Much of the richness of Gordion’s history lies in its interaction with the other great kingdoms of the Near East during the Iron Age and Archaic periods (ca. 950–540 BCE). Each of them observed Gordion and the Phrygians through divergent lenses, and the character of the site shifted considerably as the power of these neighboring states and empires increased and diminished. Gordion’s interface with Assyria, Lydia, Persia, Greece, and the Eurasian steppe constitutes one of the defining features of The Golden Age of King Midas exhibition. In the following pages, you will find these regions presented like characters in an epic film that gradually shaped the history of Asia Minor during the 1st millennium BCE.

ASSYRIANS AND PHRYGIANS

At its greatest extent, the Neo-Assyrian Empire (883–612 BCE) extended as far as Egypt, the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf, and Iran, all of which were ruled from a series of capitals, such as Nineveh and Nimrud, in what is now northern Iraq. The Empire was maintained through a complex bureaucratic network, and rebellions were quelled through massive deportations of conquered peoples. As Sargon II noted, “I smashed all enemy lands like pots, and cast bonds upon the four regions (of the earth).” Fortunately, the Neo-Assyrian period is one of the most textually rich in the ancient world, so we can draw on a wealth of royal records to reconstruct the imperial contests and battles that occurred throughout the Near East.
The Assyrians were particularly concerned about their unstable borders at the north, which coincide with southeast Turkey. That area was filled with a series of relatively small kingdoms that constituted a buffer zone effectively dividing Assyrian territory from that of Phrygia and Urartu. Whoever controlled the region had access to valuable natural resources such as silver, alabaster, and wood, as well as the best travel routes through the Taurus Mountains from Syria into Asia Minor. Not surprisingly, both Urartu and Phrygia were continually interacting both diplomatically and militarily with the buffer states in this area.

Phrygian involvement in Assyrian territories became much more aggressive during the reigns of the Assyrian Sargon II (721–705 BCE) and his contemporary, Midas. Urartu reemerged as a threat and Sargon focused on preventing an alliance between the two kingdoms. With the rise of Phrygia and Urartu, the peripheral areas could play the imperial powers against one another.

In 710/709 BCE, Midas unexpectedly sought a truce with Assyria, which is recorded in a letter from Sargon to his governor of Que, near modern Adana:

“A messenger [of] Midas the Phrygian has come to me...this is extremely good! His ambassador offered submission and brought me tribute and gifts. My gods Aššur, Śamaš, Bel, and Nabû have now taken action, and without a battle or anything, the Phrygian has given us his word and become our ally!...You will press [my enemies] from one side, and the Phrygian from the other side, so that (in no time) you will snap your belt on them.” As Sargon notes, such alliances regularly prompted the exchange of gifts between kings, and the bronze *situlae* (wine buckets) with ram and lion head decoration found in Tumulus MM may represent earlier gifts to Phrygia from Assyria.

A LYDIAN VIEW OF THE PHRYGIANS
Nearly 100 years after Sargon II wrote his self-congratulatory letter, the Assyrian Empire had been destroyed and the Lydians had succeeded the Phrygians as the dominant power in western-central Anatolia. The Lydian Empire extended from the Aegean coast of Asia Minor to the Halys River (now the Kızılırmak) in the east, bringing much of the former Phrygian kingdom within their sphere of control. Even though Phrygia’s political power began to wane during the 7th century BCE, many aspects of Phrygian
cultural flourish among the Lydians, for whom the Phrygians served as a venerable model.

Our best evidence comes from tombs, where the Lydians’ modeling of Phrygian antecedents is the most clear. Little is known of Lydian burial customs before the 6th century, but King Alyattes introduced the tumulus form of burial to Lydia during the 560s BCE. It is clear that Alyattes was not only inspired by the tumuli of Gordion, but saw himself in direct competition with them, or more specifically with the great king, probably Gordios, who was laid to rest in the so-called Midas Mound. Thus, Alyattes set about constructing for himself the largest tumulus in Asia Minor: 1,120 m (almost 3,700 feet) in circumference, 360 m (almost 1,200 feet) in diameter, and 69 m (over 200 feet) high. In doing so, Alyattes made a direct statement of his place in the tradition of Anatolian kingship, as did his son Croesus, who would have completed the tumulus.

The Lydian royals did not adopt the tumulus without adapting it to their own architectural traditions. Rather than constructing a wooden tomb chamber, Alyattes was something of an innovator and constructed his out of stone ashlar masonry, the oldest ashlar masonry structure yet found in Lydia. This tradition of stone working is most closely associated with the East Greek cities of the Aegean coast and attests to the Lydians’ multi-faceted tastes.

It is from the Greek sources that we know of other adoptions of Phrygian customs by the Lydian kings.

The Pactolus River (modern Sart Çayı) contained gold in antiquity, and was responsible for the great wealth of Lydia. Courtesy of the Holy Lands Photo Project. Photo by Görkem Köseh.
Herodotus tells us (I.14) that Gyges and Croesus made wealthy dedications at the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi and were the first of the “barbarians” to do so after Midas himself. From these dedications, the names of Gyges and Croesus became synonymous among the Greeks with wealth and luxury, and the phrase “rich as Croesus” survives today.

The Greeks were not blind to the Lydians’ use of Phrygian models, and the myth of Midas is telling in this regard. To rid himself of his golden touch (see page 53 in this issue), Midas was commanded to bathe in the river Pactolus, which flows west of Sardis, the Lydian capital. Thus, his golden power was transferred to the river, which then ran with gold. In other words, this “golden river” that was the source of Lydia’s wealth had been given to them by Midas, and myth was therefore used as a device to explain the transfer of power from Phrygia to Lydia.

Phrygian influence was not limited to the upper echelons of Lydian society. To a Lydian visitor, the settlement of Gordion in the 6th century BCE would have seemed comfortably familiar, complete as it was with a fortified citadel and a distant and impressive cemetery filled with tumuli, just like Sardis. A Lydian or Phrygian visitor to either site could also have worshiped the great mother goddess, Matar, as she was known in Phrygia, or Kuwava, as she was known in Lydia, with equal ease.

The process of interaction and hybridization that began under Gyges and Alyartes would continue in the following centuries, even after Persia’s conquest of Lydia, and we have now begun to question our distinctions of “Phrygian” and “Lydian,” embracing instead the formulation of a greater Anatolian tradition that encompassed both cultures.

PERSIAN GORDION

In the mid-6th century BCE, when King Croesus of Lydia stood on the verge of war with Cyrus, the king of the growing Persian Empire, he consulted the oracle at Delphi. After learning that if he went to war he would destroy a great kingdom, Croesus confidently attacked. Once he fled back to Sardis to mount his disastrous last stand against the Persians, Croesus recognized the irony
of the ambiguous oracle: the kingdom Croesus had destroyed was his own.

Regardless of the truth of the tale of Croesus and the oracle, it certainly encapsulates the unexpected turn of events in which Cyrus the Great swiftly annexed Anatolia into the rapidly expanding Persian Empire in 546 BCE. The large concentration of Lydian pottery found on Gordion’s Küçük Höyük (“little mound”) suggests that the Lydians maintained a garrison along Gordion’s outer fortification wall as a strategic stronghold. The Persians captured Gordion by building an earthen siege ramp against this garrison, probably pushing a siege tower up the ramp from which they launched arrows and firebrands. The Persians had perfected this Assyrian siege technique and would use it to conquer other cities, such as Paphos on Cyprus. It was due to this type of warfare that the Phrygians had built the massive gate and walls of Gordion centuries earlier, but this time, they were not enough.

The Persians governed their expansive territories, which stretched from Central Asia to Egypt and the edge.
of Europe, through a complex administrative network. Large provinces—called *satrapies*—were ruled from regional capitals connected by an extensive overland communication network; Gordion appears to have been situated on its main artery, the “Royal Road.” Based on calculations by Henry Colburn, if the Persian postal relay was as fast as the Pony Express, the Persian King in Susa (Iran) could have sent a message to Gordion in ten days.

Herodotus (5.52) writes that the Persian King maintained way stations with elaborate guesthouses along the Royal Road, with 20 in Lydia and Phrygia alone. One of these may have been Gordion, since a delegation of Athenian ambassadors resided at Gordion for several months while the Persians negotiated a separate alliance with the Spartans in 407 BCE (Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.1). The stylish welcome guests once enjoyed may still be seen today: two beautiful marble column bases in high Persian style would have reminded any of Gordion’s Persian visitors of the very similar ones in Cyrus’ royal capital at Pasargadae, in southwestern Iran. The Mosaic Building, a new elaborately decorated architectural complex on Gordion’s citadel, included a room with a stepped podium that might have served as a throne base for holding court on such occasions.

The inhabitants of Gordion maintained their architectural traditions on a smaller scale and in unique ways. A small subterranean room, which may have served as a clandestine ritual dining space, was covered in intricate wall paintings in the “Greco-Persian” style of west-central Anatolia. This “Painted House” had a large frieze containing 50 figures, mainly barefoot women clad in elaborate jewelry and headdresses, playing lyres, carrying vessels and beer-straws, and drinking from spouted jugs. Fragments of this wall painting were found in tiny pieces in the 1950s, but were reconstructed in watercolors with a touch of Art Deco style by the great archaeological illustrator Piet de Jong (see page 13 in this issue). The most unusual find from the Painted House was a wall mosaic made of more than 1,000 tiny ceramic pegs. Although they have a formal similarity to Mesopotamian clay and stone cone wall decorations, they seem to be a quirky blend of the Phrygian mosaic tradition and traditional Phrygian pottery techniques.

Ostensibly because the Athenians had burned the temple of Cybele at Sardis, the Persians and the Greeks fought back and forth for almost two centuries, but in the second half of the 5th century...
the Athenians and Spartans turned their attention to fighting each other. At the beginning of the 4th century, the Spartans renewed war against Persia, sending King Agesilaos on an unsuccessful three-year mission to liberate the cities of Asia Minor. In 395 BCE, Agesilaos tried to capture Gordion, but gave up after six days—probably because he had no siege engines.

Two generations later, Alexander the Great would renew the war against Persia with a better-equipped force and a better strategic plan: he conquered the Persian Empire satrapy by satrapy, eventually stopping at Gordion to regroup his army. It may have been in the colonnaded court of the Mosaic Building, which was the only major edifice still standing on Gordion’s citadel, that Alexander cut the Gordian Knot in 333 BCE and symbolically inherited the kingdom of Midas—or at least what was left of it.

GREEKS AND PHRYGIANS

Much of what we know about the Phrygians—including their name—comes from Greek accounts. The Phrygians were often associated with the mythical Trojans of the *Iliad*, and a popular poem was the epitaph Homer had supposedly written for King Midas. While the Greeks’ conception of the Phrygians often verged on the legendary and mythical, physical proof of their history as a strong and skilled Anatolian people could have been found scattered throughout Greece itself, preserved among the offerings made to the gods at sanctuaries. Herodotus (I.14) tells us of a throne sent to Delphi by King Midas, which took pride of place not only for its intricacy and magnificence, but also for being the first
dedication by a “barbarian” at the famous sanctuary of Apollo.

Other Phrygian objects are known from sanctuaries beyond Delphi, all of them bronzes: belt buckles, bowls, and fibulae (garment pins). It is noteworthy that the principal sanctuaries where they appear are limited to Delphi, Olympia, the Heraion of Argos, Perachora, and the Heraion of Samos. The rarity of these objects in Greece must have enhanced their value as dedications and heightened Phrygia’s esteem as a kingdom on the international stage.

The Greeks often incorporated into their mythology and artwork what they knew about Phrygia’s former power. Perhaps the most common scenarios are those related to the story of King Midas and the capture of the satyr Silenus by Phrygian hunters. A beautiful stamnos (broad-shouldered, round vessel with two handles), now in the British Museum, shows Silenus standing before King Midas, his hands bound behind his back. Emerging from Midas’ head are two prominent donkey ears. Interestingly, it is only during the mid-5th century BCE that Midas begins to appear in vase painting with this attribute.

Midas had acquired this curious feature after acting as judge at the musical contest between Pan and Apollo, in which he foolishly awarded the prize to Pan. Angered that any human ears could be so stupid, Apollo promptly gave Midas the ears of an ass as a symbol of his bad taste. In his vivid description of the tale, Ovid relates how Midas tried to conceal his shame beneath his Phrygian cap. Only his barber knew the secret, and was sworn to silence. This eventually became too much for the poor man to bear, and he went to a deserted field, dug a hole, and whispered “Midas has ass’s ears” into the ground. The reeds echoed back his words, and soon the whole world knew the story.

Although widely depicted on vase painting throughout the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, the manner of representing Midas and the Phrygians underwent an important change in the first half of the 5th century. Earlier examples tend to show Phrygians in Greek costume, and Midas with human ears. Gradually, however, these figures begin to look more exotic, and vase painters employ a confusing blend of “Eastern” garments (not specifically Phrygian) in their depictions. Paradoxically perhaps, this is precisely the period in which the number of Phrygians in Athens grew rapidly. It may be that as myths of Midas gained popularity, so too did the desire to portray him and his entourage as exotic foreigners inhabiting a world very different from the noisy streets of Classical Athens.

A potter in Athens, who produced some of the best red-figure vases, signed them “Brygos epoiesen,” which probably means “the Phrygian made this.” We cannot know if the potter was a slave, but a study of slave names indicates that about 30% of the slave population of Classical Athens—by far the largest ethnic group—was Phrygian. Some worked for a family or an individual in a domestic context while others labored in large gangs mining silver to enrich the state treasury. There were so many Phrygians living in areas around Athens by the end of the 5th century BCE that there was even a district called “Phrygia.”

An inscription found in Hellespontine Phrygia, now northwestern Turkey, gives us a glimpse of the
pernicious activities that sent so many Phrygians to Greece. The stone in question (6th century BCE) comes from Kyzikos, a Greek port city that honored a wealthy Phrygian man named Manes, a grandson of another Phrygian named Aesop. Nearly all of his taxes were cancelled except those for using Kyzikos’ port and selling horses and slaves; consequently, it looks as if Manes may have made his fortune by selling other Phrygians overseas. Around the time of Manes, tales were spreading throughout Greece of a Phrygian slave named Aesop, probably the same person mentioned above, who had won his freedom and folk-hero status by telling the fables many children hear today.

THE SCYTHIANS AND CIMMERIANS
Beginning in the 8th century BCE, nomadic groups broadly identified as Scythians dominated the Eurasian steppe. They likely spoke Iranian dialects—but did not have a writing system—and undertook large-scale migrations only in the event of war or environmental change. They were expert horsemen and were described by ancient historians as warlike, which has strongly influenced interpretations of their culture. The visual record they left behind, however, is striking. Especially noteworthy is their depiction of fantastic animals on faceted gold plaques that decorated their garments and horses, all of which would have glistened in the sunlight, as one can see from the Maikop shroud in the Gordion exhibition.

Following the Greek and Akkadian texts, scholars have traditionally distinguished between the Scythians and another nomadic group called the Cimmerians, but both groups were living north and south of the Caucasus mountains by the 7th century BCE, and it is impossible to distinguish between them in the archaeological record.

The earliest written indication of the Cimmerians occurs in Assyrian records dating to the late 8th century BCE (the reign of Sargon II), which discuss the Cimmerians’ confrontation with the Urartian kingdom in what is now Armenia. The ancient sources provide even more evidence for their activities during the 7th century BCE, when they swept through Asia Minor and engaged in a series of conflicts with the Assyrians, Urartians, Phrygians, and Lydians, reportedly sacking the Lydian capital of Sardis and causing the death of King Gyges. Strabo, writing during the Early Roman Empire, reported that Midas had committed suicide in a state of depression following a Cimmerian invasion of his kingdom; Penn excavator Rodney Young sought to link Gordion’s extensive destruction level to that invasion. Such a theory must be abandoned, however, in the wake of the re-dating of the destruction level to a period 100 years earlier. No evidence exists for Cimmerian damage to the site.

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Gold necklace from Gordion Tumulus A (ca. 540–520 BCE). More than 100 gold beads and pendants were recovered from this tomb, including spherical and quatrefoil beads, and acorn and fruit/nut pendants. Seventy-six of them are shown here, re-strung as a single necklace. For more on Tumulus A, see page 56. Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara.