In 278 B.C., a group of Celtic immigrants crossed from the Balkans into Anatolia, or present-day Turkey. The long journey to the Bosporus from their European homeland had taken these wandering Celts, known as Galatians, through Hellenized states, where they settled temporarily as allies. The culture they established in Anatolia may have reflected Greek elements from that sojourn, influences from the indigenous peoples they encountered, and remnants of their own European customs and traditions. Today, archaeologists examining the site of the Galatian settlement at Gordion are piecing together the nature of Celtic culture in Anatolia.

Gordion is unique within central Anatolia because of the archaeological information that it can provide for the Hellenistic period, the late fourth through second centuries B.C. While working at the site, Rodney Young, director of the University Museum’s Gordion Project from 1950-1973, found a well-preserved Hellenistic level. Houses discovered there showed evidence of some fire damage and large quantities of pottery and other artifacts left on the floors. Young nicknamed this discovery the “Deserted Village.” Dated to the late third century B.C., its archaeological remains have been generally linked to a dramatic event in Gordion history: In 189 B.C., a Roman army led by Consul Manlius Vulso looted the city. The historian Livy — drawing on a contemporary account by Polybios that is preserved only as a summary — describes Vulso’s campaign against the Galatians. When the Romans arrived at Gordion, they found that its inhabitants had fled, taking refuge in a mountain stronghold called Mount Olympus. This strategy failed when the Romans defeated and slaughtered the refugees, who scholars agree were members of the Galatian tribe known as the Tolistobogii.

IN SEARCH OF THE CELTS OF ANATOLIA

Although the Greeks and Romans saw the Galatians as barbarians who raided to acquire portable wealth, modern scholarship interprets their journey as a quest for something quite different — good agricultural land. They entered Anatolia as allies of King Nichomedes of Bythnia (located just east of the Bosporus), who offered them pay, booty, and land in what is now north central Turkey.

Before the 1988 excavations, Gordion scholars had thought that the site was abandoned between the destruction of 189 B.C. and the late first century B.C., when the Romans resettled it. But research at Gordion since 1988 has provided new information on the timing and nature of the Galatian immigration into the city. Ongoing work is yielding a more detailed picture of material culture, both before and after the time the Celts arrived, and exploring previously neglected areas of the site such as the western Citadel and the Lower Town. Analysis of this material has just begun, so this article provides a preliminary description of a newly defined Hellenistic sequence and settlement and some of its implications for our understanding of the Celts of Anatolia.

In 1988-89 Gordion excavators defined the Yassihoyuk Stratigraphic Sequence, a closely controlled series of occupation levels for the Citadel Mound that extended from the modern surface down to the Bronze Age. Three trenches were placed along the edge of the large area cleared by Young on the eastern half of the Citadel. We quickly encountered a deposit typical of the Deserted Village. On house floors and courtyard surfaces were gray and buff-colored ceramic jars and cookpots, a cluster of small containers for oils and cosmetics, a pile of clay loomweights, Macedonian and Seleucid coins of the late fourth and early third centuries, and shells from the Mediterranean. In one corner of the room was a large ceramic tray covered with bright blue pigment, a color favored by Celtic warriors and apparently by Celtic housewives as well.

Some aspects of the houses were surprising; however. There was no evidence for the use of mudbrick, which Gordion scholar Frederick Winter had considered characteristic of the Hellenistic buildings excavated by Young. Instead, stone foundations had vertical slots for posts to support a superstructure that was made of organic materials plastered with mud (which had decayed into a pink soil flecked with white plant remains). Moreover, one of the paving stones in a courtyard proved to be the top of a carved stone slab or stela that had been broken up to a usable size and set with its sculpted side down. Such stelae were
The date of the Galatian migration is less certain, but no later than the mid-third century, as suggested by Frederick Winter and others. More startling is new data on the length of the occupation. A third Late Hellenistic construction phase is now well documented by excavations in 2001–2002 showing that the site was reoccupied soon after Vulso’s raid. That the subsequent Hellenistic inhabitants were returning Galatians rather than newcomers is suggested by a rebuilding of walls within the Deserted Village and continuity in the kinds of activities carried out in outside areas. From this final Hellenistic occupation came the first example of a fibula (garment pin) from Gordion found last summer, with European or La Tène ornamentation characteristic of Celtic design. The ornament is made of iron wire and has not yet been fully conserved and restored, but the identification made by Celtic scholar Gareth Darbyshire seems certain.

The Galatians in a Broader Cultural Context

The problems involved in relying on texts written about nonliterate societies by dominant literate societies have been
discussed for decades by archaeologists studying Celtic societies in Europe. Historians and art historians as well as archaeologists have stressed the necessity of looking at material culture and the archaeological record in conjunction with, and as a balance to, texts. Over the past decade a similar process has occurred with respect to the Anatolian Celts or Galatians, with new syntheses of the evidence developed by scholars such as Steven Mitchell, Karl Stroebel, Gareth Darbyshire, and Levent Vardar. Their work has been hampered by the small available sample of archaeological data. Significant differences in the historical context of the Celts in Europe and Anatolia change the nature of the questions that must be asked and the archaeological data needed to provide answers. First, the Galatians represent immigrants rather than a people indigenous to Anatolia. A fully-documented sequence of occupation over large areas of the settlement is needed in order to document patterns of continuity and change and relate them to processes such as the adaptation of immigrant farmers and herders to a new environment, or the use of material culture to symbolize a Celtic identity distinct from that of the indigenous population. Differences in the form and contents of houses might be a clue to the number of immigrants. For example, if only a few parts of the settlement show the kinds of changes that we observed, one might conclude that the only resident Galatians were a ruling military elite and their entourage. On the other hand, if large areas of the Deserted Village show new forms of architecture and household contents, we could conclude that a relatively large number of immigrants displaced the indigenous Phrygian residents. Second, in Anatolia it was the Celts who dominated, and the development of a specifically “Galatian” identity would have been a response to groups they had conquered rather than to incursions by larger and stronger polities (such as Rome). Did the newly arrived Celtic groups symbolize their ethnicity by retaining traditions from their European homeland, or did they adopt some of the trappings of the Hellenized kingdoms they encountered during their long journey through the Balkans and their sojourns as allies and soldiers in small Hellenistic states? Third, in Europe, archaeologists and ethnohistorians traditionally have focused on material remains. Scholars have suggested the location of the territories controlled by these groups, but few sites have been systematically investigated, and defining boundaries or border zones based on archaeological remains is impossible at present. A tightly controlled archaeological sequence with distinctive ceramic types securely dated would help us look at changes in the countryside. Was the distribution of small settlements across the landscape the same or different after Galatian took control of central places? Were the fortresses recently identified by surface surveys built to enforce control of strategically important regions. The Galatians arrived in Anatolia with a tribal form of political organization that allowed for effective military action. Boundaries between tribal groups have also been important evidence for archaeologists, as discussed by Peter Wells in Beyond Celts, Germans and Scythians. Texts tell us that there were three tribes in Anatolia (the Tolistobogii, Troscei, and Teutoscagens). Scholars have suggested the location of the territories controlled by these groups, but few sites have been systematically investigated, and defining boundaries or border zones based on archaeological remains is impossible at present. A tightly controlled archaeological sequence with distinctive ceramic types securely dated would help us look at changes in the countryside. Was the distribution of small settlements across the landscape the same or different after Galatians took control of central places? Were the fortresses recently identified by surface surveys built to enforce control of strategically important places? If so, when did this form of settlement develop? We have addressed here only one of the major problems set out above: documenting the migration of Celts to Gordion by establishing distinctive patterns of material culture. We can also draw other preliminary conclusions. Although the Galatians were strongly Hellenized, they retained their native language and practiced rituals carried with them from their European homeland. The rulers were prosperous and ambitious, erecting public buildings and supporting specialized craftsmen in a prosperous town. This sketch can be made into a more richly shaded image of the settlement and the landscape around it by analyzing the vast amount of archaeological data accumulated from the more than 2.5 hectares excavated since 1950. It is a daunting but enticing research problem.

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FOR FURTHER READING


Reconstruction of the Northwest Zone pottery workshop by Michael Rothman. Small pots full of paint and pigments were found on the floor of the building near the doorway, as was a pile of loomweights.