

Beyond the Gordian Knot: The Role of Gordion in the Campaigns of Alexander

Compared to the later events of his campaigns further east, Alexander the Great's time in Asia Minor has received surprisingly little attention from the extant ancient authors and thus has generally received relatively little attention from modern scholars. This situation largely persists despite the fact that during his time in Asia Minor at the very beginning of his Asiatic conquests, the fate of Alexander's campaigns remained very much in question. This is in large part why Alexander's time in Asia Minor should be appreciated – for its moment of significant historical uncertainty.

Despite this limited attention, one of the most notable and most discussed events in the ancient sources during Alexander's time in Asia Minor is the description of Alexander's visit to the ancient site of Gordion. Gordion is most famously known in relation to Alexander in the memorable story of Alexander's cutting of the Gordian knot, simultaneously in the extant accounts fulfilling the ancient prophecy and foreshadowing his future Asiatic conquests. While the importance of Alexander's motivations behind visiting Gordion for this symbolic or personal purpose should not be ignored, this memorable scene has obscured a pragmatic Alexander and the underlying potential for any logistical and strategic importance of Gordion.

A handful of scholars have posited that Gordion may have served as a significant base of operations for Alexander but have not thoroughly explained or investigated why this might have been the case (e.g. Young 1963; Murison 1972; Ruzicka 1988; Heckel 1992). Thanks to the substantial work continuing to come out of the Gordion excavations, it is now possible to reinvestigate the role of Gordion in Alexander's campaigns during this period of transition between the Achaemenid and Macedonian empires. Through an examination of the primary

sources that describe Alexander's visit to Gordion - Justin, Plutarch, Quintus Curtius Rufus, and Arrian – in conjunction with recent archaeological work, this paper will aim to provide an updated appreciation and understanding of Gordion in the campaigns of Alexander.

This paper will ultimately argue that the ancient site of Gordion played a significant strategic role in the underappreciated and precarious early period of Alexander's campaigns in Asia Minor. The attractive attributes of Gordion would have made it an ideal location for Alexander as a base of operations in hostile territory at a very uncertain time in his campaigns when he remained an invading foreigner with a scattered army. Darius had not yet been defeated or even directly faced on the battlefield, Memnon remained for a time a significant threat even after Granicus, and Darius' plans threatened to preemptively end Alexander's campaigns by cutting him off from behind in the Aegean after Alexander had disbanded his inexperienced fleet. For the entirety of Alexander's time in Asia Minor much was uncertain and much of the region remained unconquered. In many ways, Alexander's stay at and departure from Gordion marked a turning point in his campaigns, one that would be ultimately capped with his ensuing victory at Issus and the beginning of the fall of the Achaemenid empire.

Bibliography

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