The Furniture of Tumulus MM and the Mystery of Ancient Wood

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Introduction

Carpentry was a vital vocation in the ancient Mediterranean. Every ancient person relied on carpenters for their personal items, building construction, and religious items. The complex relationships between the common people of the ancient Mediterranean are still vastly unknown, and much of the focus in scholarship has been placed on art objects, the people involved in their finishing, and wealthy patrons. Although the case study included in this project comes from a massively rich burial tomb, I point out the problems with its original analysis and absence of acknowledgement of the background players involved in the Chaîne Opératoire of the assemblage.

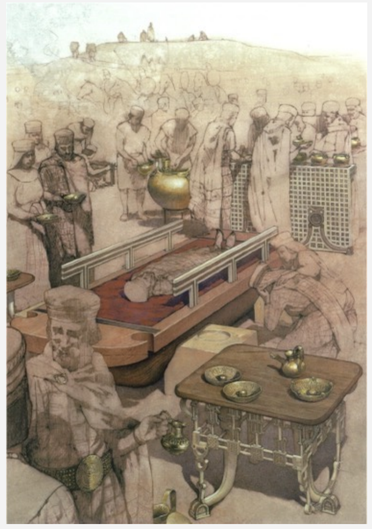

Figure 1. Reconstruction of the funeral ceremony held before the burial of the King. Tumulus MM is shown under construction in the background

Excavations & Furniture

During the initial excavations, started in 1957 by the Penn Museum under the direction of Rodney S. Young, unskilled laborers dug a channel into the mound. The inner chamber was revealed, constructed with pine plank walls. The chamber measured about 5 by 6 by 3 meters high and contained one of the most significant archaeological finds of organic objects ever discovered. At this time, it was the oldest assemblage of wooden objects on the planet. Fifteen pieces of wooden furniture were discovered; no gold or silver objects were discovered, however. There are three main types of furniture in the chamber: the pagoda table, plain tables, and serving stands. A main coffin that housed the deceased was also excavated from the chamber. Each face of the pagoda table has inlayed rectangles connected by double bars, giving the appearance of many pieces connected by dowels, but each was carved from one slab of wood. The Pagoda Table and other furniture types were discovered in situ piled with bronze serving implements, indicating communal feasting as an important aspect of Phrygian funeral rites.

Figure 2. The serving stands leaning against the east wall of the tomb, with the inlaid table to the south. Tables 1, 2, and 5 are visible in the foreground.

Exploitation of the Natural Environment

The step of raw material procurement is a very important step, as it frames the rest of the steps and the finished object. The extraction of wood from the environment is a specialized task, and these people are overlooked in their importance and relation to the final product. Each subsequent step relies on this one to be done well. Furthermore, loggers would cut trees based on many factors like location, exposure, age, and appearance of the bark. Trees were cut with axes, saws, and wedges, while smaller ones were often uprooted by digging. After the branches were lopped off, logs were pulled out by draft animals and either shipped whole or hewn into thick beams and planks before shipment. A typical lumber port might be at the mouth of a river with a mountainous, forested area at its watershed.

Figure 3. Serving stand B, assembled for display in the Museum of Anatolian Civilization, 1999.

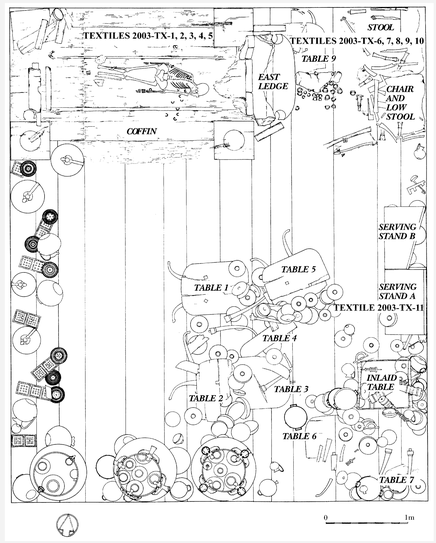

Figure 4. Site plan of the inner chamber.

Gordion

Gordion was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Phrygia, ruled at its height by King Midas in the 8th cent. BCE. Tumulus MM was constructed away from the citadel, around 53 meters high and a diameter of about 300 meters. This site was names Tumulus MM, Midas Mound, because scholars believed that Midas was interned here, although this idea is no longer prominent. The tomb most likely belonged to his father, King Gordios, due to Midas’s disgraceful death.

Sources

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Wood Degradation

Since wood degrades easily unless deposited in ideal conditions, it is very hard to find in the archaeological record. An elevated water content in wood leaves it susceptible to fungal and other forms of biological decomposition. Factors in the wood like porosity of the cell wall and rate of the cell wall polymer degradation accelerate decomposition. Certain fungi and bacteria use cellulose as food, so wet wood is the perfect environment for those microorganisms. In many cases, fungal and bacterial decomposition occurs well before the objects are discovered, rendering them useless to archaeologists. In the case of the Gordion furniture, water was introduced after discovery, so they were saved before the degradation became too great. This process is quick and severe, so the Chaîne Opératoire of woodworking is made difficult to analyze due to heavy damage, preventing scientific and visual analysis.

Figure 4. The inlaid table as assembled for display in the Museum of Anatolian Civilization, 1989.

Conclusion

Although the chamber was rich in fine wooden furniture and bronze objects, there was no gold or silver found. Since gold and silver were domestically abundant, these materials were not indicative of high status, as in many other civilizations. The potential foreign provenance of the wood made it a higher value material, making this tumulus unique to other Mediterranean and modern burial sites. Furthermore, a considerable number of wooden objects exist to be studied, but not many get studied deeply enough to understand the full picture of carpentry in the ancient Mediterranean. Scholars know almost nothing about the Chaîne Opératoire of wooden objects, which would provide crucial evidence to help us understand the lives of forgotten ancient people.

Figure 5. Tumulus MM during its excavation in 1957.