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## TRACES OF RITUAL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROCK-CUT SANCTUARY AT ESKİŞEHİR YAZILIKAYA/MIDAS FORTRESS

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**Abstract:** Yazılıkaya/Midas Fortress in Central Anatolia, situated amidst towering cliffs and deep valleys, encircled by fortifications hewn from volcanic rock, represents the most significant sacred settlement of the Phrygian Civilization. The unique rock monuments on the plateau serve as critical tangible evidence illuminating Phrygian religious practices. Recent excavations were conducted in the vicinity of the monumental Phrygian rock-cut altar, located to the west of the acropolis. This area is referred to as the Agdistis Sanctuary due to the inscribed votive steles from the Roman Period previously uncovered here. These excavations have yielded vital insights into the organization of ritual activities performed directly in front of the rock-cut altar. This paper aims to evaluate the architectural features unearthed for the first time through extensive excavations at this Phrygian rock-cut altar, in light of archaeological and anthropological findings, and to elucidate the usage of this space for ritual preparations.

**Keywords:** *Phrygian Civilization, Midas Fortress, Agdistis Sanctuary, Rock-cut altar, Ritual activities.*

### INTRODUCTION

The site is situated in the Central Anatolia Region of Turkey, 30 km south of Seyitgazi District, 18 km northwest of Han District, and 75 km from Eskisehir (Fig. 1). The fortified settlement, established on the rugged terrain southwest of Yazılıkaya Village, is also a sanctuary and is referred to as “Midas City” by certain researchers.<sup>1</sup> The acropolis consists of a flat rocky plateau and is 800 m long in the northeast-southwest direction. The Acropolis is 235 m wide to the northeast and 350 m wide to the southwest, and its elevation increases especially towards the south (Fig. 2). On top of the rocky area, on the skirts and at the points where the rock structure is suitable, the Phrygians built cult monuments consisting of many facades, altars, and niches in the name of the Mother Goddess Matar<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 3).

The fortress was mostly inhabited by the Phrygians. The Phrygians, who are thought to have migrated from Macedonia and Thrace to Anatolia in several raids from the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, took their place as a political power in Central Anatolia from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>3</sup> The area where the Phrygians were most influential politically and culturally was the Mountainous Phrygia Region, which was called “Minor Phrygia” in

<sup>1</sup> HASPELS 1971, 36.

<sup>2</sup> HASPELS 1971; TAMSÜ POLAT 2010, 204–221.

<sup>3</sup> HERODOTUS, 7. 73; STRABON, XII, 3.20; PLINY, 5. 41.145.

the Classical period, between the provinces of Eskişehir, Afyonkarahisar and Kütahya in the Upper Sakarya Valley. Mountainous Phrygia has a rugged terrain, which is advantageous for defense, and large, fertile plains suitable for agriculture around the lands. The region is bordered by Mount Sündiken to the north, Mount Sivrihisar to the east, and the Turkmen Mountains to the west, with deep valleys between these elevations. This geographical structure provided important advantages for both settlement and defense (Fig. 4).

This article covers the archaeological excavations in front of the monumental Phrygian rock-cut altar in the west of the Yazılıkaya/Midas Fortress Acropolis, the religious center of the Phrygian Civilization, and the evaluation of the archaeological finds from these excavations. In addition, ethnoarchaeological observations conducted in Çukurca village, located 3.5 km north of the site, provided comparative insight. The wooden vessels and hearths still used by the muhajir-descended villagers exhibit remarkable parallels with the rock-cut bowls and hearth structures uncovered during the excavations. By integrating archaeological and ethnoarchaeological data, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering a new interpretative framework for understanding ritual preparation areas associated with rock-cut altars in Phrygia.

### **Recent Discoveries at the Sanctuary of Agdistis**

The sanctuary where the Phrygian rock-cut altar is located was named “Agdistis Sanctuary” because of the inscribed stelae dated to the Roman Imperial Period.<sup>4</sup> The presence of a temple (?) dated to the Late Hellenistic Period in the area where the monumental Phrygian rock-cut altar is located at the highest point of the Old Phrygian settlement in the Midas Fortress, which is among the sacred places of the Phrygians, is significant.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that the cult of the Mother Goddess maintained its connection with the high places of Phrygia.<sup>6</sup> From the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards, the cult of the Mother Goddess underwent changes under the influence of Hellenism. However, the cult of Matar in Anatolia, instead of adopting the Greek style as it was, turned into a hybrid cult that preserved some features of the Phrygian Mother Goddess but also adopted features of the Greek Meter.<sup>7</sup>

During the first excavations conducted between 1936 and 1939 on the upper plateau of the fortress, just east of the stepped Phrygian rock-cut altar, under the direction of A. Gabriel, Director of the Institute on behalf of the French Archaeological Institute in Istanbul, fragments of terracotta figurines dating to the Hellenistic Period and votive stelae with Greek inscriptions dating to the Roman Imperial Period were found (Fig. 5). It is understood from the content of the inscriptions that the votive stelae were dedicated to Agdistis. Based on the finds recovered during the first period excavations, the researchers also stated that there was a temple dedicated to the goddess Agdistis just in front of the rock-cut altar.<sup>8</sup> They

identified ceramics dating to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC in this area, which they named as excavation area U4.<sup>9</sup>

Archaeological excavations were carried out for two seasons, in 2022 and 2024, to trace architectural remains, if any, in this place called a sanctuary, to determine the boundaries of this area if it is a sanctuary, and to determine the stratigraphy in this area<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 6). The architectural ceramics and small finds obtained because of the excavations were evaluated.

During the excavations in the sanctuary of Agdistis, it was found out that the Phrygian, Hellenistic and Roman Period ceramic finds found at a depth of 1.20 m after the surface soil in the area excavated up to the foundation level were mixed, and that the material below this level up to the base was a sterile layer and consisted of monochrome, that is, monochrome and slightly painted pottery dating to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC–6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The monochrome potsherds consist of well burnished, gray-colored, metallic looking vessels. Some of them are decorated with geometric motifs in incised or impressed technique. Others have spool handles imitating metal vessels. The most common forms include large craters and dinos, single-handle clover-mouthed jugs, splayed bowls, and bowls. Painted pottery, on the other hand, is represented by the so-called marble imitation decorated group among the Lydian ceramics, which is less numerous. In conclusion, although the ceramic finds were mixed in the first 3 levels of this 2.5x10 m excavated area, the ceramic finds in the other 2 levels are more sterile, mostly Phrygian ceramics dating to the 7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC (Fig. 7).<sup>11</sup> A 2.5 m long, 0.65 m wide, northeast-southwest aligned wall line was found in the south of the plank. During the leveling works, it was determined that the south side of this wall was supported by small stones while the north side was built with large stones (Fig. 8). In order to prevent the collapse of this wall, the wall line was suspended and the leveling work continued in the area immediately north of this wall. The excavations revealed that the wall in the northeast-southwest direction rested on the bedrock. During the leveling works carried out in the north direction of the wall line, it was determined that the ground formed by the bedrock was graded and continued in the north direction, and each level was leveled by filling with medium-sized stones in order to obtain a flat surface on the sloping land. In this excavated area, it was found that a hearth belonging to the Phrygian Period in the northeast corner of the plan square was destroyed by a wall belonging to a space built on it later. The wall line in the south of the trench, which continues in the northeast-southwest direction and does not show an elaborate workmanship, indicates an arrangement in the Late Hellenistic-Early Roman Period as evidenced by the ceramic finds.<sup>12</sup>

After the 2.5 m wide and 10 m long trench opened to the east of the area called Agdistis Sanctuary was documented to the west, it was removed in order to perceive the organic

GABRIEL 1965, 46, fig. 27.

<sup>9</sup> HASPELS 1951, 28, 38, 71, 102, 120, 130, 130, 137, 146, 149, pl. 37c1.5, 36e7, 45c1, 7e2, 8b6, 20a2, 39.2.2.3, 36c1.3, 36e2.6, 34a7.8, 34a2.3, 41a6, 38b3.4, 38b5.2, 43b2, 16a, 31a2=31b2, 31a3–31b3, 29.21, 7d1, 8d4, 44a8, 36c2, 43b4, 37c2.4.

<sup>10</sup> POLAT/POLAT/YÜRÜK 2024, 431.

<sup>11</sup> POLAT/POLAT/YÜRÜK 2024, 431.

<sup>12</sup> POLAT/POLAT/YÜRÜK 2024, 422.

<sup>4</sup> Stelae 1–8 and 13–14 in the sanctuary of Agdistis were discovered by the Service of Antiquities in 1935, HASPELS 1971, 188, footnote. 122.

<sup>5</sup> ROLLER 2012, 230.

<sup>6</sup> ROLLER 1999, 190–191.

<sup>7</sup> ROLLER 1999, 189.

<sup>8</sup> Today there are no traces of this temple. HASPELS 1951, 86 vdd.;

connection of the area. It was determined that the wall in the northeast-southwest direction, which was detected in the plan square where this excavation was carried out, continued to the west and this wall was combined with a single row of stones continuing to the north on the north-south line. During the excavations, mixed fragments of bowls, craters, dinos, and amphorae dating to the Phrygian, Hellenistic and Roman Periods were recovered from the upper levels. P.t weaving weights, p.t spindle whorls, terracotta figurine foot fragments, bronze arrowheads, and plated plate fragments were also found during the excavations in this area. During the excavations, a stone pavement fragment measuring 3.00x1.30 m was found towards the north of the trench. The remains of a wall belonging to a place that was built with the combination of medium and small-sized stones in two rows extending in the north-south and east-west directions and apparently forming an organic connection with the remains of the wall in the south but which was severely damaged were found. The excavations in this area yielded a pithos dating to the Middle Phrygian Period (7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC) placed in a pit with a diameter of 0.80 m and a pithos and crater dating to the Middle Phrygian Period (7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC); clover-rimmed and flat-rimmed jugs, amphora, and dinos fragments were also found. In addition, weights and spindle whorls from weaving looms, a bronze reader, fragments of terracotta figurines, tools (?), and a melody stone were found during the excavations. After the excavations, the eastern part of the Phrygian altar was cleaned up to the bedrock floor level. During these excavations, a large number of ceramics dating to the 8<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC, one ceramic decoration printing tool (?), one terracotta spindle whorl, Roman Period ceramics belonging to the eastern sigillata B group ceramics dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC-AD, and fragments of plastic vessels belonging to the present day were found. In 2022, our studies in a small area showed that this area dated to the 7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC was transformed with simple architectural elements and used until the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

During the 2024 excavations, a new 10x10 m plan square was excavated just south of the Phrygian rock-cut altar in the sanctuary. Immediately southeast of the plan square, a wall measuring 1.45–1.40 m in thickness and oriented in a northwest–southeast direction was uncovered. This wall, whose northwestern end borders the Phrygian rock-cut altar and whose southeastern end appears to extend further into the eastern section, was identified during the excavation. The wall was built in dry masonry technique, and it was observed that it was formed by arranging medium-sized stones with flat faces facing outwards on both sides, and the middle part was formed by compacting small-sized stones and continued in 2 rows. While the ceramics recovered from this area were dated to the Late Hellenistic Period and 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, a small number of sherds belonging to cooking, storage, and daily use vessels were found. Terracotta figurine fragments, a fragment of a votive stele for Meter, and a bronze coin from the Dokimeion Agrippina II (50–59 AD) period were found during the excavations.

During the excavations carried out to the north of the trench, a wall fragment composed of medium and small-sized stones was found, joined to the wall located in the northeastern corner of the northwest–southeast-oriented wall in the

eastern section. It was determined that the wall in the north-south direction formed by large stones joining this wall line continues in the east-west direction. In the area where this wall line was identified, ceramics belonging to the Middle Phrygian Period such as craters, dinos, plates, and bowls were found. In addition to ceramic finds, terracotta spindle whorls, weaving loom weights, and iron objects were found.

During the excavations, the remains of one hearth connected to the altar where animals sacrificed during religious ceremonies were cooked. Animal bones of various species were found around the hearth<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 9). Ethnoarchaeological research conducted in Çukurca village, located 3.5 km north of the excavation area, has provided valuable comparative insights. The rock-cut bowls found on a platform during the excavation bear a resemblance to the traditional wooden vessels used for leavening bread by the village residents, who are descendants of Balkan immigrants known as muhajir. Similarly, the quadrangular-shaped rock-cut bowls identified south of the altar bear a notable resemblance to the hearth structures called “kotlan” used in the village, where the burning process is conducted from above. These parallels contribute to our understanding of the functional continuity and cultural adaptation within the region.

In the northeast of the Phrygian rock-cut altar in the Agdistis Sanctuary, 3 rock-cut bowls with diameters of 25 cm and depths of 5–7.5 cm were found on a platform formed by leveling the bedrock in the east-west direction. On the rock mass where these rock-cut bowls were found, a rock-cut idol with abstract depictions of the Phrygian Mother Goddess Matar was found just east of the bowls (Figs. 10–11). The rock-cut bowls discovered in this area indicate that the practice of making offerings in front of the rock-cut altar during the Phrygian Period was recorded as evidence of the ritual act, further consecrated by the abstract representation of the Mother Goddess. In this context, one should raise the following question: What is the meaning of these rock-cut bowls crowned with a rock-cut idol, an abstract depiction of the Mother Goddess Matar, in front of a rock-cut altar?

In Hittite and Late Hittite centers (Boğazköy, Kargamış), rock markings, pits, and reliefs interpreted as offering bowls were found at the entrances to the cities. These signs are interpreted by P. Neve as part of important cultic functions. These round pits found at the city gates indicate the presence of liquid offerings.<sup>14</sup>

At Yazılıkaya/Midas Fortress in Eskişehir, at the Phrygian necropolis in Zey Village, at the area called Menekşe Kaya in Afyonkarahisar, and at Fındık Asar Fortress in Kütahya, pits with diameters ranging between 0.20–0.40 m and depths between 0.20–0.50 m were found on flattened areas as a platform above or below the steps of the rock-cut altar. In addition to these, triple and single reliefs were also found on the rocky platform where the altar was located in the rock-cut altars of Eskişehir Yazılıkaya/Midas Fortress, Afyon Demirli Village Menekşe Kaya and Kütahya Fındık Asar Fortress settlements. The pits found in most of the altars indicate that liquid libations were made during the ceremonies (Fig. 12).

<sup>13</sup> The hearth measures 1.10x0.70x0.40 m., and studies on the bone remains are ongoing.

<sup>14</sup> NEVE 1977–1978, 72.

The triple and single reliefs found on some altars must be related to the offerings<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 13).

In the Hittite text describing the winter feast of Ishtar of Ninive, pits carved with knives and covered with bread are mentioned.<sup>16</sup> In addition, a group of Roman marble altars found in the museums of Eskisehir (Fig. 14) and Yalvaç are also remarkable for their triple reliefs. These archaeological sources interpret the reliefs found in the immediate vicinity of the Phrygian rock-cut altar as symbolic expressions of bread offerings on the rock, reflecting deep feelings of gratitude to the goddess at the end of a fruitful harvest season. Thus, based on the pits and reliefs found on the altars, it can be suggested that bread offerings may have been made to the goddess in addition to liquid libations.<sup>17</sup> In this case, the rock-cut bowls found to the northeast of the altar during the excavations in front of the monumental Phrygian rock-cut altar, which is called the Agdistis sanctuary, should also be an area directly related to the act of offering.

The excavations yielded 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century BC Phrygian ceramics, 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century BC Lydian ceramics, loom weights and spindle whorls in front of the platform where the rock-cut bowls were found. The excavations in this area yielded sherds of pottery and dinos in large-sized pithoi and craters which are intertwined but integrable.

## CONCLUSION

According to the first findings, the sanctuary dates to the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century BC, i.e., the Middle Phrygian Period, and Phrygian and Lydian ceramics dating to the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century BC and ceramics and finds dating to the Roman Period (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) were found in the upper layers. The excavations also revealed the presence of three rock-cut bowls, one after the other on a rocky platform, and a rock-cut idol, which is an abstract depiction of the Mother Goddess Matar, in the immediate vicinity of these bowls. The ethnoarchaeological research conducted in Çukurca village supports the interpretation of the rock-cut bowls as functional elements possibly related to food preparation, as evidenced by their similarity to traditional bread-leavening vessels used by the villagers. The identification of quadrangular-shaped rock-cut bowls resembling the "kotlan" hearths used in the village also suggests a possible continuity or adaptation of ritual practices from the Phrygian period to more recent times. This comparative approach emphasizes the importance of integrating archaeological and ethnoarchaeological data to gain a holistic understanding of ritual spaces and their functions throughout history (Figs. 15-16). Comprehensive archaeological excavations in front of the Phrygian rock-cut altar uncovered a ritual preparation area with hearths, characterized by a rudimentary stone foundation and wooden structure, offering definitive evidence of ritual organization during the Phrygian Period.<sup>18</sup> The continuation of sacred practices under the names Angdistis and Agdistis in the Late

Hellenistic and Roman periods, in front of the monumental rock-cut altar where ritual activities were performed in honor of the Mother Goddess during the Phrygian Period, indicates that the sanctity of this site persisted across different historical periods. This observation highlights the need for a more thorough investigation and critical analysis of the rituals in Phrygian religious life, along with the religious ceremonies and organizations of later periods.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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<sup>15</sup> TAMSÜ POLAT 2010, 209.

<sup>16</sup> GIMBUTAS 1989, 147 ff.

<sup>17</sup> TUFEKCI SİVAS 2002, 342.

<sup>18</sup> Angdistis, who is seen on coins minted by Dokimeion in Phrygia in addition to Sardis and Philadelphia, is known to have had a cult in this settlement as well (ROBERT 1980, 237, Figs. 10-14).

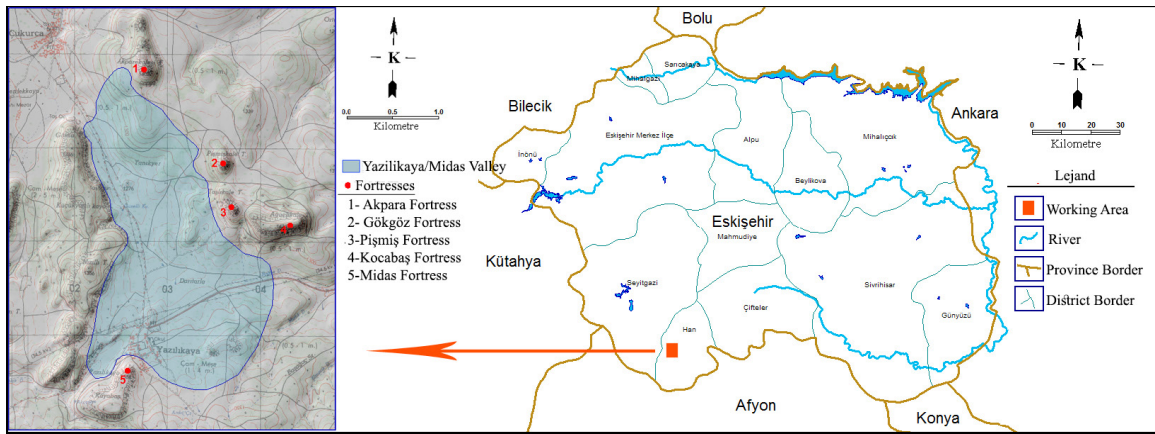


Fig. 1. Location of the work area.

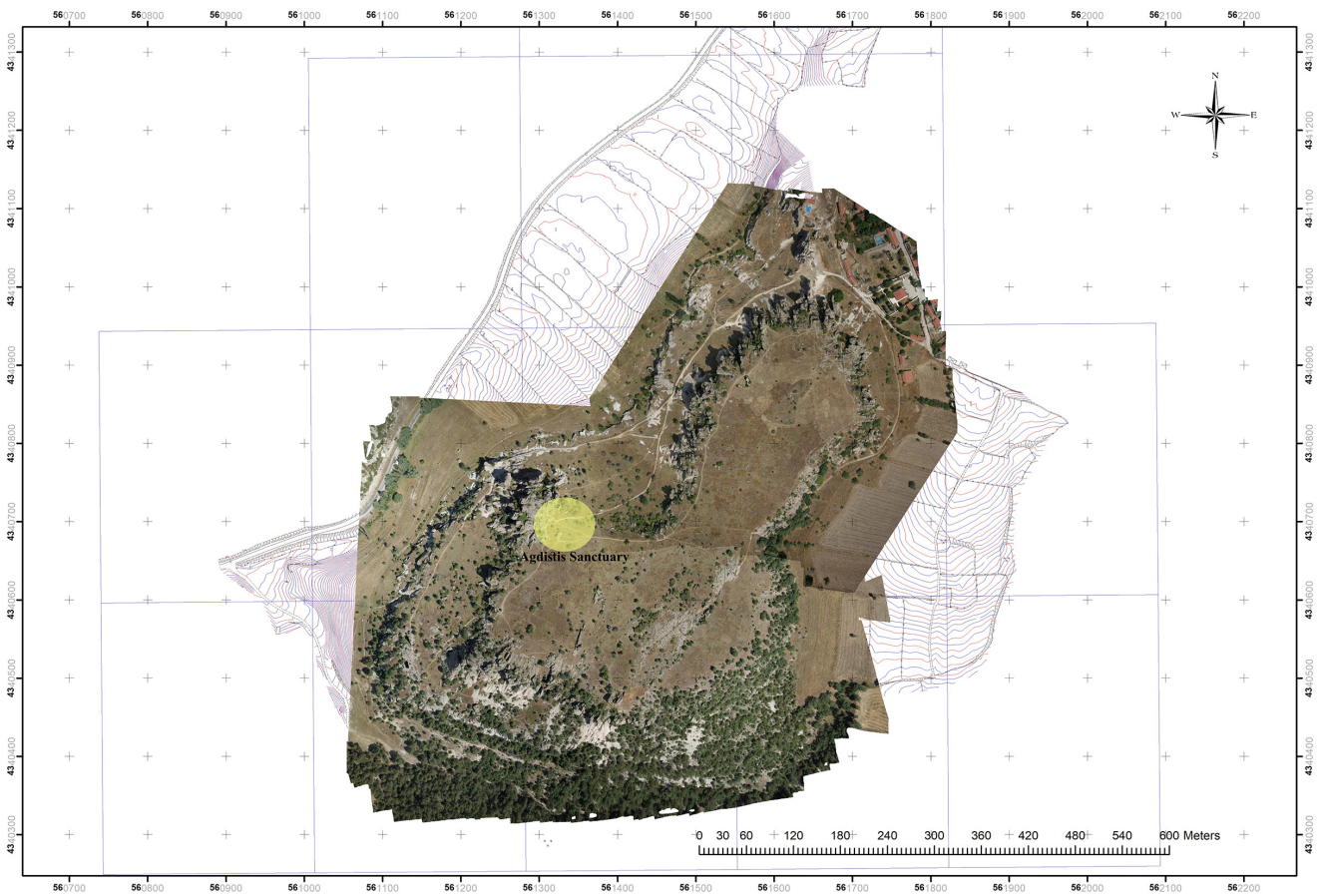
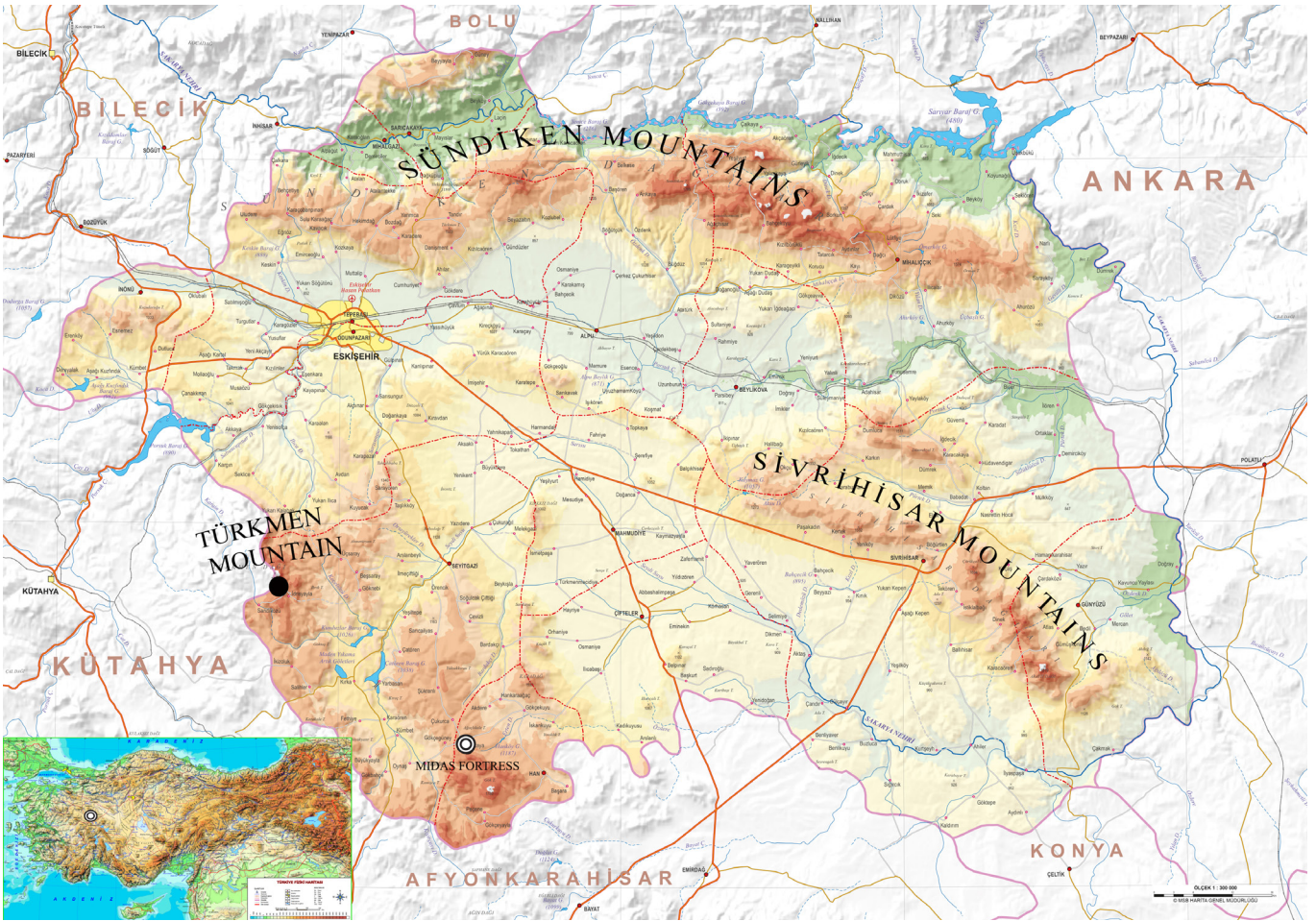


Fig. 2. Yazılıkaya/Midas Fortress.



**Fig. 3.** Phrygian Monuments at Yazılıkaya/Midas Fortress (From left to right: Midas Monument, Unfinished Monument, Hyacinth Monument).



**Fig. 4.** Mountains surrounding Yazılıkaya / Midas Fortress.



**Fig. 5.** Steles dedicated to Agdistis (HASPELS 1971, 605–611).



**Fig. 6.** The 2022 excavation campaign at the Agdistis Sanctuary.



**Fig. 7.** Phrygian ceramics dating to the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century BC.



**Fig. 8.** Remains of a wall built during the Late Hellenistic-Early Roman Period.



**Fig. 9.** Remains of a hearth dating to the Middle Phrygian Period.



**Fig. 10.** 2024 general view of the excavation area.



**Fig. 11.** Rock-cut bowls and rock idol.



**Fig. 12.** Altar with triple pits at Midas Fortress.



**Fig. 13.** Menekşe Kaya rock-cut altars with triple reliefs.



**Fig. 14.** Marble altars with triple reliefs in Roman period from Pessinus.



**Fig. 15.** Wooden bowls used today for leavening bread.



**Fig. 16.** Quadrangular hearth discovered during the excavations south of the altar, and the “kotlan” hearth used by the local villagers.