or surrendered by the communities along the marching route. A variety of surviving sources—literary passages, contemporary inscriptions, and commemorative issues of coinage—have helped scholars to track the movement of these massive armies, as the soldiers proceeded across Turkey to and from the Euphrates River and its major crossing points.

According to our surviving literary sources, with his declaration of war against King Artabanus of Parthia in 214, Caracalla was seized by a yearning to wage an eastern campaign in imitation of Alexander the Great. In the spring of 214, at the age of 26, he arrived in western Asia Minor filled with visions of recreating Alexander's exploits. The Roman army marched along the well-known military highway running from the Bosporus to Ankara, very likely by way of Gordion, and then southeast through the Cilician Gates to Antioch (modern Antakya), the capital of Roman Syria. It is possible to trace the route of Caracalla and his court as they toured the great cities and sanctuaries of Asia Minor, through the numerous token bronze coins typically struck by eastern cities during this period. These local coins were used as a means to celebrate the emperor, the city gods, and even the presiding magistrate supervising the coinage. For example, locally minted bronze coins record Caracalla's visit to the Asklepieion, the renowned sanctuary of the healing god Asklepios at Pergamon (modern Bergama in western Turkey). Caracalla may very well have passed through Gordion before arriving at Ancyra, where the citizens scheduled games in his honor, again celebrated on bronze coins.

En route to his Parthian war, Caracalla postured as the new Alexander to the acclaims of Greek provincials across Anatolia. The newly discovered altars at Gordion indicate that soldiers garrisoned in Anatolia also cel-

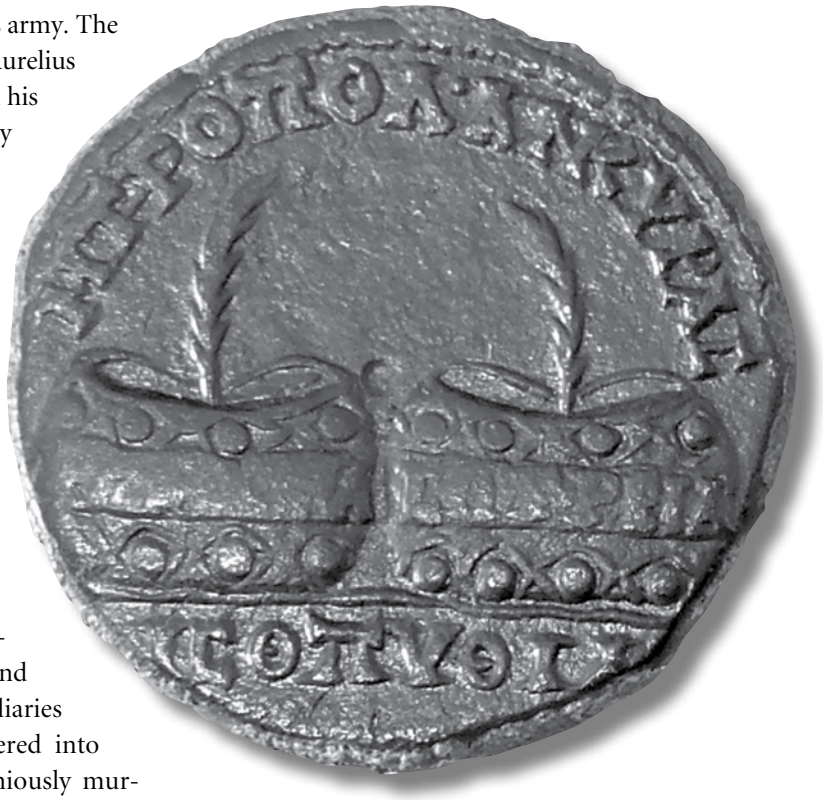
Tanya Silvernagel

ebrated the passage of the emperor and his army. The altar carries the official name—Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Felix Augustus—found on his coins since 213, and Gordion most likely lay upon the route of Caracalla's army in 214. It therefore seems possible that the auxiliary soldiers of the *cohors I Cyrenaica Augusta* stationed at the site dedicated their altar in the presence of the emperor himself in anticipation of his Parthian victories. Gordion would have been a natural focus for a young emperor who saw himself as the next Alexander, visiting the very site where the Macedonian conqueror cut the famous Gordian Knot five and a half centuries before.

Caracalla, however, proved far less successful a commander than Alexander, and the hopes for victory by Gordion's auxiliaries proved fruitless, as Caracalla never entered into battle. On April 8, 217, he was ignominiously murdered on the road between Edessa and Carrhae (modern Urfa and Harran, respectively, in southeastern Turkey) on order of his Praetorian Prefect Macrinus, who, for good reason, feared his suspicious and capricious imperial master.

The inscription on altar S-114 from Gordion has provided an important new source of information for scholars about the site's Roman-period occupation and its military garrison in the early 3rd century. Not only are we learning more about the presence and activities of Roman soldiers stationed there, but also we now have probable evidence for Gordion's participatory role in one of Rome's massive eastern campaigns. The apparently erased inscription on S-113 is perhaps even more intriguing. As project co-director Brian Rose recalled when examining the altar, Caracalla did not suffer a formal erasure of his name (*damnatio memoriae*), but many of his images and inscriptions were defaced after his assassination. It might have been that the twin altar bases were not set up next to each other. Alternatively, perhaps S-113 was not dedicated to Caracalla at all, but to some other ruler from around that time (for example his hated brother Geta)? At present, we cannot know.

Given the significance of these new chance finds, perhaps an offering to the goddess Fortuna—an altar?—would not be out of place.



The reverse of a local bronze coin from Ancyra shows Caracalla on the obverse and prize crowns for local games to Asklepios and Zeus Soter on the reverse. (cf. *BMCGalatia* 24).

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For Further Reading

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