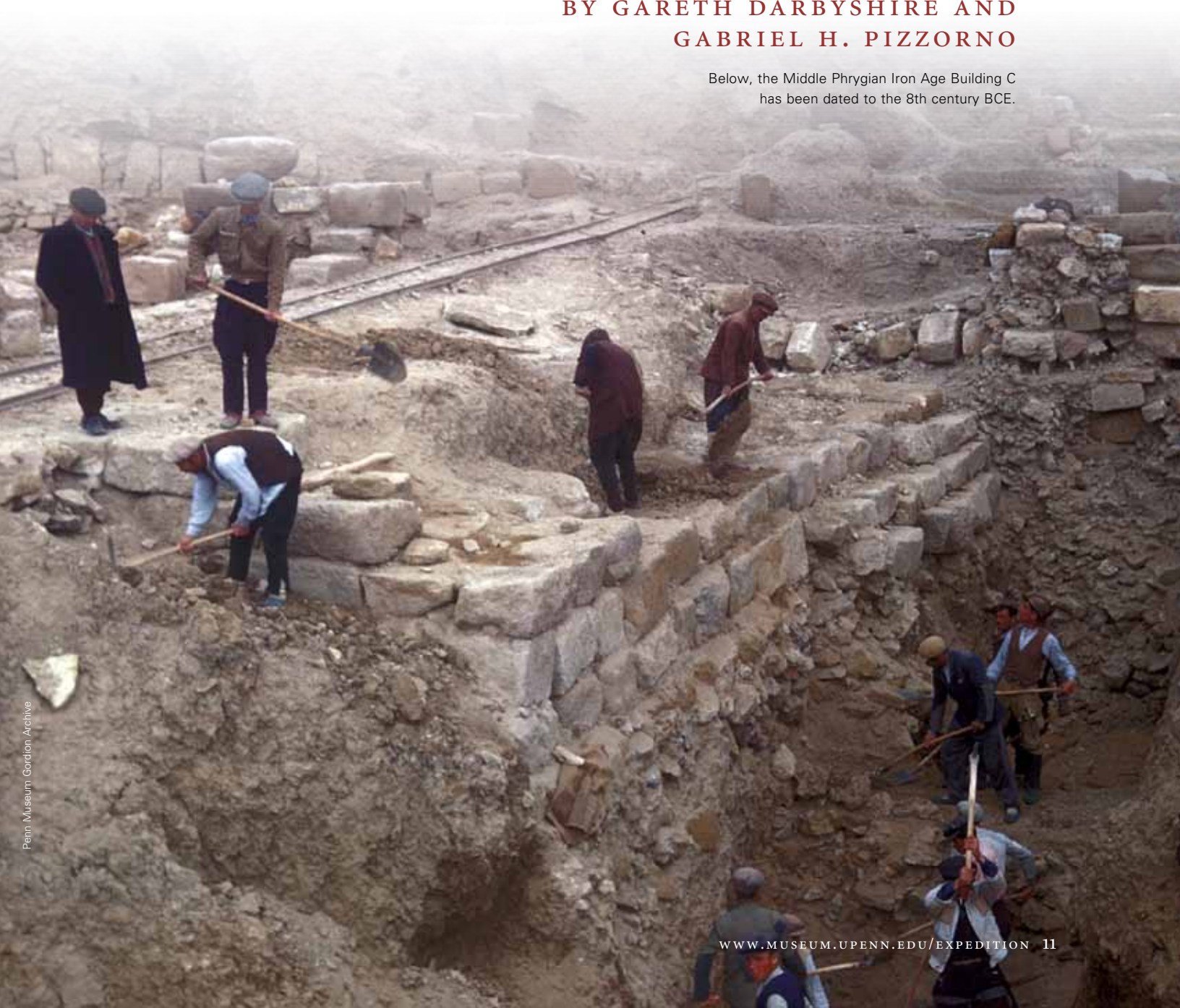




# GORDION IN HISTORY

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Below, the Middle Phrygian Iron Age Building C  
has been dated to the 8th century BCE.





Gordion lies 80 km (50 miles) southwest of Ankara in the steppe land of Turkey's Central Anatolian region. It has a long history of occupation and was a major center of political authority and population. The site's location was highly strategic in antiquity—a regional crossroads centered on a major crossing point of the river Sangarios (Sakarya in Turkish). In the Iron Age, it was the capital of the large and powerful state known as Phrygia to the Greeks, and Mushki (or Mushku) to the Assyrians.



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ACCORDING TO ANCIENT writers, Gordion is the place where, in 334/3 BCE, Alexander the Great cut the famous Gordian Knot and fulfilled a prophecy to become the ruler of Asia. Gordion is also linked with Midas, the Iron Age king of the late 8th century BCE, who in later Greek mythology is cursed with the “golden touch.” In addition to the stories and myths that provide a popular backdrop to the site, extensive archaeological and textual evidence has revealed Gordion’s very long and complex settlement history. Spanning at least 4,500 years from the Bronze Age (*ca.* 2500 BCE) to the present, Gordion and its environs have been closely connected to key geo-political and cultural developments in the region.



Site Map of Gordion showing the main topographical and morphological components of the site, including the location of the tumuli (as red dots).

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT GORDION

Gordion is one of the most complex and extensive archaeological sites known in Anatolia, with settlement and funerary remains extending over 2 km (1.24 miles) and covering more than 400 hectares (988 acres). Today, Gordion appears as a cluster of impressive grassy mounds straddling the valley of the Sakarya River at the modern village of Yassihöyük—Turkish for “flat-topped settlement mound.” These mounds are the visible remains of a central multi-period citadel, parts of the fortifications of the surrounding

Iron Age town and associated Persian siege works, and close to 150 Iron Age, Persian, and Hellenistic *tumuli* or elite burial mounds on the sides of the valley and along the approach roads. Not visible on the ground are the thousands of multi-period buildings and graves that lie buried by overlaying archaeological remains, by river silt, and by soil washed down from the surrounding hills. Because of this covering, many remains are exceedingly well preserved. Although considerable excavation is necessary to access lower levels, Gordion is not encumbered by the presence of a major modern settlement.

Archaeological investigations at the site began in 1900, but lasted only one season. After a half-century





Rodney S. Young was Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania and head of the Museum's Mediterranean Section. A complex, charismatic, and dominating figure, he directed the Gordion excavations from 1950 until his untimely death in a car accident in 1974.

hiatus, excavations restarted in 1950 and have continued almost to the present. The first excavation series in 1900 was conducted by Alfred and Gustav Körte, the German brothers who first identified the Yassihöyük site with ancient Gordion. Excavating five tumuli and two locations on the citadel mound, plus a trench in the Lower Town, they published their findings just over three years later in 1904. The Museum excavation series included 17 seasons of digging between 1950 and 1973, directed by Rodney S. Young. This work was conducted on a mas-

sive scale, with a focus on the citadel mound and no less than 30 of the tumuli. Important excavations of parts of the Lower Town and on settlement remains and cemeteries on the periphery of the site were also carried out. Excavations resumed once again in 1988 under the direction of Mary Voigt of the College of William and Mary, and continued until 2006, with work also directed by T. Cuyler Young, Andrew Goldman, and Brendan Burke. These later investigations were inevitably more sophisticated and detailed, and so, although much smaller in extent than the Young excavations, they yielded a similar quantity of data as the earlier series, with greater complexity. This period also saw excavations of four tumuli by the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, and of the citadel gate area by G. Kenneth Sams. The work since 1988 has totaled 14 excavation seasons.

The excavations have been on a scale rivaled by few other projects in the world, with over 30 seasons of digging and six decades of post-excavation analysis. Over 270 excavation trenches have been dug at Gordion, including those in 39 of the tumuli, and about 40,000 artifacts have been recovered. In addition, geomorphological, paleo-environmental, archaeological, and geophysical surveys have greatly furthered our understanding of the site and its environs.



A burial from the Middle Bronze Age cemetery at Gordion, on the east flank of the Sakarya valley. The predominant mortuary rite, as shown here, is interment in huge, valuable *pithoi* or storage jars. Such evidence places Gordion in a broad regional Anatolian Bronze Age culture zone.





The Turkish team excavates Gordion's Iron Age Citadel in 1953.

## GORDION THROUGH THE AGES

People began living at the site of Gordion in the Early Bronze Age, at least as early as *ca.* 2500 BCE; the people of Yassihöyük village still call the site home today. Across that enormous span of time, archaeologists can detect few breaks in habitation.

The major periods represented are the Bronze Age (*ca.* 2500–1200 BCE), the Iron Age (*ca.* 1200–550 BCE, largely synonymous here with the Phrygian period), Achaemenid (Persian or Late Phrygian, *ca.* 550–330 BCE), Hellenistic (*ca.* 330–1st century BCE), Roman (1st century BCE to 5th century CE), Medieval (6th to 14th centuries CE), Ottoman (15th to 20th centuries CE) and the Modern era beginning with the formation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

Knowledge of the Bronze Age at Gordion is more limited than that of later periods owing to the masking of these earlier settlement levels by later activity and because

this period was not the main focus of the Penn Museum's excavations. However, a small number of deep and narrow excavations have suggested a long sequence of successive settlements, one on top of the other. Recovered artifacts and structures clearly indicate that the site was of considerable local importance at an early date, a point underlined by evidence from a Middle Bronze Age (*ca.* 2000–1400 BCE) cemetery discovered on the perimeter of the ancient settlement area. With geo-political fluctuations during this period, Gordion was variously on or within the western frontier of the land of Hatti—the kingdom of the Hittites—the regional superpower in the Bronze Age, with a territory that extended across much of modern Turkey and the Levant.

Gordion's heyday came in the Iron Age, following the breakup of the Hittite kingdom, when the site emerged as the capital of the land of Phrygia, one of the most powerful states to develop in Anatolia. Bound up with this geo-political transformation was the introduction to central Anatolia of a foreign language (still not





Megaron 3, the largest of the burnt halls from the Early Phrygian Destruction Level, measures 31 by 18 m. Note the characteristic megaron plan: a main room at the rear and a smaller anteroom in front. This particular hall has beam slots for the timbers that once supported a gallery. The burnt artifacts found in the hall were removed by the excavators before this photograph was taken.

deciphered), called “Phrygian,” and presumably a conquering foreign elite, ultimately derived from the Balkans via northwest Anatolia. Monumental construction works of this period have left the greatest mark on the landscape at Gordion, and even today they have the effect that was originally intended: striking awe in the observer as signifiers and active agents of the incredible power and authority of the Phrygian elite. Midas the Great, or Mita as he was called in contemporary Assyrian imperial records of the late 8th century BCE, was the only Phrygian ruler about whom we know anything personally and reliably significant. To the Assyrians, he was the most potent rival to their ambitions in Anatolia at that time. However, the excavated monumental remains that predate his reign indicate that it was his predecessors who helped build up the great power he ultimately enjoyed.

A sequence of several successive complexes is well attested in the Gordion citadel, indicating a series of royal building programs, each of which included an

imposing perimeter wall, terrace and gates, and dozens of *megarons* or large halls arranged around a number of conjoined courts, avenues, and streets. The best preserved and best understood of these programs is in the so-called Early Phrygian Destruction Level, dated to *ca.* 800 BCE. It ended with a conflagration, apparently accidental, that destroyed part of the citadel and yet resulted in the remarkable preservation of thousands of artifacts. Objects were left abandoned where they were being stored or used at the time, particularly in a series of connected textile workshops with attached kitchens and storage units. This burnt level, a kind of “Pompeii” phenomenon, provides unrivaled insights into the organization and activities of an Iron Age royal center. After the fire, the citadel was soon rebuilt, to virtually the same plan, in a massive construction operation that involved the importation and deposition of thousands of tons of earth to prepare a new, higher building surface over the demolished Destruction Level remains. This Middle Phrygian layout continued into the following Persian period.





Left, masses of pottery and other artifacts were found in the burnt workshops and storage buildings of the Early Phrygian Destruction Level, dated to about 800 BCE. The photograph shows the excavation of the main room of Terrace Building 2 in 1961, with many pots *in situ* along the northwest wall. Other finds included ivory horse trappings and iron bridle bits. The burning is clearly visible here. Below, from Megaron 3, Early Phrygian Destruction Level, ca. 800 BCE. An ivory plaque decorated with the carving of a mounted warrior may have been a furniture fixture.



ideologies furnish a remarkable perspective on the chronology and character of power at Gordion from the mid-9th century BCE onwards. In addition, the excavation by Machteld Mellink and G. Roger Edwards of part of a lower class cemetery dating to the 7th century BCE has shed rare light on some of the non-dynastic levels of Phrygian society. Together with the evidence from the Destruction Level workshops, this cemetery provides a fascinating complement to the focus on the aspirations, attainments, and possessions of the highest elites.

In the Iron Age Lower Town that surrounds the citadel, additional large-scale building complexes—in particular, a huge mud-brick fortification system—have been partially excavated. Outside those fortifications other buildings have been discovered, though most of the settlement presumably still lies buried to a depth of several meters in the floodplain.

Dozens of elite Iron Age burial mounds surround the site, mostly on the dominating elevations; the high number and large size of the mounds indicate the existence at Gordion of a long-lived center of power. Over 30 of these dynastic burials have been excavated, and the associated artifacts, tomb constructions, and mortuary

After a period of domination by the powerful Iron Age kingdom of Lydia in the 6th century BCE, which had come to rule the whole of western Anatolia from its capital at Sardis in western Turkey, Gordion was incorporated into the vast Persian Empire. The Persian Empire, extending from the Balkans to India, was the result of the incredible military and diplomatic operations of its founder, Cyrus the Great, in the 540s BCE. However, a major siege was required to bring Gordion and its district to heel, as attested by remarkable evidence of combat: abandoned weaponry and other equipment, remains of dead soldiers, monumental siege works, and the destruction of the Lower Town fortifications by the Persian army. In this period (ca. 550–330 BCE), called Achaemenid





Many monumental tumuli can be observed around Gordion. The enormous tumulus visible in the center is Tumulus MM (Midas Mound), over 50 m high and 300 m in diameter. Excavated in 1957, it is one of the biggest in the world and encases a perfectly preserved wooden burial chamber that contained a spectacular array of grave goods. Originally thought to be the burial of the famous King Midas, in fact, it must belong to his immediate predecessor, dated to about 740 BCE. But Midas is the likely candidate for having it built, the monument thus reflecting his own greatness.

from the name of the Persian ruling dynasty, Gordion served as a large and important district center within one of the empire's provinces. The excavations of both the settlement and contemporary tumulus burials have provided rare detail on the organizational and cultural attributes of this major communications, administrative, military, demographic, and economic center.

The Hellenistic period began when Alexander the Great's Macedonian expeditionary force conquered the Persian Empire in the great campaign of 334–328 BCE. Gordion was taken and used as a Macedonian military base early on in these operations, when the Knot episode supposedly occurred. Following Alexander's untimely death in 323 BCE, his generals and their successors set about dividing the spoils of empire in a series of conflicts which saw the rise and fall of Macedonian Greek polities and the rise of new native Anatolian kingdoms. Gordion was inevitably bound up in these complex affairs. Increasing Hellenization (absorption of elements of Greek culture) is attested by artifacts and linguistic evidence, and a major rebuilding program was instituted on the site by a high authority early within the period. In 277 BCE, Celtic-speaking mercenaries, the Galatians, moved into Anatolia from ancient Thrace in eastern Europe and ultimately settled in the Gordion region and further north and east. A Celtic language was imposed,



Above, one of the wonderful Gordion paintings by the celebrated British artist Piet de Jong. An ornate and highly valuable bronze lion-headed situla from Tumulus MM, dated to about 740 BCE. Such buckets contained alcoholic drinks served up at elite parties, in this case the funeral banquet. UPM Image #153691.

Right, this lion-headed gold bracelet from Gordion Tumulus A is from a cremated female burial dated 540–530 BCE. The bracelet finds close parallels in Ionian East Greek work. After the woman's body and a large quantity of artifacts had been burnt nearby, the remains were deposited in a shallow pit. Other artifacts, unburned, were added to the burial. Apart from gold-work, elite personal items included a silver mirror and ivory inlays from a box, together with a stone alabastron (oil/perfume container), imported and locally produced pottery, and spindle whorls. Iron vehicle fittings, together with iron and bronze horse gear, indicate that a wagon, presumably the hearse, was dismantled and buried too, a costly deposit in its own right.







Funerary banquet paraphernalia from inside the royal tomb, Tumulus MM, included bronze cauldrons (for storing alcoholic drink) on iron stands and bronze omphalos drinking bowls. The bowls were originally stacked on wooden tables, one of which is visible here in a collapsed state on the floor. Note the superbly preserved pine boards of the tomb chamber wall.



Hellenistic bone deposits such as this were recovered during Mary Voigt's excavations in the abandoned Lower Town area. These strange structured deposits of dismembered and mixed up human and animal body parts were probably deposited in the 3rd century BCE. Closely paralleled by finds in west and central Europe, they were part of a cultural package introduced to the region by the Galatians; ritual in character and certainly not "normal" burials, their rationale is poorly understood.

and Gordion became the center of one of several Galatian polities (called *tetrarchies*), part of the broader tribal organization known as the Tolistobogii. East of Gordion were the Tektosages and Trokmi. The Gordion excavations provide the best archaeological documentation of a Galatian context, characterized by acculturation of foreign Galatian and Greek elements as well as established native Anatolian elements. In a part of the Lower Town no longer used for settlement, striking evidence for contemporary central and western European-type ritual practices has been found in a number of highly unusual ritual deposits of human and animal remains. Elements of Celtic material culture are also attested from various contexts in the citadel area. By contrast, several dynastic burials in stone chambered tombs under burial mounds, in a style typical of other non-Galatian polities, are demonstrative of an elite culture broadly shared by various Anatolian dynasties of this period. Nevertheless, the bulk of the material remains excavated on the site are Anatolian in character.

Of great archaeological value is the so-called Abandonment Level uncovered on the citadel mound and dated to the late 3rd century BCE. This horizon marks the end of extensive occupation on the citadel mound and is characterized by well-preserved buildings and associated artifacts. Providing us with a detailed snapshot of life on the site, it is clearly the product of some unusual occurrence. The Abandonment Level is most plausibly linked to events in 189 BCE when, we are informed by Roman textual sources, the inhabitants of

Gordion abandoned the site in the face of a Roman punitive expedition into Galatia led by the consul Manlius Vulso. The region suffered heavily as a result of this invasion, including the enslaving of thousands of people. This is reflected at Gordion, which never again enjoyed the grandeur that had marked it for centuries.

Certainly by the early Roman period the site had declined dramatically in size and importance though it continued to retain some strategic value as a military garrison of the Roman Empire. Again, the excavations are of great import, providing the only coherent view available of a small Roman settlement in Anatolia during the period *ca.* 25 BCE–600 CE. Three Roman cemeteries have been excavated as well as military installations, and inscriptions identify some units stationed at the site (see "To the Victory of Caracalla," this issue). Thus, Gordion provides insights into both Roman strategy and the reality of daily life and culture.

The Medieval period at Gordion technically extends from the Early Byzantine period (6th century CE) into the Turkish Selçuk and Early Ottoman periods. Between the 7th and 10th centuries CE, the Byzantine empire—the medieval eastern continuation of the Roman state—was divided into military *themata* (administrative districts). The site of Gordion lay in a boundary zone between two of these, the Boukellarion *thema* (governed from Ankara) and the larger Anatolikon *thema* to the south of it. Excavations on the Citadel Mound have suggested a settlement hiatus for several centuries throughout much of the Byzantine period.





This Late Roman burial is from the cemetery on the Citadel Mound.



Hellenistic burial Tumulus O was excavated in 1955. The stone chambered tomb, covered by an earthen mound, has a distinctive corbelled roof that is paralleled in other dynastic burials from Galatia. Although the tomb had been robbed in antiquity, fragments of a terracotta sarcophagus were found.

Life resumed at Gordion as a small settlement through the early Turkish period, when the Selçuk state emerged in the 11th century CE as the successful challenger to Byzantine authority in the region, and then through the mighty Ottoman Empire beginning in the early 14th century and lasting until the 20th century.

Excavations have yielded evidence datable by pottery and coins to the 11th–14th centuries CE, but the limited ceramic sample has not allowed for much chronological precision. Settlement remains extend over much of the Citadel Mound. In the northwestern sector of the mound, above the Late Roman cemetery, was a substantial building, many subterranean tandoor-style ovens, and a large furnace or kiln. One of several pits contained a 13th century Iranian faience lion's head. Further east on the mound, less well-preserved architectural remains were discovered. A fortification or enclosure wall with concrete mortar and large external buttresses suggests that the site of Gordion was still an important place worthy of protection in this period.

In the early 20th century the village of Bebi, lying near the foot of the ancient citadel mound, witnessed the birth of the modern Republic of Turkey from the welter of



The modern village of Yassihöyük has been the seasonal home to the Gordion project since 1950.



World War I and the struggle of the subsequent Turkish War of Liberation. However, Bebi was destroyed during the process in the climactic Battle of the Sakarya in 1921, when the Turkish army defeated invading Greek forces. The modern village of Yassihöyük, located adjacent to the ancient Phrygian royal necropolis, is the successor to Bebi, and the present incarnation of this fascinating ongoing phenomenon of human settlement on the banks of the Sakarya. 🏠

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#### For Further Reading

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To learn more about Gordion, visit the official project website at <http://sites.museum.upenn.edu/gordion>



Gabriel H. Pizzorno and Gareth Darbyshire, with a reconstruction based on the skull of the man buried in Tumulus MM, once thought to be King Midas.