

Phrygian Religion and Cult Practice

Phrygian cult practice was an important element of Phrygian culture. As immigrants from southeastern Europe during the early first millennium BCE, the Phrygians developed a distinctive system of cult practice and sacred monuments in Anatolia that continued in use long after Phrygia had lost its political importance. Certainly Phrygian cult made a strong impression on the Greeks and Romans, who adopted the Phrygian Mother goddess, or Cybele, as they called her, into their pantheon. For the modern investigator, however, Phrygian cult is one of the most difficult aspects of Phrygian society to examine. Only a handful of Greek literary texts comment on Phrygian cult practices and the few surviving cult inscriptions in the Phrygian language are not fully understood. The principal source of information is furnished by archaeological sites and monuments that are difficult to date and even more difficult to interpret. The cult monuments of Phrygia, however, provide a striking if enigmatic picture of religious practice, and some of them, including the large carved façade at Midas City and the rock relief known as Arslankaya, are among the most impressive remains from ancient Anatolia.

The two major sources of information on Phrygian cult practice are textual and archaeological data. Textual data include the observations of Phrygian cult activities made by Greek authors; these can be useful, although they must be read with caution, as they preserve the opinions of people who did not fully understand Phrygian ritual practices. In addition, several Paleo-Phrygian inscriptions are found on cult monuments. While the Phrygian language has never been fully deciphered, often enough of the text can be read to provide valuable information such as the name of the deity or the dedicator. The most abundant source of information is the archaeological data furnished by the cult centers, including cult monuments, idols, and images of

a deity. For this reason archaeological evidence will provide the framework for this discussion, with textual sources used as a supplement as relevant. The discussion will focus primarily on the ninth through sixth centuries BCE, the Early and Middle Phrygian periods when Phrygian culture was dominant in central Anatolia, with some observations on the Later Phrygian and Hellenistic eras and on survivals of Phrygian cult during the Roman era.¹

Phrygian cult centers

Phrygian cult centers are found in two distinct types of settings, in urban centers and in more remote, mountainous areas that are often far from urban settlements. A rich series of monuments from Gordion, Ankara, Boğazköy, and Kerkenes Dağ provide insight into urban cult activities; these include inscriptions, semi-iconic idols, reliefs imitating architectural facades, and anthropomorphic images of a deity or other divine figure. Gordion, the most completely investigated Phrygian settlement to date, may serve as an example. The cult of the Phrygian Mother goddess, or Matar, is especially prominent. The goddess is regularly represented as a mature female who wears a long gown and an elaborate high headdress and veil. Examples include a relief in which the goddess appears as if standing in a doorway set into the short end of a building with a gabled roof surmounted by curved akroteria. These replicate features of actual Phrygian buildings: the rectangular building with a central doorway in one short side recalls the plan of the Phrygian megaron, wooden beams were extensively used in local architecture, and actual examples of curved stone akroteria have been found at Gordion. The goddess is shown standing with a bird of prey in one hand and a drinking bowl in the other. Additional images of Matar holding a bird of prey confirm the importance of this divine attribute, as do the large number of small stone birds, probably votive offerings. Other Gordion cult images include the head of a male figure, found near a city gate (Young 1968, pl. 72, fig. 10), small male and female

figures, perhaps divine attendants, and more than two dozen examples of semi-iconic idols. The idols depict schematic humanoid figures; most of them are anonymous, but some are personalized with details such as facial features, clothing, and anatomical indications of gender, both male and female. The image of the goddess in the architectural frame was found outside the citadel walls, while other images were found in household contexts or were discarded. Their chronological range spans the Middle and Late Phrygian period. Further insight into cult activity comes from a set of paintings depicting a cult ceremony; these decorated the walls of an underground chamber set in between two buildings of the Middle Phrygian level (Mellink 1980).

At Boğazköy only a small section of the Phrygian era settlement has been investigated, but one discovery, an Early Phrygian shrine adjacent to the earlier Hittite temple of the sky god, hints at some continuity of cult awareness, if not practice (Beran 1963). Boğazköy has also yielded one of the most impressive images of the Phrygian Mother. The image, depicting the deity flanked by two youthful figures, one playing the double pipes and the other a lyre, was set into a niche near a city gate, giving the impression of a figure standing in an architectural façade similar to the Gordion relief. At Boğazköy, as at Gordion, a number of semi-iconic idols have been found in household contexts. Little is known of the Phrygian levels at Ankara, but two important reliefs depicting the Phrygian Mother goddess standing in an architectural frame were found here; in one of these the deity holds a bird of prey and a drinking vessel, and in another she is attended by a guardian genius figure. The two reliefs of the deity, along with several reliefs depicting animals and sphinxes, were probably set up near burial tumuli that ringed Phrygian Ankara and date from the Middle Phrygian period. The attributes of the Gordion, Boğazköy, and Ankara Matar images may refer to ritual activities, such as music and the consumption of food and/or drink, or to the deity's function of power and protection.

Valuable information on Phrygian cult has been recovered from Kerkenes Dağ; here a large semi-iconic idol, similar to those from Gordion and Boğazköy, was set up in a niche within one of the main city gates, and another aniconic idol was placed near the gate. Especially noteworthy is a substantial open-air platform on a major street inside the city gate, on which was placed a nearly life-size statue of a standing male figure. This was probably a cult image, although the figure's identity is uncertain. This monument was destroyed along with the rest of the Kerkenes Dağ settlement in the mid-sixth century BCE.

Many more cult monuments are found in rural settings, often on high places that offer broad views of the surrounding terrain, suggesting that such high places had special meaning in Phrygian cult tradition. Typical features found in rural cult settings include step monuments, semi-iconic idols, cult facades and niches, inscriptions, and anthropomorphic images. Often groups of step monuments and idols are clustered together; examples include Dümrek, near Gordion; Findık, near Kütahya; the Phrygian Highlands and the Köhnus Valley, both between Afyon and Eskişehir; and the Pessinus-Sivrihisar region. On step monuments a series of four to six steps were carved into live rock, surmounted by a flat platform that may have been a seat. On some, the back of the seat has a semi-circular disc, reminiscent of the head on the semi-iconic idol; these may indicate a deity. Semi-iconic idols, some alone, some in groups of two or three, were carved into the natural rock at Midas City and other sites in the Phrygian Highlands. Their identity is uncertain; they could have represented divinities or worshippers.

Other distinctive types of Phrygian cult monument are the niche, the façade, and the shaft monument, often cut into vertical rock faces of cliffs. Facades normally consist of a smoothed rectangular face, often with carved details that imitate the appearance of an architectural structure similar to those depicted on cult reliefs from Gordion and Ankara. Niches comprise a

recess into the vertical face of the stone; some were placed in the centers of facades, while others stand alone or have only the outline of an architectural façade surrounding them. The shaft monuments consist of deep vertical spaces cut into the natural rock; there are only five known examples, each placed behind a carved architectural façade. Their function remains uncertain; they may have been used as oracles or to deposit offerings. (S B-E 1998)

The majority of the architectural facades and niches are found in Midas City and the surrounding region or in the Köhnus Valley, in the Phrygian Highlands. Midas City is the richest site; there are six carved facades on the citadel, or kale, of Midas City, and two others nearby. These include the main monument at Midas City, which at over sixteen meters in height is the largest known example of a Phrygian façade, and the elaborate façade known as the Areyastin Monument. Another large façade, Delikitaş, thirteen and a half meters in height, lies to the west of Kütahya. In some facades, including the Highland facades known as Arslankaya, Büyük Kapıkaya, Küçük Kapıkaya, and Kumca Boğaz Kapıkaya (Haspels 1971:87-90), and another at Kuzören near Pessinus (Tüfekçi Sivas 2003), the image of the Phrygian goddess Matar, is present. Her identity is confirmed by Paleo-Phrygian inscriptions containing the word *Matar*, often with an epithet. In some cases the texts are inscribed on the front of a façade, as at the Areyastin Monument, while others were scratched as graffiti within the niche of the main façade, as at Midas City. One epithet, *Kybeleia*, found in an inscription in Bithynia and another in the Köhnus Valley (Brixhe and Lejeune 1984:B-01, W-04), means “mountain” in the Phrygian language, and forms the source of the goddess’s Greek and Roman name, Cybele (Roller 1999:66-69). This was not the only Phrygian epithet, though, since others are attested on the Areyastin Monument (Brixhe and Lejeune 1984:W-01a, W-01b). As in the urban images, the deity is shown as a mature female wearing a long gown, high headdress, and veil. The deity’s

attributes, however, are different. The goddess on the Arslankaya relief is flanked by two huge lions that surely refer to the deity's function of power and protection. The deity in the Büyük Kapıkaya monument also had flanking attributes, although these are no longer preserved.

As in the urban reliefs, the architectural frame in which the goddess stands is carefully detailed, depicting the timbers that formed the frame of the "building", a curved akroterion above the roof gable, and the niche itself, placed as if to signify the door of a building. On the Arslankaya façade the identification of the niche with a door is made specific by the representation of the hinges and double leaves of an open door. Other facades with niches are now empty, but are likely to be spaces into which a portable image of a deity could be set, brought there on the occasion of special festivals. In the main façade at Midas City, cuttings on the floor and the ceiling of the niche show how an image could have been supported.

On many of the reliefs, both those with and those lacking an image of the deity, the carved façade was decorated with a rich series of complex patterns that depict mazes built around a series of interlocking cross and square patterns. Examples include the principal Midas City façade, and the Arslankaya, Büyük Kapıkaya, and Maltaş monuments (Haspels 1971:figs. 8, 189, 183, 157). A few architectural façades have a different type of carved ornament, including the Areyastin and Bahşeyiş Monuments; here the facade was decorated with a pattern of running lozenges or four lozenges in a square.

The chronology of the extra-urban monuments is difficult to determine, since contextual material often limited. At Dümrek, a site with several step monuments but no facades or anthropomorphic images, pottery analysis shows that the main period of use was during the Early and Middle Phrygian periods. At Midas City, scattered finds of pottery and fibulae show that the site was in use from at least the eighth century BCE, while the settlement on the top of

the kale was occupied during the Later Phrygian period. In the case of the decorated facades, the patterns may furnish an indication of date. On facades with complex cross and square patterns, such as Midas City, Arslankaya, Büyük Kapıkaya, and Maltaş, there is a close correlation between the geometric patterns of the façades and the patterns on the wooden serving stands from the burial tumuli P and MM in Gordion, which were also decorated with a similar set of cross and square patterns (Young 1981:fig. 33, 104; Simpson 2010). Gordion Tumulus MM has been dated by dendrochronological analysis to ca. 740 BC, while Tumulus P is slightly later, ca. 700 BCE. This suggests that the carved facades with the complex geometric patterns should fall in the range of the later eighth through early seventh centuries BCE. The facades on the Areyastin and Bahşeyiş Monuments, in contrast, are decorated with designs that closely replicate architectural terracottas. Architectural terracottas with this type of pattern first appear in Phrygia in the sixth century BCE, suggesting a similar date for these latter two facades. Two further points of chronology can be noted: the main façade on the Midas Monument is dedicated to Midas, king and leader of the people (Brixhe and Lejeune 1984, M-01), and it is attractive to interpret this as a dedication to the best known Phrygian ruler, Midas, who ruled during the later eighth and early seventh century BCE, thus placing this monument after his death in 696 (? S B-E 2008). The second point derives from the incomplete state of the Areyastin Monument; this was clearly intended to be an imposing monument, but was left unfinished with only a small niche in the center. Such abrupt abandonment could well coincide with the conquest of Phrygia by the Achaemenian Persians in the mid-sixth century BCE. In sum, step altars and disks first appear during the Early Phrygian period, while the facades, shafts, and niches may appear somewhat later, spanning somewhat over a century, from the later eighth or early seventh

centuries through mid-sixth century BCE. After this few new monuments were built, but cult activity at many sites continued into the Late Phrygian period.

The function of the cult monuments and the Phrygian pantheon

The large number of Phrygian cult monuments, idols, and images offer us much information on cult practice, but few signposts with which to interpret it. This discussion will start with two observable characteristics of Phrygian cult, the range of cult objects and their settings, and the limited use of anthropomorphic figures. I will analyze each of these in turn and attempt to build a synthesis on this analysis.

The settings of Phrygian cult material furnish one of the best guides to their function. In urban centers, cult installations include anthropomorphic images that were often set up near a city gate or entrance to the elite quarter. This is certain in the case of Boğazköy and Kerkenes Dağ and likely for the Gordion image found outside the city but near the walls. This suggests that a key function of a deity was to protect the city's defenses, and by extension, the city itself. In the case of Boğazköy and Gordion divine protection was ascribed to Matar, the Mother goddess. The cult image found at Kerkenes Dağ is almost assuredly male and his identity is not known; the figure could be a male divinity or a figure conceptualized as a hero or ancestor. There is some reason to support the latter interpretation, as will be discussed below.

Another part of the cult activity documented in urban settings is the frequent use of small figures, both anthropomorphic and semi-iconic. Several small cult figures, both male and female, were found at Gordion scattered throughout the city in the Middle and Late Phrygian levels. Some, such as an alabaster male who holds attributes similar to those held by the goddess Matar and an ivory female with a costume similar to that of Matar, are probably intended to represent divine attendants or worshippers of Matar. The male head found in Gordion near a city

gate may represent a deity or heroized ancestor, similar to the image from Kerkenes Dağ. Other examples of small anthropomorphic figures were recovered from household contexts or were deliberately buried. The semi-iconic idols are also likely to be connected with household or personal cult; they could represent major divinities, minor cult figures or household gods, or the worshippers. Most were recovered from household debris, although one, from Boğazköy (Naumann 1983, pl. 9e), was set up on a base with animal reliefs in a household shrine, and another, at Kerkenes Dağ, was set into the courtyard of a city gate (Draycott and Summers 2008).

The rural settings of Phrygian cult monuments are more varied. Rural cult installations are often found in high places, along mountain passes or strategic transportation routes, or on settings that offer a commanding view of the surrounding countryside, implying that here too the protective function of the deity or deities was paramount. Many of these rural settings are far from settled communities, suggesting that the monuments could have been designed to mark the boundaries of territory controlled by a community or designed to protect access routes to the community. Some, especially those where the cult installations are found in groups, could have been places of pilgrimage. In some cases we can suggest a connection between a rural shrine and a Phrygian community: Dümrek, for example, was probably visited primarily by people from Gordion, while sites in the Phrygian Highlands, lying roughly equidistant between Afyon and Eskişehir, may have served as cult centers for the Phrygian predecessors of those communities. Other cult places, especially the individual examples of a step altar such as the single altar at Tekören, north of Pessinus, could represent a votive act by an individual or small community.

The nature of the rituals at the rural cult installations and the deity or deities worshipped there remains obscure. In many of the step monuments and niches, the object of the cult is not indicated at all. Semi-iconic idols, carved into the natural rock or placed at the top of a step altar, surely represent the object of cult activity, but their identity is unknown, and the varied appearances of the semi-iconic idols from Gordion warns us against assuming that all semi-iconic idols represent the same figure. The one anthropomorphic deity present in rural settings is the Phrygian Mother goddess, or *Matar*, the same deity depicted in representations from Gordion, Ankara, and Boğazköy (Roller 1999:64-115). In the rural reliefs the goddess *Matar* is regularly depicted in an architectural frame resembling a rectangular building, indicating that the architectural frame was a key part of the goddess's identity in rural settings as well as urban settings. While some have suggested that the architectural façade alludes to a temple of the deity, no example of a Phrygian temple is known, and we suggest that the façade symbolized the palace of the Phrygian ruler. By depicting the deity in the house of the ruler, the façades advertise the goddess *Matar* as a deity who protects the ruler and, by extension, the Phrygian state. A further indication of this is the inscription over the main façade at Midas City. The monument was dedicated by Ates, a name associated with Phrygian royalty, to Midas, the leader and ruler of the people (Brixhe and Lejeune 1984:M-01a). Thus in this, the largest and most impressive Phrygian cult monument, the façade was dedicated to a prominent Phrygian ruler (perhaps recently deceased), apparently as the partner of the Mother goddess. The importance of the ruler in Phrygian cult is further emphasized by the life-size statue of a standing male figure found near the main entrance to the city at Kerkenes Dağ, perhaps a cult monument for a heroized ruler or ancestor whose presence protected the city (Draycott and Summers 2008:58-60). Taken together, this suggests that the cult of the Mother was important religious rite for the protection

of Phrygian territory and Phrygian ruling power, and that in at least some of the Matar shrines, the heroized ruler shared in this ritual.

Other cult monuments in rural settings, though, probably reflect the worship of other deities. The prevalence of step monuments on high places suggests that a sky deity, probably male, was a key element of the Phrygian pantheon also. A citation from Arrian confirms this (Arrian FGrHist 156 F 22, cf. also Diodoros 3.58.4), stating that the Phrygians addressed the local Zeus, a sky god, as Attis or Baba. Further confirmation can be found in the great prevalence of dedications to Zeus during the Roman era (Drew-Bear and Naour 1990); this is likely to be a Hellenized form of an older Phrygian sky god. We may suggest that the names Ata or Baba are another form of the word “Father”, and this sky god, worshipped on high places, was a father god to the Phrygians, the male counterpart of the goddess Matar (Berndt-Ersöz 2004). Several examples of a closely linked pair of semi-iconic idols are known, including two sets of dual idols on a rock-cut step altar at Midas City, and two free-standing reliefs with a pair of idols from the Ankara region. These too are likely to represent a pair of closely linked deities, and the pair of father and mother deities makes an attractive identification. We should also remember that the semi-iconic idols from Gordion represent a range of figures, with both genders and a variety of hair styles and costumes and other marks of identification represented; these suggest that the Phrygian pantheon comprised a range of deities, young and old, male and female, clothed and unclothed. Some of these could be household gods or deities associated with specific locations whose names we will probably never know.

This leads us to two difficult questions about Phrygian cult practice: why are so many cult features, both the rock-cut installations and the aniconic and semi-iconic idols, anonymous; and conversely, why is the Phrygian goddess Matar the only Phrygian deity represented in

anthropomorphic form? Images of the Mother goddess and cult monuments connected with her have received most of the attention, largely because these are among the few Phrygian monuments we can identify and also because of the impact of the Mother goddess cult on Greek and Roman cult. Yet when we consider the range of evidence for Phrygian cult practice, we can see that objects and sites securely linked to Phrygian Matar form a minority of Phrygian cult installations. The number of step altars, facades, niches, and anonymous idols far exceeds the number of cult installations securely connected with Matar, and it would be unsound to assume that every cult feature must belong to Matar simply because it is unidentified.

Why would the Phrygians want so many aspects of their cult activity to remain anonymous? To be sure, part of the anonymity must stem from our ignorance about Phrygian cult practices, the low survival rate of Phrygian texts, and our inability to understand the Phrygian language. Yet it seems likely that part of this appearance of obscurity was intentional. Many important Phrygian shrines and sanctuaries are located in out of the way places that are not close to major settlements or transportation routes, and thus would not have been obvious to individuals and groups outside of Phrygia. They require special intent to reach them, suggesting that they were intended to be accessible only to a group of initiates. The high frequency of semi-iconic idols suggests the same; the identity of such idols was probably clear to the people who used them, but would have been anonymous to outsiders unfamiliar with the Phrygian pantheon and Phrygian ritual practices. Taken together, this material suggests intent to keep Phrygian cult practices limited to members of their group and to exclude outsiders.

This leads to the second question of why the cult of Matar does not follow this pattern. Why was this deity represented in anthropomorphic form and why her was image placed in conspicuous settings, such as a city gate? The answer to this may lie in the suggestion presented

above, that the goddess Matar enjoyed a close connection with the Phrygian ruling elite. The rulers of Phrygia may have wished to stress the close relationship they enjoyed with the deity and thereby enhance the legitimacy of their rule. Because the ruling elite would have been the most conspicuous element of Phrygian society, the cult of Matar would have been prominent enough to attract the attention of their Greek neighbors, who would in any case have been more receptive to the cult of an anthropomorphic deity. It is possible that the cult of Matar was especially supported by the Phrygian king Midas and that he may have been the individual who introduced the anthropomorphic image of the deity (Mellink 1983, Berndt-Ersöz 2006:209-210); this is further implied by the main façade of the Midas monument, dedicated to both Midas and Matar.² The theory cannot be proven, but it offers an attractive explanation for the change in the orientation of Phrygian official cult during the Middle Phrygian period.

Phrygian Cult in the Hellenistic and Roman eras

Traditional Phrygian cult centers continued after Phrygian territory came under Greek and then Roman control. An example is furnished by a small sanctuary at Midas City to the Phrygian Mother, now addressed as Agdistis, used during the Later Phrygian and Hellenistic periods. Hellenistic Phrygian cult monuments strongly reflect Greek influence; Hellenized depictions of the Mother goddess and her attendants are known from Gordion (Roller 1991), and a major sanctuary to the goddess was built at Pessinus with financial support from the kings of Pergamon (Strabo 12.5.3). During the Roman era, there was another revival of the cult of Agdistis near an Old Phrygian altar at Midas City (Haspels 1971, 188, 199-200), but the deity most frequently attested in Phrygia during the Roman era is Zeus, accompanied by a large number of local epithets (Haspels 1971, 200-201; Drew-Bear and Naour 1990). Some dedications to Zeus focus on his function as a sky god, while others stress his protection of

agriculture and fertility, an appropriate connection in a region that was now almost entirely rural. One noteworthy feature of Roman Phrygia is the revival of texts in the Phrygian language. Most Neo-Phrygian texts record the wish for protection of a grave, but some preserve dedications to Phrygian deities, demonstrating the persistence and long life of traditional Phrygian cult practices (Brixhe, Lubotsky).

Notes

¹ This discussion follows the chronological scheme of Voigt 2005, 27, Table 3-1: Early Phrygian, ca. 950-800 BC; Middle Phrygian, ca. 800-540 BC; Late Phrygian ca. 540-330 BC.

² Note also references in Greek texts commenting on the close relationship between the Phrygian king Midas and the Mother goddess (Diodoros 3. 59. 8; Arnobius, Ad. Nat. 2. 73; 5. 7; Plutarch, Caesar 9. 3; Hyginus, Fabulae 274; Pseudo-Hesiod, fr. 251 [Rzach]).