Picturing Persian Victory:  
The Painted Battle Scene on the Munich Wood

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Abstract
The present article analyses the battle scene on the painted beam in Munich, which originally belonged to the ensemble of an extensively painted tomb chamber near Tatarlı, and reviews its interpretation as an historical depiction that was proposed by the first editor Peter Calmeyer. The author concludes that this battle scene bears no clear indications to connect it with a specific historical event; rather, it seems to depict an exemplary Persian victory over enemies, who are conveyed as a unified ethnic group by their uniform costumes and pointed caps.

The article analyses the evidence of the iconography in detail with particular regard to the forms of narration and the context, and in the light of this review attempts to show alternative ways how this painted Persian victory may be viewed and interpreted.

Keywords
Phrygia / Kelainai / Persians / Scythians / Battle / Wood painting / Iconography

Introduction

In 1989 four pieces of wooden beams of unknown origin were handed over to the “Archäologische Staatssammlung” as a gift and permanent loan. In 1993, Peter Calmeyer published a first acquisition report in the „Münchner Jahrbücher“, unfortunately with inadequate and sometimes upside down illustrations. Even though shortly thereafter two colour photographs of details of the beams were published in the exhibition catalogue “Orient und Okzident”, these pictures were reproduced the wrong way round, so that they were not recognisable as a coherent scenic ensemble. Probably because of this inadequate photographic publication, scholars have hardly taken notice of these important monuments of Achaemenid-era wood painting. Fourteen years
after first being published, the Munich beams are still widely unknown. In literature one finds only a few casual references to them. The author of this paper was able to prove elsewhere that their original context was an extensively painted wooden tomb chamber in a tumulus near the village Tatarlı, *en route* from the royal residence of Kelainai to Gordion. The Tumulus in Tatarlı was raided by the villagers in 1969 and excavated by the Museum of Afyon in 1970. Some beams of the walls were cut off and taken away during the raiding, while the museum staff dismantled the remaining beams and brought them to the Afyon Museum. Detailed technical studies on the planks in the Afyon Museum showed that the beam with the battle scene was sawed off from the east wall by the looters in 1969.

The dimensions of the timber-lined tomb chamber are reported to be 2.50 m × 2 m in length and width and 1.85 m in height. The northern—*i.e.* back wall—was made up of 8 beams, while the sidewalls—that is the eastern and western walls—consisted of 4 beams and the gabled roof of 7 beams. From the southern wall a door led to a stone barrel-shaped *dromos*. Additionally, the wooden chamber was enclosed within a stone chamber before being covered by an earthen mantle.

The Tatarlı wooden tomb chamber is the latest known example of the old Phrygian tradition of the timber tomb construction. Unlike the earlier tumuli of the necropolis of Gordion it has a stone mantle and a *dromos* leading to the chamber.

The beam with the battle frieze is 221 cm long and 32 cm high and was sawn in two in recent times, probably to make transportation easier. The two parts which belong together are easily recognisable due to continuity in the imagery (Fig. 1). Only 1 mm is missing between the parts belonging together,

5 Casual mentions by Jacobs 1994, 138; Özgen, Öztürk 1996, 45; Boardman 2000, 247, note 150. Borchhardt (2002, 95-96) includes the Munich beams in the catalogue of the historical scenes referring to Calmeyer's interpretation. In his book “Darius dans l’ombre d’Alexandre”, Briant (2003, 247, fig. 40) republishes a detailed photograph and a drawing of one of the beams with the combat scene. The drawings are unfortunately faulty regarding some details, since they have been created from inadequate photographs.

6 Summerer 2007, 115-164. It seems that along this natural route there were other imposing grave monuments: Athenaeus (XIII, 574 f) describes the grave monument of Alcibiades, who was killed in 404 BC by the Satrap Pharnabazos in Melisse on the way between Synnada (Suhut) and Metropolis (Tatarlı).


9 Detailed architectural studies of wood construction by Alexander von Kienlin are forthcoming.