

Anatolian Origins of the Gordian Knot Legend

Brendan Burke

THE LEGEND of the Gordian knot is preserved in only five Greek and Roman sources: Arrian (*Anab.* 2.3.1–8), Curtius (3.1.11–18), Plutarch (*Alex.* 18.1–2), Justin (*Epit.* 11.7.3–16), and Marsyas of Philippi (*FGrHist* 136 F 4). Several scholars have addressed the sources for the story and have focused on the varying accounts by Classical writers.¹ These investigations have centered on the legend of the knot in the context of Alexander the Great's visit to Gordion in spring 333, centuries after any historical King Midas of Phrygia.²

Rather than concentrating on the historiography of the legend of the Gordian knot, this paper examines Anatolian origins of the knot story and the possible connections between the name of the most famous Phrygian dynast, King Midas (or Mita, in Near Eastern sources), and a Hittite word, *mit(t)a-*, *miti-*, which often means red wool, twisted threads, or cords. This word appears in several Hittite texts and always in a ritual context.³ I argue that certain details of the story of the Gordian knot preserved by the historians of Alexander are holdovers from the

¹See, for example, E. Fredricksmeier, "Alexander, Midas, and the Oracle at Gordium," *CP* 56 (1961) 160–168; L. Roller, "Midas and the Gordian Knot," *ClassAnt* 3 (1984) 256–271.

²The Midas placed by the Greek chronographers in the late eighth/early seventh century is attested in the annals of Sargon II, active from 717 and 709 B.C.: D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* II (Chicago 1927) 4 nos. 8ff.

³H. Güterbock and H. Hoffner, ed., *The Hittite Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* III (Chicago 1989) 301–304 s.v. *mi(t)ta-*, *miti-*; J. Puhvel, *Hittite Etymological Dictionary* VI (Berlin forthcoming) s.v. *mit(t)a-*, *miti-*.

Late Bronze Age and demonstrate that the legend was of great antiquity and local to Anatolia. The evidence for Phrygian history is fragmentary and derives more from archaeology than textual sources; what follows is an attempt to weave together various strands of evidence into a suggestive hypothesis to postulate a scenario whereby various aspects of Anatolian legend endured through time down to the age of Alexander.

The legend of the knot is known to us as the "Gordian knot," yet most of the sources give a more prominent role to Midas than to his father Gordios. Arrian and Justin provide the most details about the source of the knot at Gordion. Both agree that first a divine sign of birds appeared to the lowly Gordios; later, a wagon was driven into an assembly of warring Phrygians who had been foretold that a man in a wagon would bring peace and become their king. This wagon, which held the knot, was dedicated as a thank offering, and whoever loosened the knot would rule all Asia.⁴ Justin is the only source to tell us that the man in the wagon, and first king of the Phrygians, was Gordios. Arrian records that Midas, riding in his father's cart, was made the first king. Curtius reiterates that the wagon belonged to Gordios but that the site of Gordion was the famous seat of Midas. Plutarch and Marsyas connect the story of the knot to Midas without reference to Gordios at all.

There are two versions of how Alexander undid the knot; Arrian, Justin, Plutarch, and Curtius imply that Alexander cut the knot rather than face a public embarrassment once it seemed likely he would be unable to loosen it. Arrian and Plutarch also cite an alternative version of the story, from Aristoboulos, relating that Alexander did not cut the knot but instead took

⁴Plutarch (*Alex.* 18.1) states that whoever unfastened the knot would be king of all the world; see S. I. Oost, "The Alexander Historians and 'Asia,'" in H. J. Dell, ed., *Ancient Macedonian Studies in Honor of Charles F. Edson* (Thessaloniki 1981) 265–282. Gordion was thought of by Ionian philosophers as the center of the world, which consequently gave it strategic importance: F. Pfister, "Gordion als Mittelpunkt der altionischen Erdkarte," *Philologus* 36 (1927) 359–363.

out the peg that fastened the knot in place.⁵ As a detail of the legend, cutting the knot illustrates that Alexander could only solve the problem by force; whereas unfastening the peg signaled his superior intelligence.⁶ Whatever method Alexander used, he unfastened the knot, and his success in fulfilling the oracle was divinely sanctioned that night by a sudden storm of thunder and lightning.

Justin, Curtius, and Marsyas (as reported in the scholia to Euripides) do not mention the material of which the Gordian knot was made, but Arrian and Plutarch both state that it was made from fibers of cornelian cherry (φλοιὸς κρανίας), often translated as “cornel bark.”⁷ It is more likely that the knot was made from the internal stringy bast fibers, which would be much better suited to fastening the yoke of a chariot or wagon, than from tree bark. Since the particular species is noted, cornelian cherry must be in reference to the color, which would have tinted the fibers of the knot red.

Hittite threads

All historians of Alexander stress that the knot is a local legend—of the “barbarians,” to quote Plutarch (18.1). If we look for any kind of forerunner in Anatolia to the story of the knot, one possible candidate is the Hittite myth known as “When the Storm God Thunders Frightfully.”⁸ This is a very old myth pre-

⁵Aristoboulos, an architect and engineer in Alexander’s campaign: *FGrHist* 139; H. Berve, *Das Alexanderreich* II (Munich 1926) 64–66 no. 121.

⁶The reference by Aristoboulos (F 7) is the earliest known mention of the Gordian knot and, according to Tarn, his version is most likely the historically correct one: W. W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great* II (Cambridge 1948) 262–265.

⁷Marsyas (*FGrHist* 136 F 4) states that the attachment of the yoke was with a vine-shoot. Curtius and Justin describe a plurality of knots. See A. B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian’s History of Alexander* I (Oxford 1980) 186.

⁸Also known as “The Moon that Fell from Heaven.” E. Laroche, *Catalogue des textes Hittites* (Paris 1971) 727; *Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi* (= *KUB*) XXVIII 3–5. For translation and bibliography, see A. Goetze, “Hittite Myth, Epics, and Legends,” in *ANET*² 120; H. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*², ed. G. Beckman (Atlanta 1998) 34–36, 94, no. 12.

served in bilingual texts, first in Hattic and then translated into Hittite. The story appears a millennium earlier than the first reference to the Gordian knot in Classical sources, and some of its features may have been preserved in Phrygian legend during the Iron Age. In the introduction to Version A, based on the Hittite translation, several elements recall the story of the Gordian knot. In Hoffner's translation:

[When the Storm God] thunders frightfully, (the Man of the Storm God) [takes] the following: two bulls, two [...], one copper [...], one copper knife, one copper axe, red, white, and black wool, of each a loop. When they have assembled all this, they [...] the Man [of the Storm God]. The Man of the Storm God takes fifty thick breads, [a selection (?)] of pegs: [...] pegs of silver and bronze, and a peg of cornel wood, and [he ...s them ...].

The specific reference to the storm god thundering recalls the prominent role of Zeus in the Classical sources for the Gordian knot. The wagon with the knot was dedicated to Zeus, and Arrian explicitly mentions that after Alexander undid the knot, thunder and lightning from the gods certified that the oracle was fulfilled.⁹ The role of an Indo-European storm god, however, is not by itself very remarkable. What is most striking about this Anatolian myth is the reference to cornel wood, the *κρᾶνία* that is recorded by Arrian and Plutarch as the material of the knot.

While there is no knot specified in the Hittite story, there is reference to loops of red, black, and white wool, to cutting implements, and to two bulls, which may have been yoked to a cart. The reference to pegs, including one of cornel wood and presumably red in color, recalls the version of the Gordian knot attributed to Aristoboulos, that a peg or dowel kept the knot in

⁹Arrian (2.3.8) states that after the thunder and lightning Alexander gave sacrifices in thanksgiving "to whatever gods had shown the signs." The lack of specificity for which gods were thanked is discussed by Fredricksmeier (*supra* n. 1) 165, who concludes that the plural is used to refer to more than one aspect of Zeus, as king and as god of thunderstorms. Bosworth (*supra* n. 7) 187–188 suggests that it is a plurality of divinities being honored.

place. The Hittite passage seems to have elements of both versions of the later knot story—the material for the knot itself, cornel wood, and the use of pegs made of this wood.

We find more suggestive evidence in Hittite ritual texts. In many fragmentary texts, the root *mit(t)a-*, *miti-* occurs in reference to threads, often red in color, which are sometimes twisted and used to fasten two things together.¹⁰ The nominal and adjectival root *mit(t)a-*, *miti-* is remarkably similar to the personal name Mita, or, as he is known from Greek sources, Midas.¹¹ The Hittite root, also written as the sumerogram SA₅, is found in many Hittite texts in reference to wool, cloth, and more rarely in describing ivory, hides, and food. Yet, as Güterbock and Hoffner summarize, “The key to the meaning of *mita-* is found in ritual passages involving the use of colored wool.”¹²

Hittite festival text *KUB X 91 ii.3–4* reads, 3 ^{TUG}*kureššar* 1 *BABBAR* 1 SA₅ 1 ZA.GÌN *anda taruppanzi*, translated as: “they braid together three scarves, one white, one red, one blue, (and

¹⁰ A verb *mitai* occurs in the irreversible binomial merism *tarmai-* (SIG) *mitai-*, meaning “nail (and) secure with red (wool),” which is especially significant in connection with the peg of cornel wood mentioned by Aristoboulos. The occurrence of *tarma-* for “peg” (sumerogram KAK, and also in Luwian) may refer to Termessos (perhaps ^TTarmassa, “peg town”: J. Puhvel, pers. comm., 8 February 2002). In the legend of the Gordian knot, Termessos and Telmessos are important topographical specifications recorded by the historians of Alexander. The prophetess who interprets the omen of the birds for Gordios, according to Arrian, is from Telmessos, known throughout antiquity for its skillful seers. It is tempting to conjecture that Aristander of Telmessos, who was well acquainted with the royal Macedonian court and accompanied Alexander on his campaigns, may be responsible for the preservation and transmission of the legend of the Gordian knot as recorded by Alexander’s historians. On Aristander see W. Greenwalt, “A Macedonian Mantis,” *Ancient World* 5.1 (1982) 17–25. Telmessos and Termessos seem to be confused by Arrian (1.27.5); see Bosworth (*supra* n.7) 169, 186. Two cities in Anatolia are named Telmessos, one in Caria and the other in Lycia, modern Fethiye. See Hdt. 1.78, 84; W. Ruge, *RE* 5A (1934) 409–415. I thank C. King for her comments on Aristander and refer the reader to her forthcoming dissertation, “Dreams, Omens, and Divination in the Alexander Historians” (Brown Univ.), for further discussion.

¹¹ The equation of Mita with Greek Midas was established by H. Winckler, “Die Reiche von Kilikien und Phrygien im Lichte der altorientalischen Inschriften,” *Altorientalische Forschungen* II.2 (Leipzig 1898) 131–137.

¹² Güterbock/Hoffner (*supra* n.3) 303; I employ their abbreviations for Hittite texts.

tie them to the carriage)."¹³ In another ritual text (*IBoT* IV 14 Rs. 6–9 + *KBo* XXIV 4 Rs. 11–14), we read, “thereupon he plants stakes with red wool and says: ‘Let the king’s perjury, curse, blood, and tears be planted with red wool, and they shall not stir from the spot!’”¹⁴ Another ritual text (*KBo* XXXIX, ed. L. Rost, *MIO* 1 [1953] 350) states, “She takes red wool (and she cuts it up with a knife over the sacrificers).” Text *Bo* 5093 iii.5 is translated, “It is tied together with red and white wool...” Similarly, *KUB* XLI 8 ii.28: “He takes red wool and ties it onto ...”

In comparing Hittite texts containing the root *mit(t)a-*, *miti-*, or *SA₅* and the versions of the Gordian knot legend as recorded by the historians of Alexander, we note striking similarities. Pieces of colored wool in ritual contexts are used to fasten things in place; there are references to pegs and cornel wood and to braided cords—in one example, fastened to a carriage. In other Hittite texts someone takes a knife to cut the twisted cords of wool. Is there possibly some connection between Hittite *mit(t)a-* and the Phrygian name Midas/Mita, who is the central focus of the Gordian knot story?

The personal name Mita/Mit-ta/Midas in Anatolia is recorded in Hittite, Assyrian, and Greek sources. During the Early Iron Age, one of the kings of the Mushki, mentioned in later Assyrian sources, is called Mita, generally accepted as the Semitic variant of the Phrygian name Midas.¹⁵ Originally the Mushki and Phrygians were probably two separate groups with a dividing border at the Halys River, with Phrygia to the west

¹³ The conventions for the English translations of Hittite include setting contextual information from the texts in parentheses. I report the interpretations of Güterbock/Hoffner (*supra* n.3) and Puhvel (*supra* n.3).

¹⁴ Puhvel (*supra* n.3). See also his “‘Spider’ and ‘Mole’ in Hittite,” in Y. Arbeitman and A. Bomhard, ed., *Bono homini donum: Essays in Historical Linguistics in Memory of J. A. Kerns* (Amsterdam 1981) 238. I am very grateful to Professor Puhvel for sharing with me his thoughts on this Hittite problem. He is in no way responsible for any lapses in my Hittite citations or interpretations.

¹⁵ J. Börker-Klähn, “Zur Herkunft der Bezeichnung ‘Muski,’” in R. Gusmani, M. Salvini, P. Vannicelli, ed., *Frigi e Frigio* (Rome 1997) 249–260.

and the Mushki to the east, and at some point in the Early Iron Age the two either peacefully united or the Phrygians dominated the Mushki by force.¹⁶

The noun *mit(t)a-* and the personal name Mita were preserved from the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age and transformed themselves into part of the legendary aspect of a founding King Midas. The use of twisted colored cords of wool that are ritually cut, or sometimes attached to carriages, fastened in place by pegs perhaps made of cornel wood, are all details from Hittite sources that are again mentioned by the historians of Alexander when they describe the Gordian knot. I suggest that the Phrygian sources who informed Alexander's historians were transmitting a very old story that predated the historical King Midas known to Herodotus. The ultimate origin of this legend is found in the period of the Hittite kings in central Turkey, suggesting that the Phrygian dynasts had a ritual, possibly a foundation rite, based on Hittite predecessors. With this added insight into the origins of the Gordian knot story it is clear that some of the legends that created a history for Alexander were firmly based on local lore. Along with our view of Alexander's conquests as an inevitable Hellenization of the known world must be placed this evidence of a larger dialogue between East and West and the landscapes of memory traversed by the Macedonian king.¹⁷

September, 2002

American School of Classical Studies
54 Souidias
GR 106 76 Athens, Greece
bburke@ascsa.edu.gr

¹⁶ M. Mellink, "The Native Kingdoms of Anatolia," *CAH* III.2 (1991) 622, suggests that "Mushki" is a metonym for "Phrygians," and that the Assyrian identification of Midas of Mushki indicates Phrygian Midas's control over the tribe of Mushki in northeastern Anatolia, one of many which he controlled.

¹⁷ I am very grateful to K. DeVries, N. Felson, C. King, S. Morris, J. Puhvel, M. B. Richardson, A. Stewart, and an anonymous reader for *GRBS* for making comments on versions of this paper. They are in no way responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation.