Images and Identities. *Interpreting Identities in the Tomb Decorations of Anatolia in the Early Achaemenid Period*

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Anatolia has generally been thought of as situated between larger dominant political powers of the Near East and Mediterranean. This is particularly so for the period that Anatolia was ruled by the Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 550 – 330 BC), when traditional historical narratives of native Anatolian powers, for instance the Kingdom of Midas of Phrygia and the Lydian Kingdom of Croesus, tend to break off. The populations of Anatolia in this time period can be seen as either 'neighbours of the Greeks' or subjects of the Persians. These are both concepts that place them in a relatively passive and minor position, giving the Greeks and Persians primacy. In political terms, this is not necessarily incorrect. Anatolian groups were indeed subject to the Achaemenid Empire, and the Greeks, or at least a range of Greek-speaking communities, which had developed a heightened sense of their related 'Greekness', were banding together in the naval Delian League to continue repelling the Persians and aiding/building allies, especially in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. This created a particular tension, in which Anatolians found themselves having to align themselves to new political, economic and cultural pressures.

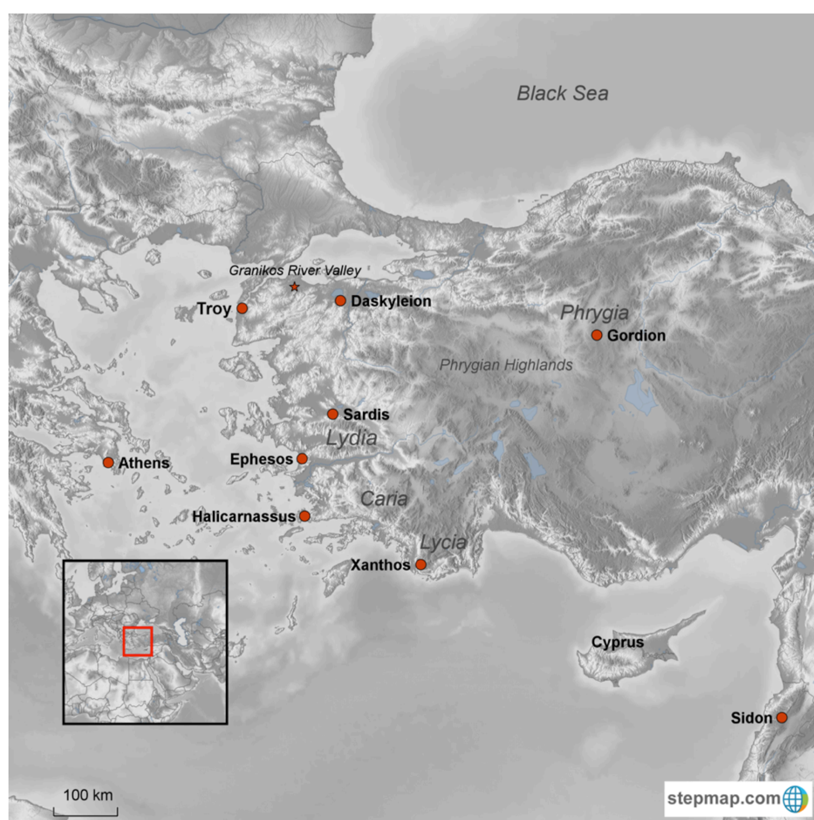

Figure 1. Map of Anatolia showing regions and cities menioned in text. Made by author using Stepmap.com.

The agency and profile of the non-Greek speaking Anatolian groups in this period is somewhat obscured by a lack of 'native' textual sources. The major written source is the Greek historian Herodotus, himself from Halicarnassus, the city on the coast of Western Anatolia, famous as the seat of the later Carian King Mausolus and his monumental, eponymous Mausoleum. Herodotus indicates some few key leading figures, such as a wealthy Lydian by the name of Pythias, but in general his narrative, geared toward explaining the causes of the great Greco-Persian Wars that erupted in the first half of the 5th century BC, depicts Anatolian groups in terms of their service in the Persian army. Colourful ethnographic digressions add description of those who found themselves Persian allies, including various Anatolian, and in particular Western Anatolian groups. These, however, are limited. Although he does state that some groups, such as the Lydians, were in many ways 'like the Greeks', Herodotus' emphasis lies on distinguishing peculiar practices such as gender roles, suiting the aims of a narrative designed to differentiate two main groups: the Persians and their varied subjects and allies, and the more homogenous Greeks.

What we do not get enough of is the condition and role of Anatolians, which was not one of merely servitude. Western Anatolia in particular was a strategic place on the Western Front of the Persian Empire, bustling with its own local hierarchies, social organisations, shifting economies and cultures. In the past, studies of Achaemenid Anatolia have concentrated on the impact of Empire, largely conceived of in terms of the visibility of Persian presence and top down monumental change, of which there is surprisingly little. More visible are changes in smaller facets of life, such as the range of portable goods, especially metal wares and seals, which show that within closed spaces there were new social practices. Out in the landscape, surveys are increasingly allowing one to grasp changes in settlement patterns too: in some areas there is scarcer sign of settlement activity, while in others there it seems to increase. In Lydia and in northwest Turkey, for instance, there is an increase in visible tombs built in the countryside. In some few places such as Xanthos, in Lycia in southwest Turkey, there are bursts of monumental (but not necessarily 'Persian-looking') urban development. In other places, there is either a decrease in settlement remains or, conversely, and increase, but without any signs of monumental urban construction, and within this only isolated monumental tombs suggesting a particular kind of social hierarchy – perhaps singular pastoral lords ruling large territories or estates. These signs indicate differentiated economic development, but rather than sealing off and isolating Anatolia, the remains suggest that alongside shrinking urban 'civilisation' in some areas, there were also new kinds of statuses, connections, trade and interaction that opened up under the Achaemenids.

As will be evident from what has been said above, tombs form a key body of evidence for change across Achaemenid Anatolia. They are not only important in assessing general patterns of activity, but also, through their architecture and burial customs they allow insights into variations in cultural practices. Furthermore, among the tombs that flourished in this period, some went a step further in their elaboration, incorporating paintings and sculpture. Such images form a precious resource for the self-identification of at least the elites of Anatolia, especially Western Anatolia, where most of the tomb building of this period takes place.

Such self-identifications form a counter to the limited stereotypes of Herodotus. The term 'self-identification', however, can be tricky, for it implies a one-to-one correlation between image and identity. In very general terms, one can say that tomb images indeed perform this function in that they are part of packages that memorialize – form a lasting

memory of – the tomb owners. They are identified with the images. The images may not, however, directly represent 'identities' in terms of how the deceased would describe themselves. They are not only not necessarily 'portraits' of the deceased, but sometimes do not even show human figures. In some cases, such as with animals or mythological images, it is very difficult to rationalise how such representations might have related to qualities of the person or persons whose memorial was emblazoned with such images, and one might question, as well, what control or interest the deceased had over the images. They might have been selected for rather arbitrary reasons, by family members, or have been affected by the repertoire of the artist employed for the job.

Yet still, even if they offer a partial view of artifices and ideas that may be remote from the reality of life experiences and the self-identity of the deceased themselves, these images are valuable evidence of the kinds of visuals available to and used by people living within a particular historical situation, and their patterns show interesting similarities and differences in the practice of visual memorialization. Overall patterns, as well, help to show variations in *cultural* identities, in that the images show the kinds of styles (both artistic and in personal styling of figures shown), themes, tones and levels of abstraction preferred in and/or available to different areas.

So, for example, in the northwestern area of Turkey usually in this period called 'Hellespontine Phrygia' by scholars, one finds a range of relief sculptures that adorned tombs, which fall into two main geographic groups. From around the site of Daskyleion, which became the seat of a Persian governor (satrap) in the Persian period, come an array of decorated tombstones set up at tumulus mounds covering graves, as well as some other reliefs which may belong to larger memorial monuments. Stylistically, these are hard to date, but roughly one can place a number of them in the 5th century BC, when Persian governors (satraps) at Daskyleion seem to have established themselves as a dynasty. Taking the tombstones, these tend to carry two to three registers of reliefs carved in a simple 'cut out' style, with figures shown in profile, which would probably have been further articulated with paint. Themes tend to be fairly consistent and overlap through the stelai: riders, hunts, convoys and especially what is usually called a 'banquet' scene.

Figure 2. Two tombstones found near Daskyleion, in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Photo by author.

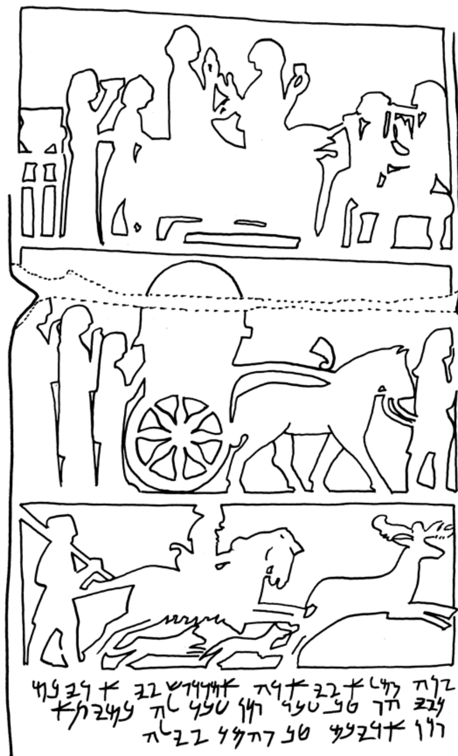

Figure 3. Drawing of reliefs and Aramaic inscription on a stele found east of Daskyleion, in Bursa Museum, Turkey. Drawing by author.

Overall, the themes tend to revolve around depictions of human figures performing activities associated with urbane, courtly life. They may be idealizing, not biographic, and even if the range of themes was restricted by the typical output of the stonemasons, this still gives a sense of the general outlook of the elites that purchased expensive tombstones. One can, in addition, compare some of the images such as the 'banquets' with other depictions of banquets such as the Greek *symposia* on Athenian painted vases. The Daskyleion tombstones show not a proper banquet with multiple guests, but only a couple seated on a couch, therefore a quieter home-based image. The relationship of the couples on the Daskyleion stelai, as well, is peculiarly intimate compared with couples shown on a few sparse contemporary reliefs showing similar scenes from Greek-speaking areas; whereas on the Greek reliefs the couple do not interact, in the Daskyleion banquet reliefs they are shown closer together and with gestures suggesting chatting. Although differing from Herodotus' examples of gender role differences, this suggests that ancient authors were right in identifying gender roles as culturally distinctive.

One thing that is not shown on any of the Daskyleion reliefs is myth. This does appear, however, on a burial monument found not too far west. The Polyxena Sarcophagus, as it is known, is a huge sarcophagus found under a tumulus, which bears rich, 'Greek archaic' style relief sculptures on its four sides, including, stretching around two sides, the murder of the Trojan Princess Polyxena, and on the other two unusual depictions of women in festive, interior settings. The scenes form an opposition – a tragic death of a princess on one side, and a festive celebration of, or even a marriage of a woman (a princess?) on the other. Such themes would be apt for a memorial of a woman – a veritable princess – correlating with a gender and status identity of the deceased. One of

the puzzles of the tomb, though, is that the bones within have been identified as a male. In view of this, scholars have suggested ways in which the themes could be relevant for memorializing a male.

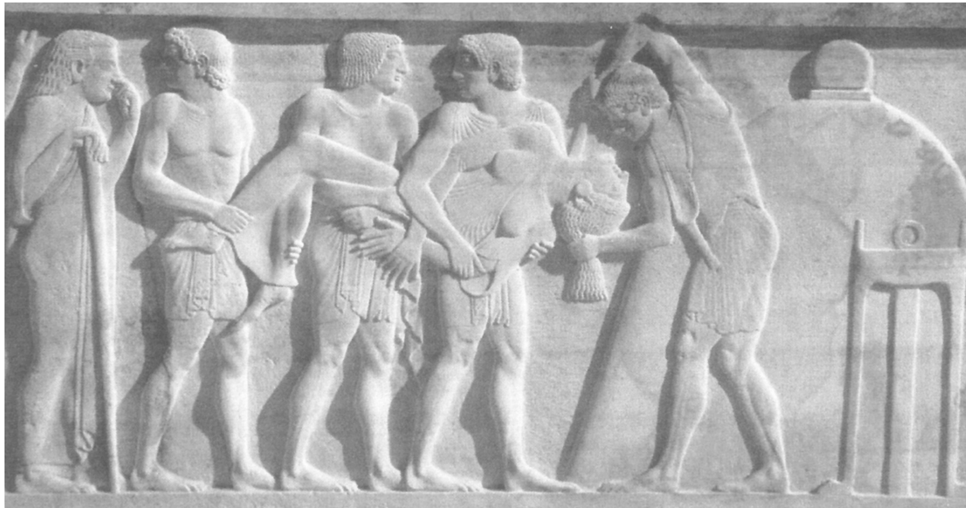

Figure 4. The right end of one of the long sides of the Polyxena Sarcophagus, showing the murder of the Trojan princess before the tomb of Achilles (near Troy). Sarcophagus in Çanakkale Museum, Turkey. © Troy Excavation Project with thanks to C. Brian Rose.

An issue here is that it is very difficult to stop oneself from insisting that the images should relate to gender identity of the deceased. Leaving that sticky issue aside, the death of Polyxena could have been chosen because it was relevant to the region. The Granikos River Valley, in which the tomb is located, is situated in what the ancient Roman period geographer Strabo called the Troad – the territory, that is, of Troy. If the recognition of the area as part of the Troad held for earlier periods, it is possible that the Polyxena image was chosen not (just) because it shows the death of a woman, but because it is an iconic, tragic death of a *Trojan*. Literature indicates that from the 6th century BC at least people were making claims of descent from surviving Trojans, and it is possible that the image could have been part of such a claim on the part of Anatolian (probably Phrygian-speaking) tomb owners, who needed to flag their rights to occupy land in the area. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the language group composition of the area was very mixed and that the tomb is situated closest to a town called Didymateiche, which may have had a primarily Greek-speaking populace. This tomb and its images show how it can be possible to find a number of potential specific reasons for the use of such images, but also how difficult it can be to distill one main understanding that users and viewers of the tomb may have shared with limited contextual information. What is useful to know, though, is that myth was being used at all; this is not necessarily something that one might assume for those living under the rule of the Achaemenid Persians. Indeed, one can see that the economic stimulus that afforded the making of such a monument meant that the Achaemenid Empire had in some ways opened up possibilities of displaying an identity that was less aligned to it than the those suggested by the images on stelai around Daskyleion, just a bit further east.

Two tombs from the Phrygian Highlands will serve to show something quite different. Whereas the northwest, around Daskyleion and the Granikos River Valley, saw an increase in visible burials in the earlier Achaemenid period, suggesting an increase in groups of similar status competing for shares in the land, in the Phrygian Highlands, situated around the Turkmen Dağlar (mountains) further inland and south, there seems

to have been a decrease. Here, rock cut monuments cut into the abundant tufa cliffs and outcrops prevail. In the period before the Achaemenid conquest in the early 540s BC, the region seems to have had a special sacred status and was bestowed with a series of rock cut religious monuments associated with the Phrygian goddess Matar. Tomb chambers were also carved into rock faces. Although difficult to date, most believe that the majority of these monuments belong to the pre-Achaemenid period, some perhaps as early as the 8th century BC. There are signs of monumental building and sculpture set up at one of the sites in the area, known as Midas City after its most majestic rock cut religious monument, which bears an inscription naming 'Midas' – possibly the famous Gordion king if not a namesake.

In one of the most populous of the rock cut tomb necropoleis, on the south western side of the Turkmen Dağlar, a singular monumental tomb was erected in this early period (precise date unknown). Known as Aslan Taş (Lion Stone), it bears huge relief sculptures of rampant lions flanking its front entrance. Attempts to interpret the significance of the lions has tended to focus on how they relate to the social identity of the person (or persons) laid to rest in the tomb, for instance as emblems of their bravery or rulership. Another way of seeing the decoration of this particular monument is to appreciate the tone and the place. The lions present a very aggressive image, and placed along what may have been an important route through the region the monument can be seen as a territorial marker, associating those who had the tomb constructed with the protection of this territory. This might be taken as a symbol of rulership, but the visual language employed is culturally different to the employment of a more urbane enthronement or audience scene.

Figure 5. The façade of Aslan Taş in the Phrygian Highlands. Photo by author.

Some time later, another tomb was carved out of the same cliff, just some 100 metres or so to the south. It has long since collapsed, leaving a pile of huge stones on which various sections of its sculptures and interior tomb chamber can be seen. This tomb also bore giant lions, and is sometimes called the 'Broken Lion Tomb', although it is also

known as Yılan Taş (Snake Stone), due to locals mistaking the lions' raised forelegs on one of the fallen blocks for snakes. The lions here were carved in quite a different style, with ornate flourishes similar to the decorative animals on Achaemenid period metal work, as well as sculptures at palaces in Iran. The lions in this case are shown on the side of the tomb. The front was adorned with sculptures of warriors of an unprecedented scale. Their helmets are ornamented with duck head crest holders, and, interestingly, going by a cast taken from the sculptures (the originals, which face the ground, are hard to access), their hair seems to be styled in a curly 'bob', the curls peeking out from under the neck guard of the helmet. Such a hairstyle is definitively Persian, seen in depictions of Persians in the Iranian palace sculptures and on seals. In contrast to the contemporary Daskyleion tombstones, there are here no visions of courtly, urbane life, but a continuation of the aggressive territoriality seen in the neighbouring, earlier Aslan Taş. At the same time, the styling of the lions and the warriors signal a sophistication of the tomb owner. Interestingly, this area seems to see a growth in the spread of settlement in mid-5th century BC, but this is of a humble form, with little sign of urbanism. It has, therefore, been characterized as a kind of rural backwater. The appearance of Yilan Tas, however, begs us to reassess this, and see the Phrygian Highlands as the territory of a high-powered and very connected lord.

Figure 6. Part of the tumbled stones of the Broken Lion Tomb, or Yılan Taş, showing head of lion. Photo by author.

The tomb sculptures discussed here represent a fraction of the over fifty decorated tombs belonging to the early Achaemenid period in Anatolia. One must pause for thought on how, in each case, on what level and in what way the images relate to identities; images of ideal social activities, myth and giant lions all differ in how they perform and the opportunities they afford for analysis. A flexible approach, taking into consideration display context and putting them into a wider understanding of shifts in economy and settlement, though, can help to harness this evidence for a vivacious period, and bring an Anatolia lacking in textual sources out of the shadows of history.