Like many great archaeological discoveries, the site of Gordion was encountered by accident. Engineers working on the construction of the Berlin-Baghdad railroad noticed a large, flat-topped mound with extensive amounts of pottery on the surface and assumed that it was an ancient settlement. Parts of the site and the surrounding monumental burial mounds, or tumuli, were subsequently dug by two German classicists, the Körte brothers, in 1900, and they identified the settlement as Gordion based on numerous ancient literary descriptions.

The rulers of Gordion controlled a kingdom that encompassed much of what is now central Turkey (part of ancient Anatolia) during the Iron Age (ca. 1200–540 BCE). This kingdom eventually reached from northwest Turkey to the Euphrates in the east. Most of the ancient...
writers who described the kingdom focused on King Midas, who ruled during the second half of the 8th century BCE (ca. 740–700). The stories of his exploits penned by Greek and Roman writers fall into the category of the legendary, and most of them were written centuries after his death. They describe a man who committed suicide by drinking bull’s blood after his kingdom had been destroyed by invaders from South Russia (the Cimmerians), and one who judged a music contest between the gods Apollo and Pan, only to have his ears turned into those of a donkey by Apollo, who felt that his judgment was erroneous. The most famous of these stories involved Midas’ Golden Touch, given to him by the god Dionysus, wherein everything he touched turned to gold.

The stories of [Midas’] exploits penned by Greek and Roman writers fall into the category of the legendary...
KING MIDAS IN HISTORY

Far more valuable information regarding his reign derives from the annals of the Assyrian kings, since these provide contemporary reports of key historical events, even if from an Assyrian viewpoint. The Assyrians referred to him as “Mita,” who was named as ruler of the Mushki—the term “Phrygian” was never used. He ascended to the throne around 740 BCE and probably ruled for more than four decades, during which he provided support for smaller kingdoms in southern and southeastern Turkey who were attempting to break away from Assyrian control. During the same period, the kingdom of Urartu, in what is now northeastern Turkey, was also continually fomenting revolt against the Assyrians, and the two kingdoms appear to have been anti-Assyrian allies from time to time during the 8th century BCE.

It is worth noting that Midas seems to have been equally concerned with the areas that lay to the west of his kingdom. He married the daughter of the ruler of Kyme, a Greek colony on the western coast of Asia Minor, which would have given him access to a key western port, and the Greek historian Herodotus notes that Midas was the first foreign king to make a dedication at the Delphic sanctuary of Apollo. The dedication in question was a wood and ivory throne, of which a piece appears to have been discovered at Delphi near the site where Herodotus said it was located; we include it in the exhibition by kind permission of the Greek Ministry of Culture. This was also the period when the Iliad was written down for the first time, and it is no surprise that Phrygia was described in the epic as a strong and well-fortified kingdom.
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GORDION AND THE PENN MUSEUM

LEFT: Lion Tamer Throne Fragment. This ivory statue, ca. 700 BCE, may have formed part of Midas’ throne. Its style matches that of other Phrygian objects, and it was discovered in Delphi, close to the Corinthian Treasury where the historian Herodotus reported seeing a throne dedicated by Midas. A dowel hole on the back indicates that it formed part of a piece of furniture. Archaeological Museum of Delphi L-2015-2-1. © Ephorate of Antiquities of Phokis. ABOVE RIGHT: A plan of the eastern side of the Mound in the Early Phrygian period shows the existing structures before the beginning of the construction project that was underway at the time of the great fire. ABOVE: This color phase plan of the Gordion Citadel shows Early, Middle, and Late Phrygian architecture. By Gareth Darbyshire and Gabriel H. Pizzorno.
RODNEY YOUNG’S EXCAVATIONS AT GORDION

Given the illustrious history that was attached to the site of Gordion, it is rather surprising that five decades passed between the end of the Körte Brothers’ excavation in 1900 and the beginning of the Penn Museum’s project in 1950. The latter excavations were launched by Prof. Rodney Young, who had a colorful career: he was Curator-in-Charge of the Mediterranean Section of the Penn Museum, a veteran of excavations in the Athenian Agora, and a recipient of the U.S. Bronze Star and the Greek Croix de Guerre in recognition of his service in World War II.

At the time in which Young began the Gordion excavations, there had long been a kind of competition among America’s Ivy League universities regarding the excavation of the great cities of antiquity: Princeton had dug the Athenian Agora and the Lydian capital of Sardis, subsequently taken over by Harvard and Cornell; Yale had explored the Syrian caravan site of Dura Europas; and Penn had excavated the Mesopotamian cities of Nippur and Ur. In a sense, each university wanted to incorporate into their identity the greatest achievements of antiquity and, thus, targeted for exploration the city centers of the wealthiest ancient sites to which they could gain access. Young was therefore interested in identifying and excavating the best-preserved architecture of ancient Gordion as well as the largest of its burial mounds.

In so doing, he faced a daunting task, as the Citadel Mound of Gordion measures 450 x 300 m (135,000 square meters), which is nearly four times the size of the mound of Troy, and it rises 15 m (almost 50 feet) above the surrounding plains. Nor did Young have much in the way of earlier excavations to guide him, and remote sensing, which now takes much of the guesswork out of excavation, was then still relatively new in archaeology.

Over the course of the next 24 years Young discovered nine settlements, one built on top of the other, which spanned a period of nearly 4,000 years. Habitation appears to have begun in the Early Bronze Age, ca. 2300 BCE, and continued through the 2nd millennium BCE, when the settlement would have been part of the Hittite kingdom. In the 12th century BCE, however, it looks as if...

Fresco fragments no. 29a/b of two women is from Gordion’s Painted House; the wall painting dates to the early Achaemenid period. (See page 18.) Image #DSC_8442. Watercolor reconstructions of the fragments were painted by Piet de Jong in 1957. This shows what the paintings may have looked like. Image #G-1537.
the collapse of the Hittite Empire (ca. 1200/1190 BCE) prompted the opening of a commercial corridor from southeastern Europe to central Anatolia, and Gordion received a group of Balkan immigrants who brought with them an Indo-European language very similar to Greek.

Although only the eastern side of the Citadel Mound of Gordion has been extensively investigated, the Citadel had clearly acquired monumental form by the 9th century BCE. During his excavations in the 1950s and 1960s, Young discovered two principal districts, one for the elite and another for industry. The former zone, usually referred to as the Palace Area, was occupied by megarons, rectangular structures with a large, deep hall fronted by a much shallower anteroom. One of the megarons was decorated with a colorful and wildly patterned mosaic floor—a panel from this is featured in the Gordion exhibition. Having been laid at some point in the second half of the 9th century BCE, it ranks as the earliest color pebble mosaic yet discovered.

The Terrace Building Complex, to the west of the megarons, consisted of two long, multi-unit buildings that were dedicated to large-scale food preparation and the production of textiles, some of which are probably reflected in the patterns on the mosaic floor.

The buildings of this settlement are extraordinarily well preserved because of an unusual decision made by Gordion’s rulers ca. 800 BCE, when they decided to endow the city with an even more commanding presence by raising the level of the Mound 4–5 m higher. This entailed the complete burial of the Early Phrygian Citadel, the buildings of which had been standing, for the most part, not more than 50 years. Such a radical recreation of an entire city is unprecedented in the ancient world, and it should probably be viewed as an attempt by Gordion to compete with the increasing splendor of the citadels in North Syria with which it now interacted.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW CITADEL

It was during the course of this unusual operation that a major fire swept through the city, probably in late summer, which is often referred to as the “Destruction Level.” Young had originally dated this event to 700 BCE and connected it to later Graeco-Roman stories of an
attack by the Cimmerians, who migrated from South Russia and the area north of the Black Sea. However, advances in archaeological science, especially dendrochronology (dating by tree ring analysis) and radiocarbon dating, now allow us to pinpoint the destruction at 800 BCE, 100 years earlier than Young had assumed.

No one appears to have died in the fire, and the newly elevated Citadel, which marks the beginning of the Middle Phrygian period (ca. 800–540 BCE), featured a plan almost identical to that of its predecessor, although space was left between the buildings to hinder the spread of fire. The increase in the Citadel’s height occurred in tandem with the construction of equally monumental fortifications in the Lower Town, a residential district that featured...
mudbrick walls at least 4 m high on 3.5 m thick stone foundations, with a defensive ditch set in front of them. There were also two multi-storied forts incorporated into the circuit at north and southeast, generally called the Small Mound (Küçük Höyük) and Bird Mound (Kustepe), respectively. We should view such extensive building activity against the backdrop of an almost equally energetic campaign of city foundations and citadel constructions in eastern Anatolia (Urartu, under Argishti I), the Upper Euphrates (Zincirli in North Syria), and Assyria (Nimrud under Assurnasirpal II).

**TUMULUS MM: THE MIDAS MOUND**
Around the same time as the major renovations, an increasing number of monumental tumuli began to surround the Citadel of Gordion. The largest of these was Tumulus MM (Midas Mound, 740 BCE), which was almost certainly constructed by Midas for his father, Gordios, at the beginning of Midas’ reign. It would stand as the largest tumulus in Asia Minor until King Croesus of Lydia constructed a tomb for his own father, Alyattes, at Sardis around 560 BCE.

The excavation of this tumulus, which Young undertook in 1957, was one of his most impressive achievements, in that it stood 53 m (about 174 feet) high and had a diameter of 300 m (984 feet). Young realized that even if he could locate the burial, he would still have to dig an enormous tunnel into the mound and find a way to prevent the wooden tomb chamber from collapsing when he cut an access hole into the wall. The Phrygians, needless to say, included no door in their tomb chambers since no one was ever again expected to enter them after the burial took place.

What Young’s team found was a chamber measuring 6 x 7 m (about 20 x 23 feet) that had never been looted: the entire royal assemblage of 740 BCE was still intact, including wooden serving standards for the funeral meal, bronze belts, fibulae—meticulously crafted bronze garment pins—and approximately 100 bronze bowls, some of which featured personal names incised in wax. This is one of the few royal burials of Iron Age date to have survived intact. We are fortunate that much of it has been loaned to the Penn Museum for this exhibition. The Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, working in tandem with the Penn Museum,
successfully conserved the tomb chamber, and it now ranks as the oldest standing wooden structure in the world.

Such elite burial mounds were by no means restricted to the area around Gordion. At the site of Bayındır in central Lycia, in modern southwest Turkey, there are nearly 100 tumuli, two of which were built toward the end of the 8th century BCE in a distinctively Phrygian style, and probably at a time when Midas was still on the Phrygian throne. Parallels between the mounds at Bayındır and those at Gordion can be found in both tomb construction and the presence of Phrygian inscriptions on grave goods. What is most distinctive among the objects recovered from Bayındır is that they have been produced in silver, which one rarely finds at Gordion. Several of these objects are featured in our exhibition, the most remarkable of which is a silver statuette of a man who may be a eunuch priest of Cybele, the mother goddess of Asia Minor. The Bayındır tombs are fully Phrygian burials and surely indicate a Phrygian element in the population of central Lycia.

The 7th century BCE represented a period of extraordinary change in and around ancient Anatolia: the Assyrian realm collapsed, as did that of Urartu and the Cimmerians, while the Lydians of western Turkey quickly assembled an expansive kingdom in the resulting power vacuum, assuming control over Gordion as well. Their capital was located at Sardis, through which flowed a river that was rich in electrum, a
natural alloy of gold and silver. This was, according to legend, the river to which Midas transferred his Golden Touch, and not surprisingly, one finds a wealth of gold objects in the tomb assemblages of Lydia, several of which one can see in our Midas exhibition.

**PERSIA GAINS CONTROL OVER GORDION**

The site of Gordion, and indeed, all of Asia Minor were conquered by the Persians in the 540s BCE. They ruled the region for nearly 200 years, until the campaigns of Alexander the Great began in 334 BCE. During the period of Persian control, which we refer to as Late Phrygian, there is evidence for only a few new buildings on the Mound, but one of them is striking: a small, semi-subterranean structure, referred to as the Painted House (500–490 BCE), which was adorned with frescoes of women who seem to be engaged in ritual activity. Since the frescoes were so fragmentary, Young asked the noted archaeological illustrator Piet de Jong to execute reconstructions of the original wall decorations, many of which you will find in the exhibition next to the actual fragments; and even though some of his reconstructions are highly conjectural, they provide viewers with a sense of the sanctity and reverence with which this space was regarded in antiquity.

**ALEXANDER THE GREAT AT GORDION**

When Alexander the Great arrived at Gordion in 333 BCE to cut the “Gordian Knot,” thereby demonstrating that he was destined to become master of Asia, most of the imposing buildings of Early and Middle Phrygian date had been toppled by an earthquake and their stones reused in later construction. Nevertheless, habitation at Gordion would continue for at least another 1,600 years with a noteworthy series of residents. By the
middle of the 3rd century BCE, the settlement had been occupied by the Galatians, a Celtic tribe that had traveled as mercenaries from central Europe to Asia Minor. The Early and Middle Roman settlement at Gordion (1st-2nd century CE) appears to have functioned as a military outpost from which chain armor has been discovered. The settlement continued in the northwestern part of the Mound into the late Roman period (late 3rd-early 4th century CE), which ended with a Christian cemetery.

**MORE RECENT AND CURRENT EXCAVATIONS**

I have highlighted the excavations of Rodney Young in this article because his excavations were the most extensive, but three accomplished archaeologists have directed research at the site in the wake of Young’s untimely death in 1974: Keith DeVries from 1974–1987, and G. Kenneth Sams and Mary Voigt from 1988–2012, with Sams assuming responsibility for publication of the Young discoveries as well as architectural conservation, and Voigt launching an entirely new series of excavations. Voigt’s work prompted the formulation of the “New Chronology” that changed the date of the Iron Age conflagration from 700 to 800 BCE.

Research at Gordion under the auspices of the Penn Museum continues just as actively as it always has. A new campaign of remote sensing (radar, magnetic prospection, and electric resistivity) has clarified the layout of the street system and residential districts for the first time, while an extensive conservation and preservation effort is focused on the Early Phrygian Citadel Gate, Terrace Building, and pebble mosaic from Megaron 2, all of which are desperately in need of stabilization. Meanwhile, renewed excavation has yielded a far more nuanced understanding of the Citadel’s fortifications during the Early, Middle, and Late Phrygian periods.

The importance of Gordion is difficult to summarize within the scope of a short article, or within the scope of a single exhibition. However, a visit to the site or a tour of the new exhibition will amply demonstrate the multifaceted character that Gordion acquired during the last three millennia, as well as our rationale for regarding the reign of Midas and the kingdom that he ruled as a golden age.

C. BRIAN ROSE is Curator of The Golden Age of King Midas and Director of the Gordion Archaeological Project. He is also Curator-in-Charge of the Mediterranean Section and James B. Pritchard Professor of Archaeology at Penn.

**FOR FURTHER READING**


*Expedition* 51.2 (Summer 2009): special issue on Gordion.