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Ancient and New Interpretations of Anatolian Rock-cut “Thrones”

Rock-cut monuments in Anatolia are represented by a wide variety of artificially modified rocky outcrops and stone surfaces. These peculiar places, especially the figurative reliefs and the rock-cut architecture, have attracted plenty of attention — both now and in the past. This is, after all, one of the key aspects of rock-cut monuments: that they are integrated into the landscape, which leads to a continuous interaction with all inhabitants of the territory, even after the loss of their original function, meaning and connotations.

Rock-cut features could serve several functions: domestic (foundations for buildings or installations like presses), funerary (cist- or chamber tombs), cultic (platforms, altars, monuments for the focus or framing of religious activities). It is this last subset that I would like to examine in my article, in particular the group of monuments which can be called “thrones”.

It has to be pointed out, though, that “thrones” are not a strictly defined category of landscape monuments, but rather an intuitive descriptor applied to a range of modified natural stones. At first glance, this is a self-evident category: a natural outcrop cut to resemble a seat; with armrests and a higher back. But this design and seemingly self-explanatory identification shouldn't be automatically correlated with function.

In the existing classification systems, “thrones” are usually included as a variation or symbolic reference point of stepped altars. For example, in Phrygia, where the variety of rock-cut “installations” is the highest, a number of classification systems exist, developed by scholars such as Emily Haspels, Géza de Francovich, Taciser Tüfekçi Sivas, Susanne Berndt-Ersöz and Raḥşan Tamsü Polat. Tamsü Polat's system is based on the formal characteristics of rock-cut altars with important distinctions made according to the placement of the semi-circular “idol” on the top step. The “throne” designation is relegated to “Type II c”, which features “two protrusions on the sides, similar to arm-rests” [25, pp. 207–208].

In Susanne Berndt-Ersöz's monograph “Phrygian Rock-cut Shrines” (2006), it is stressed that “throne” is not a systemic category, but an interpretative framework [4, pp. 194–196]. However, she agrees that “step monuments recall divine thrones” [4, pp. 174–175, 194]. The interpretation of these monuments as “thrones” has an allure: it allows scholars to include the Anatolian monuments in the broader context of Near Eastern and ancient Greek cultic practices. For these areas we have more sources, so a comparative approach can be pursued¹.

¹ The historiography of cultic thrones and throne-like structures is too vast to recount here in its entirety. Thrones as cult places were discussed, for example, by Wolfgang Reichel [21]. Rock-cut thrones and “mountains as thrones” were studied by Arthur Bernard Cook in his extensive books on the cult of Zeus [5, pp. 124–147].



Fig. 1. Ancient Anatolian sites mentioned in the article. Adapted from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_Anatolia_ancient_regions-en.svg

However, internal sources and our actual knowledge about the use of these features are scant. Their original function, context, and even dating cannot be established with certainty. Were these monuments like altars, offering tables, or bases for statues? Were they used to sit on: and if they were used as “thrones”, were they occupied by a priest, a king, any other figure, or perhaps left empty as a place of divine epiphany? And, finally, should there be a single interpretation for all formally similar monuments in various regions?

I would like to consider three Anatolian rock-cut “thrones”: one connected to Phrygia, one to Syro-Anatolian Tabal, and one to Lydia (Fig. 1). For the purposes of this paper, I am going to assume that they all date to roughly the first half of the 1st millennium B. C. Their distribution already shows, that in Iron Age Anatolia the use of rock-cut features was a wide-spread regional practice, and not exclusive to a single culture or political entity. Of course, the number of throne-like rock structures in the ancient world is significantly higher, and the area of distribution even wider. However, it is not my goal to provide a universal study of all monuments. Rather, I would like to examine the way our knowledge of such “thrones” is gradually shaped and modified, how ancient sources can be reviewed or partially reconciled with modern scholarship, and what are the various methods we can employ to interrogate these curious structures

Hélène Danthine wrote about the imagery of empty and symbolic thrones in Near Eastern art [6]. For Phoenician “thrones” and aniconism, see [7, pp. 109–115]. See also Milette Gaifman’s work on aniconism and esp. the phenomenological analysis of the interesting “double throne” of Zeus and Hekate on Halki [10, pp. 165–167]. See the works of Maya Vassileva for parallels between Phrygian and Thracian rock-cut monuments [26; 27].

and their integration into natural landscapes. This includes a phenomenological analysis of the affects connected with the topological context of the monuments². I will concentrate on the sense of vision and how the visible features interrelated with each other and the observer from the location of the monument.

Midas City

First, let us turn to Phrygia: the so-called Midas City (ancient name unknown). This place, quite probably a “sacred city”, has the highest concentration of Phrygian rock-cut installations: cultic façades, altars, “thrones”, tombs [3; 4; 16]. However, I’d like to draw attention to a different and often overlooked group of monuments in the north-west corner of the plateau. In Berndt-Ersöz’s catalog they are given the numbers 78 and 79, a brief description, and no illustration [4, p. 256]. They are considered among one of the “relatively early” monuments, that is, dating to the 9th or 8th centuries B. C. They lack inscriptions³ or figurative reliefs, and no finds can be associated with them. Despite the lack of such distinguishing features, in my opinion, this cluster is a great example of a specific “perception of landscape” (Ill. 7).

A big boulder stands on the very edge of the plateau. It is worked from the eastern side, with several steps cut into it. On the flanks of the top step, there are two vertical protruding parts, which indeed resemble armrests (with the boulder forming the high back of the “throne”). The second, smaller monument (78) is located lower, to the left, and resembles a niche.

Let us examine the landscape around monument 79. When approaching frontally, we behold a breathtaking panorama. This was, one would assume, a conscious choice of the creators, who followed a natural inspiration. A photograph can convey the breadth and depth of the scenery; but in real life, the affect is even stronger. Of course, we cannot equate our contemporary response to ancient psychological states, yet the idiosyncrasy of the view cannot be ignored. As I wish to show, not only emotions such as awe can be considered, but a symbolic charge attributed to the location as well.

If we accept that such monuments were altars, then we can hypothetically reconstruct the perception of the rock and the landscape in the context of ritual.

A person (who, for example, wants to make an offering), approaches the altar. It is a rock, a feature of the natural world; but it is also artificially modified, and turned into a throne-like structure. The rock is located on the edge of the ravine, on a natural border, at the meeting point of two different spaces.

At the same time, the scenery beyond this border opens up before the spectator. The “bird’s eye view”, the ability to perceive a large territory — these capabilities can then be connected with the religious figure whose altar or place of epiphany this is. In this case, this is likely the Phrygian goddess Matar (“the Mother” (see [23; 26]), but our knowledge of Phrygian religion is still insufficient.

If we take the “throne” analogy at face value and imagine that at the time of the approach a person (or a statue?) is seated there, then the occupant of the throne is highlighted before the scenic backdrop, an overview of the land he or she rules over, protects. Alternatively, the occu-

² For an overview and criticism of phenomenology in archaeology, see [8].

³ On inscriptions of Phrygian monuments, see [4, pp. 67–87]. Dedicators of such monuments often include royal- or high-standing persons.

pant is associated with the deity worshipped at the “throne”. The deity’s power over the world materializes and becomes evident through the symbolism and placement of the monument.

Kızıldağ

Next, we turn to the Kızıldağ mountain in the southern region of Anatolia. Here is a group of at least four monuments, created by a certain King Hartapu. The main monument, usually named “the Throne”, is a ragged rocky outcrop, dark red in color, which towers over the plain (Ill. 8).

On the flat wall of the upper part, there is an engraved depiction of the enthroned King Hartapu, identified by a Luwian hieroglyphic inscription⁴.

It seems very possible, that the motif of the “throne” was read into the natural shape of the rock itself, turning it into a double proclamation of the idea of a lord (a person, or perhaps a god) enthroned and ruling above the land.

The date of the initial creation of the Kızıldağ complex is disputed. Since the 1990s, experts in Anatolian hieroglyphics and the Luwian language, mainly J.D.Hawkins, dated the monument to the late 12th–11th centuries B.C., based on the inscription [12, pt. 2, pp.433–435]. However, others (Ekrem Akurgal, Kurt Bittel, Winfried Orthmann, Sanna Aro-Valjus) argued that the relief is more likely for the 9th or 8th centuries B.C., on stylistic grounds [1, p.334; 9, pp.14–33]. Some attempted to reconcile the discrepancy by postulating that the relief was added centuries later, next to the already existing inscription [12, pt. 2, pp.434–435; 22, p.72], however this seems unlikely due to their very tight positioning and clear compositional unity (the hieroglyphic signs are located right next to the face and above the staff of Hartapu). A late 2nd millennium B. C. dating for the relief cannot be ruled out completely, either [17, p.63]; but this question needs further research⁵.

There has also been a recent development in the question of the complex’s dating. The region is currently studied by the Türkmen-Karahöyük Intensive Survey Project [18]. The scholars of the project argue that the new inscription, and also all the previously known monuments of Hartapu, should belong in the 8th century B. C. The unexcavated mound of Türkmen-Karahöyük, 14 km from Kızıldağ, might be the city where Hartapu lived: and the two places are clearly visible from each other: “It is easy to envision Hartapu and other rulers of Türkmen-Karahöyük leading a retinue to Kızıldağ and performing rites on the throne monument before the crowd gathered below and then continuing south to the slopes of Karadağ” [18, p.23].

The implications of this redating are significant. If Hartapu lived in the 8th century B. C., that would make him a contemporary, and as the researchers suppose, a rival, of King Midas / Mita of Phrygia. And this would also make the Kızıldağ monuments contemporary with the Early Phrygian step monuments, which they closely resemble — especially if we compare Kızıldağ 4, another Hartapu monument [9, pp.22–27, Abb. 16–17], to Step Monument no. 70 from Midas City [4, pp.251–252]. This would lead to the consideration of that specific type of monument

⁴ Sometime in the late Hellenistic / early Roman times, an interesting addition appeared on the horizontal “seat” of the throne: engraved outlines of three pairs of footprints and a Greek inscription, naming “Crateros, the priest <...>” [22, pp.72–80; 9, p.27, Abb. 20] — an intriguing example of the later use of a monument.

⁵ On Kızıldağ, see also the recent monograph by James F. Osborne [19, pp.136–142].

being not just a purely “Phrygian” creation, but an element of a wider cultural tendency in Iron Age Anatolia. However, the new dating is far from being universally accepted just yet.

The “Throne of Pelops” at Mount Siplyos

Let us now move on, to Mount Siplyos in Lydia. This area is of a special importance because of Pausanias: he calls it his home country⁶, and mentions it several times in his work. His interest is mainly in the ancient history of the area; and how it still lives on in monuments. Pausanias recounts the “signs” that prove that “Pelops and Tantalus once dwelt” in his country⁷. These include natural locations connected to these heroes (Lake of Tantalos), a tomb, a throne, a sanctuary, and a statue created from a living myrtle tree, and an ancient rock-cut statue; and Niobe herself, turned to stone⁸. The sanctuary of the Plastene Mother is an interesting case, as it is perhaps the only location that is named according to its “real” contemporary function in Pausanias’ time, and is not a fanciful identification. In 1887 several Roman-period inscriptions naming the goddess were found in the vicinity of Manisa / Magnesia [14, p.211; 11, p.26], proving that the sanctuary did, indeed, exist. We learn about the cultic importance of Mount Siplyos from other written sources as well: Strabo mentions that it was a place of worship for Rhea (10.3.12).

Pausanias’ mythographic itinerary attracted much attention in the 19th–20th centuries, with scholars and travelers trying to match the descriptions to real features of the landscape⁹. Today we have, in general, a good understanding about which places Pausanias might have meant.

The author populates the land with legendary kings of the “Tantalid” dynasty, like Pelops or Broteas, who are mentioned also as creators and patrons of monuments. This is done, in part, in an attempt to raise the authority and “interestingness” of the land. The result is, as phrased by Felipe Rojas, “a temporal and ontological mish-mash” [22, p.68]. But perhaps these legends can contain a trace of a local tradition, which retains knowledge, if not about the exact dignitaries, but about the ancient practice of royal (or high priestly) dedications of rock-cut structures — like those in Phrygia and on the Kızıldağ?

In this context, it is interesting to examine the so-called Throne of Pelops. We can be quite certain, that Pausanias attached this label to a rock-cut structure on Mount Siplyos, next to the narrow canyon called Yarikkaya.

Carl Humann in the 1880s was one of the first Western travelers to describe the monument [13]. He instantly connected it to the “throne of Pelops” mentioned by Pausanias. It was also soon discussed by William Ramsay. He posited that the throne “probably served some religious purpose: the lofty commanding position <...> points to this conclusion”, and he added that it

⁶ Most scholars suggest that he might had been born in the city of Magnesia ad Sipylum (modern Manisa) [11, pp.25–26].

⁷ Paus. 5.13.7; see also 2.22.3, 3.22.4, 1.21.3 for mentions of antiquities around Mount Siplyos.

⁸ The uncanny pareidolic “now you see it, now you don’t” image was a commonplace in ancient literature: Paus. 1.21.3; Ov. Metam. 6.312; Q. Smyrn. 1.293–304. It is usually identified as the Ağlayan Kaya near Manisa, which, indeed, resembles a human profile from a certain vantage point.

⁹ Among them Charles Texier, Georg Weber, Carl Humann, William Ramsay, Georges Perrot & Charles Chipiez, George E. Bean and others. For an overview and bibliography of the Sipylene monuments, see [2, pp.35–40; 24, pp.219–222].



Fig. 2. The “Throne of Pelops”, rock-cut monument on Mt. Sipylus (Spil Dağı, Manisa province, Turkey). Adapted from: C. Humann [13, S. 22]

wasn't a grave, but rather “an altar on which offerings were placed” [20, p. 37]¹⁰. George E. Bean also thinks that originally this was originally an altar, “but in view of its shape and size it may well have passed in antiquity under the name of the Throne of Pelops” [2, p. 40].

The structure itself is a “gigantic niche shaped like a hollow cube bisected diagonally” [14, p. 211] (Fig. 2).

Its position in the landscape is most peculiar. Here, the north-eastern segment of Mount Sipylus is separated from the main body of the mountain by a canyon¹¹ (Fig. 3). The “throne” stands on this outcrop, on the edge of a dangerous void: the chasm behind the monument is at least 150 meters deep! Such extreme geography could be understood as the working of mighty natural forces, and, indeed, Pausanias tells a story about a town destroyed by an earthquake¹². From the “throne”, a steep slope descends towards the east, but doesn't reach ground level, and instead turns into a rock wall. There were some buildings down the slope from the throne, but their dating is unknown [13]. At the bottom of the canyon runs a small creek.

¹⁰ See also [5, pp. 136–140].

¹¹ Hence the Turkish name Yarikkaya (“cleft rock”).

¹² Paus. 7.24.13: “A similar fate [i.e. destruction by earthquake], though different in type, came upon a city on Mount Sipylus, so that it vanished into a chasm. The mountain split, water welled up from the fissure, and the chasm became a lake called Saloe” (transl. by W. H. S. Jones & H. A. Ormerod). See also [5, p. 138].

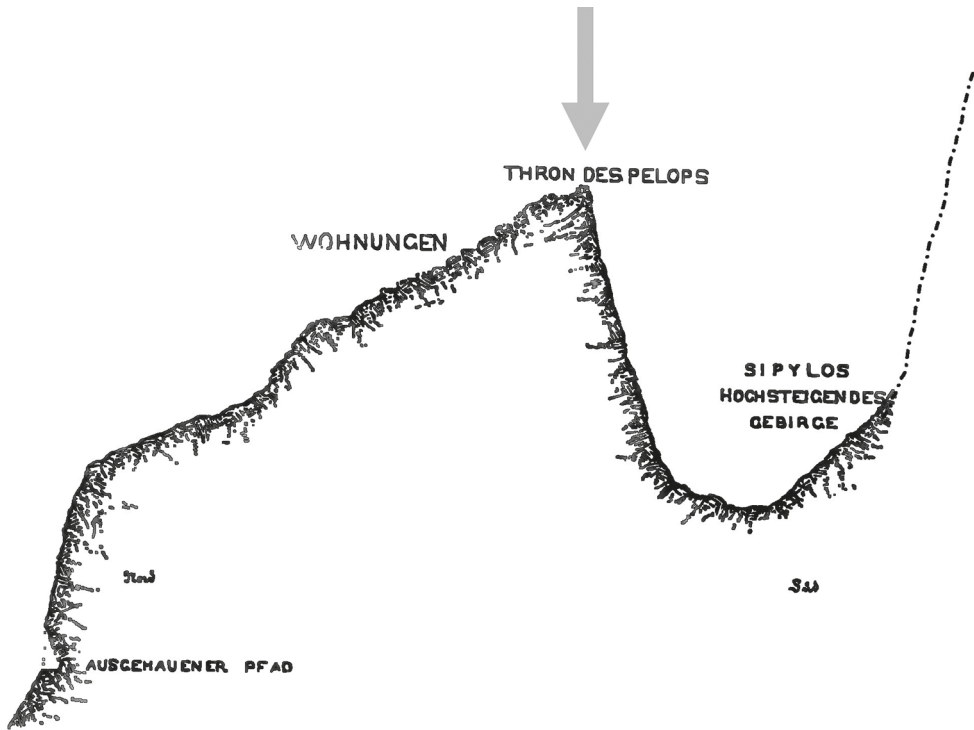


Fig. 3. The location of the “Throne of Pelops”. Section of the Yarikkaya canyon. Adapted from: C. Humann [13, S. 34]

Thus, it can be said that a special location was picked for the creation of this monument. This is a place where the working of the forces of nature is visible; where there is a clear-cut border between spaces; where there are both rocks and water.

Next, we can examine the scenery. An observer seated at the throne overlooks the whole plain of the Hermos river¹³. The view of this fertile land conveys a sense of prosperity and riches. They would also see the road connecting two important cities: Magnesia and Sardis. Thus, the elevated, “watchtower-like” position of the monument fosters an idea of dominion and control¹⁴.

The “throne” itself, however, is actually quite big: a single seated person would be dwarfed by the niche’s walls. Perhaps it wasn’t meant to be sat on — or wasn’t meant to be occupied by a “mere mortal”. Indeed, the size could be taken to suggest a divine reference.

The view *towards* the “throne” must also be considered. When approached frontally, the niche is aligned with the dominant feature of the landscape: the summit of Mount Sipylos. If we extend the vertical armrests of the throne, they create a frame around the peak of the sacred

¹³ Modern Gediz. For a geographical overview of rivers in Lydia, see [24, pp.41–44]. It is noted that this stretch of the Hermos river valley may have been one of the best agricultural areas in Lydia and “extremely fertile” [24, pp.47, 50].

¹⁴ Cf. Strab. 13.4.5, for another “domineering” location in Lydia, Mount Tmolos.

mountain. In this case the “throne” can be understood as a mediator, literally mid-way in location and scale/monumentality between the mountain and a person approaching from below.

Conclusion

Due to their very nature, rock-cut monuments remain visible after the loss of their original function. Their conspicuous placement and features continue to attract attention of local populace, who interpret them based on what they may know or may feel. Pausanias, on the one hand, postulates a mythic origin for the rock-cut monument on Mount Sipylos, in keeping with his general interest in placing ancient kings in the landscape; on the other hand, the practices he describes (kings as dedicators or dedicatees of such monuments) lines up well with what we know for certain for Hartapu’s “throne” on Kızıldag, or hypothesize for the Phrygian monument. To this, we can also add the observations gained through spatial and visual analysis. Future research could be supplemented by the study of ancient perception of landscape and scenery as a verification of the phenomenological approach.

In all three cases, there is a staging of activities focused around the “throne”. The “scene” is the symbolically charged environment, and the “actors” and their actions are understood in relation to the landscape. It is important to study the perception of the “thrones”, their connections to natural and built features. The location for the cutting of the monument is chosen not just based on available volumes of rock, but also on the environmental properties. “Extremes” and liminal spaces are clearly marked and used. Monuments 78–79 in “Midas City” stand on the edge of the plateau, Kızıldag is a natural “skyscraper” on the plain, the “Throne of Pelops” balances above a chasm. They all exhibit a defining, dominating and controlling presence over the surrounding landscape. Only for the “Throne of Pelops” can we find something “bigger” — the peak of Mount Sipylos, for which the “throne” can act as a threshold.

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Название статьи. Древние и новые интерпретации скальных «трон» Анатолии

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается три скальных «трона» на территории Анатолии: один из ступенчатых алтарей в «городе Мидаса» (Фригия), памятник Хартapu на Кызылдаге и т. н. «трон Пелоп» на горе Сипил (Лидия). Эти объекты объединяет общая структура и расположение в особом, примечательном окружении. Предпринята попытка анализа ландшафтного контекста, в первую очередь через зрительное восприятие окружающей среды, как от локации памятников, так и взгляд на памятники. Подобный анализ (проведённый, насколько это возможно, с учётом отличия древних и современных ландшафтов, а также древнего и современного опыта наблюдателя) позволяет выделить основные акценты, на которые ориентировался тот или иной «трон». При отсутствии иных источников, эти наблюдения способствуют лучшему пониманию изначальной концепции скальных памятников.

Ключевые слова: Древняя Анатолия, скальные памятники, скальные «троны», Фригия, Лидия, сиро-анатолийские княжества, I тысячелетие до н.э., восприятие ландшафта

Title. Ancient and New Interpretations of Anatolian Rock-cut “Thrones”

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Abstract. The article focuses on three rock-cut “thrones” in Anatolia: a stepped altar in “Midas City” (Phrygia), the monument of Hartapu on Kızıldağ, and the so-called “Throne of Pelops” on Mount Sipylus (Lydia). These monuments are united by similarities in their structure and location in special even “spectacular” environments. Their context in the landscape is analyzed, mainly through the visual senses: what could be observed from the monuments’ vantage point, or, on the other hand, while directing one’s gaze *at* the monument. Such analysis (if taking into account the discrepancies between ancient and modern landscapes, and ancient and modern experience of the observer) allows us to highlight the main accents towards which these “thrones” were oriented. In a situation where we lack other sources, these observations can enrich our understanding of the original idea of these rock-cut monuments.

Keywords: Ancient Anatolia, rock-cut monuments, rock-cut “thrones”, Phrygia, Lydia, Syro-Anatolian kingdoms, 1st millennium BC, perception of landscape



Ill. 7. Rock-cut monuments nos. 78–79, “Midas City”, Phrygia (modern Yazılıkaya, Eskişehir province, Turkey). Photo by T. P. Kisbali



Ill. 8. Rock-cut monument of King Hartapu, Kızıldağ (Karaman province, Turkey). Photo by E. Anıl. Available at: <http://hittitemonuments.com>