

The Myth of MIDAS' GOLDEN TOUCH

BY ANASTASIA AMRHEIN, PATRICIA KIM, LUCAS STEPHENS, AND JANE HICKMAN



Gold has been used to create objects of beauty across the ages, conferring a high level of status on those who own it. In some cultures, gold has spiritual and even magical qualities. As a raw material or manufactured object, gold also plays an important role in understanding ancient trade.

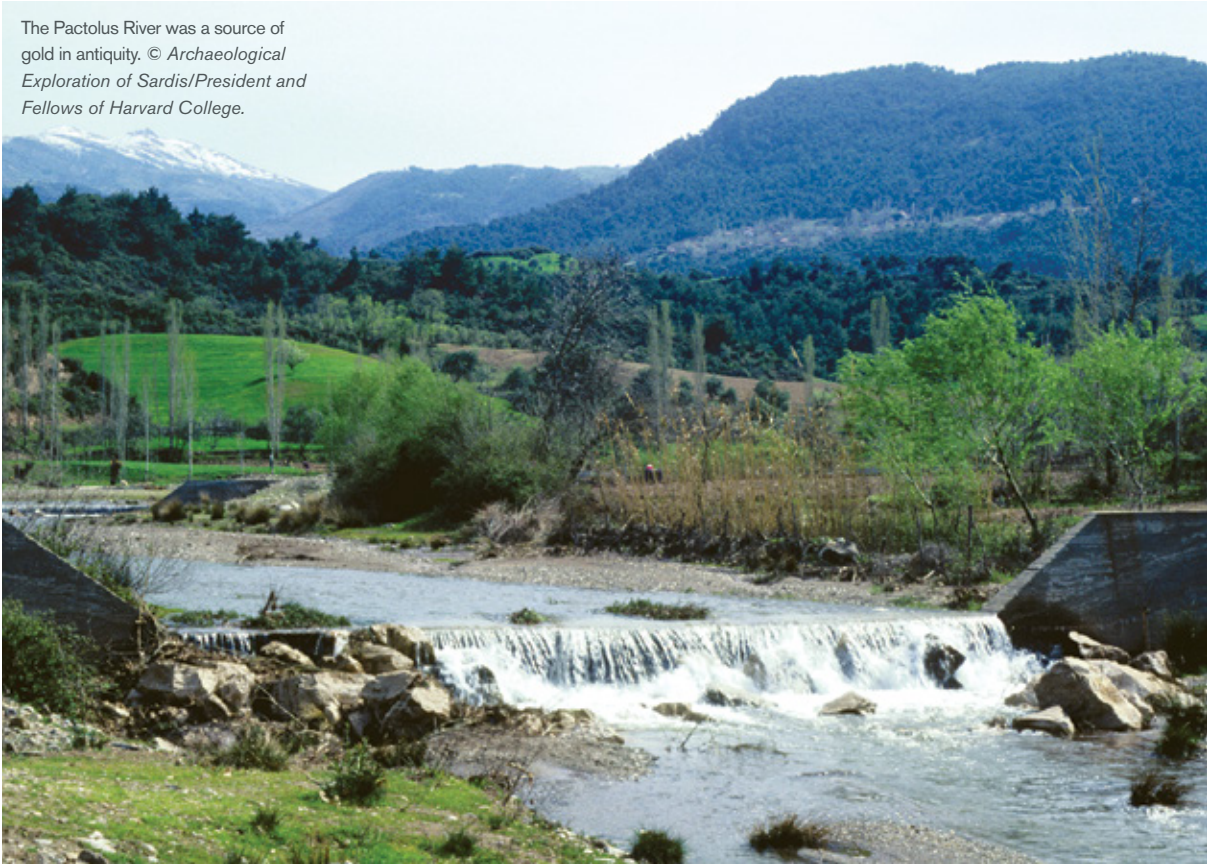
Gold luxury objects and coins provide valuable evidence for cross-cultural contact and the social interaction of elites. At least as early as the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE, Assyrian merchants were exporting gold from Asia Minor into Assyria and Mesopotamia, although it was only one commodity in a very complicated trade system that encompassed the entire Near East. The merchants employed standard weights and measures and paid uniform tolls and taxes along well-traveled and guarded routes. By the late 7th century BCE, the kings of Lydia began to strike the first coins in electrum, a natural alloy of gold and silver, which revolutionized commercial exchange throughout the region.

It is therefore not surprising that myths and legends have arisen related to the special qualities of gold, of which the “Golden Touch of Midas” is probably the most famous example. The earliest

An Apulian red-figure calyx krater (ca. 330–240 BCE) depicts Jason bringing Pelias the Golden Fleece. A winged victory prepares to crown Jason. From the Louvre, Paris.

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The Pactolus River was a source of gold in antiquity. © Archaeological Exploration of Sardis/President and Fellows of Harvard College.



reference to the Golden Touch occurs in Aristotle's *Politics* (1257b, 4th century BCE):

It is anomalous that wealth should be of such a kind that a man may be well supplied with it and yet die of hunger, like the famous Midas in the legend, when owing to the insatiable covetousness of his prayer all the viands served up to him turned into gold.

Another early account of the Midas myth is from the first half of the 1st century BCE: the Greek scholar Alexander Polyhistor recounts how Midas was traveling through a barren area of Phrygia, and gold sprang forth when he attempted to tap spring water. This is one of the few tales of Midas that ends well—after praying to Dionysus the gold is turned back into water.

The fullest account however, occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses XI* (1st century CE): the old satyr Silenus, a

tutor of Dionysus (Roman Bacchus), was found drunk on wine in the Phrygian countryside and brought before Midas. The king recognized him and treated him to ten days and nights of feasting. On the 11th day, he brought Silenus back to Dionysus, who, in turn, offered the fulfillment of one wish. Midas famously requested that anything he touched would turn to gold, although when he discovered the peril of his wish, he begged Dionysus to reverse the spell. The god relented and told Midas to plunge his hands into the river Pactolus, which runs through Sardis, the capital of Lydia. As he did this...

...the gold virtue granted by the god, as it departed from his body, tinged the stream with gold. And even to this hour adjoining fields, touched by this ancient vein of gold, are hardened where the river flows and colored with the gold that Midas left.

These accounts serve to explain why the river Pactolus may have appeared golden in color, and reflect the importance of rivers as sources of gold in the ancient world.

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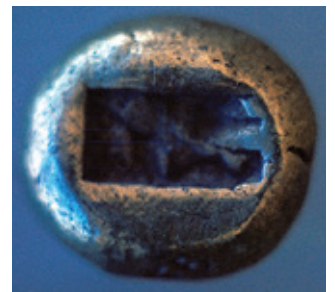
Another familiar myth, that of Jason and the Golden Fleece, may have been based on actual gold harvesting practices from rivers that carried gold dust from the mountains. In one version of the myth, Jason had to retrieve the Golden Fleece (the golden tufted skin of a ram) from the land of Colchis on the eastern coast of the Black Sea (modern Georgia) in order to reclaim his lost throne. The Colchis region was famous in antiquity for extensive gold deposits in its rivers that were harvested using sheepskins: when left in the water, gold particles would adhere to the skins, thereby creating a series of “golden fleeces.” It seems likely, then, that the Colchian technique of gold harvesting gradually developed into the story of the Golden Fleece.

To what extent do the archaeological discoveries at Gordion align with the legend of the Golden Touch? Although gold jewelry and ornaments have been found on the citadel and in the surrounding tombs, such discoveries are rare. Even in a royal tomb as monumental and rich as Tumulus MM, there were no traces of gold. How, then, could such a “Golden Touch” tradition have developed?

As with so many questions at Gordion, the answer may lie in Tumulus MM, where the deceased, probably Midas’ father, was covered with a textile that contained an inorganic mineral pigment called goethite, which gave it a golden sheen; this also appears to be the case for other textiles uncovered at Gordion. It may be that such golden-looking garments were among the hallmarks of the settlement’s elite, which could mean that the myth of Midas’ golden touch originated from these distinctive garments. As with the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece, then,

we uncover a situation with an underlying truth beneath the more fantastic elements of the story. It is also worth noting that the core elements of both of these tales are still with us today: ancient maxims such as “the Midas Touch,” “the golden rule,” or “worth your weight in gold” are regularly used in our daily conversations as a means to measure and evaluate excellence. ●

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The obverse and reverse of an electrum coin from Gordion, dated to ca. 600 BCE. Images #G-638, G-639.



Lydia struck the first coins in gold and electrum (an alloy of gold and silver). © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

