



Rules of the Road: Four Lessons from an Extraordinary Exhibit Adventure

by John Russick

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In the summer of 1998, just weeks after accepting a position at the Chicago Historical Society, my wife Susan and I joined a crew of archaeologists, conservators, and researchers at a remote dig site in central Turkey. I was hired to develop and design the inaugural exhibits for an expansion of a state museum to open there just seventeen months later. My wife had recently received her graduate degree in conservation and was also invited to join the team of conservators who would treat, re-assemble, and mount the ancient pottery, jewelry, and other artifacts found in the ruins. We joined the dig crew that summer anticipating a wonderful adventure. Unexpectedly, we also got a better understanding of what was important in life.



Susan and John Russick at the Hagia Sofia in Istanbul, Turkey, August 1998

The site, known as Gordion, is about a 90 minutes southwest of Ankara, the nation's capital (you can see it on a map at <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~salzmann/map.htm>). Gordion is named for Gordias, the legendary founder of an ancient kingdom called Phrygia and the maker of the famous Gordian knot. After the death of the previous Phrygian ruler, an oracle advised the Phrygians that the first person to enter their capitol city on an ox cart should be proclaimed king. Gordias was that man and he supposedly fasten his cart to the pole that held the oxen with his famous knot and then left it the center of town to remind the citizens of Phrygia of his humble roots. After Gordias's line ended without an obvious heir, untying the knot became the symbolic act of the man destined to rule all of Asia. Although many supposedly tried, no one could undo the knot until Gordion's most famous visitor, Alexander the Great, came through on his way to conquer the East. Alexander did not fiddle about. He cut the knot in two with his sword and declared himself in charge. He then left and never returned.

Dr. G. Kenneth Sams, professor of classical archaeology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and Project Director for the dig asked me to develop and design the exhibits for the new museum. Jessica Johnson, then the head of the objects conservation program at Gordion, first got me interested in the prospect of going to Turkey. Jessie and I had been colleagues at the Texas Memorial Museum on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin in the mid-1990s. She arranged for Ken and I to meet, and shortly thereafter Susan and I were on our way to Turkey. We planned to be gone for 8 weeks and return the following summer to finish the job. Before I had even started the work I learned the first of many lessons this project was about to teach me.



John Russick, Ken Sams, and Jessie Johnson
(from left) tour the ancient Phrygian citadel, July 1998



LESSON #1: It is, in fact, who (or whom) you know.

The traditional reading of that statement is that some of us unfairly benefit from influential connections to further our careers. However, I think more often it applies to the tremendous opportunities that come your way because the people you know and are on good terms with are interesting people involved with exciting work, and sometimes they need what you have to offer.

I was thrilled to be going that first summer. Susan and I flew from Chicago to New York. Jessie joined us there. We proceeded on to Istanbul where we caught a smaller plane to Ankara. At the international airport in Istanbul we had to point to our luggage as we crossed the tarmac in order to have the bags placed on the connecting flight. This was to ensure that only the bags of actual passengers went into the plane—a terrorism-prevention tactic. It was an early reminder that we had entered a more volatile region of the world. Today, it appears an archaic leftover from a more trusting time.

Ken picked us up in Ankara and from there we drove out toward Gordion. On the way we passed through the town of Polatli (pronounced po-LOT-la). The first time I saw Polatli it appeared to be the edge of the new, economically expanding and urbanizing Turkey that I'd heard so much about before I came. As we drove out of town toward Gordion this image of the new Turkey faded into the pastoral landscape of the ancients.

About 30 minutes out of Polatli we arrived at Gordion, near the village of Yassihoyuk (pronounced ya-sa-hoo-YOOK), an extremely small community with not much in the way of public amenities. On the way into town the road passes by the small, decades-old museum. It sits across the road from the Midas tomb, a massive mound that houses a burial chamber commonly reputed to be the resting place of King Midas, one of Phrygia's greatest leaders. After passing through the heart of the village, we entered the mud brick and plaster compound on the edge of town from which dig operations were run. There were several buildings in the compound—the main house, a couple of collections storage buildings, a small building where additional summer staff slept when the house got too full, and a couple of outhouses. The compound had one telephone, one fax machine, no running water, and intermittent electrical service. With the exception of a modern metal storage building standing in the middle of the compound, all the other structures were built in the 1950s and were connected by a high, thick wall that created a continuous barrier between the dig house grounds and the surrounding countryside.



The dig house compound

I spent the next few days getting an overview of the collection, touring the old museum building, visiting the burial mounds and the citadel—the ancient fortress city that was home to the Phrygians—and meeting that summer's project staff: conservators, archaeologists, historians, and of course the Turkish house staff. The house staff made sure the house ran well. They fed us, cleaned the rooms, and washed our clothes. This relationship was one of the many remarkable holdovers from a long tradition of western dig operations in this part (and many other parts) of the world. For example, Maummer, the man who ran the dig house, had been part of the operation since he was a young boy. On occasion Maummer could be coaxed to tell a story of how, when he was just a kid, he was asked by the archaeologists to climb through a very small passageway into the Midas Tomb. That day he became the first person to go inside the tomb in nearly three thousand years.

I spent a fair amount of time with Ken those first few weeks. Ken was incredibly generous with his time taking me around the site, introducing me to the old hands who would be involved with the museum project. He worked very hard to see this project through and he deserves a lot of credit. Ken also made sure that the work we were doing at Gordion was in line with the goals of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara and its Director, Ilhan Temizsoy. The Museum of Anatolian Civilizations is the parent of the Gordion Museum. After our arrival one of the first places Ken took me to visit was the museum in Ankara to meet Ilhan Bey. We discussed our plans for the summer and he revealed his desire to submit the Gordion Museum for the coveted "Museum of Europe" award when it opened the following October. Which leads to:

LESSON #2: Don't fear the client's expectations.

Clients often expect more than can be delivered from a contractor. I have almost always thought it wise to tackle extraordinarily high expectations up front. But sometimes you have to embrace the client's vision of both the project and its potential reception. Sometimes it's your own expectations that need to be reconsidered in order to make a project soar.



The daily routine at Gordion started about 5:00 am with a breakfast of soft-boiled eggs, tea or instant coffee, white bread, olives, cheese, honey, and apricot nectar. The dig crew went off to work until a mid-morning break of tea and biscuits. Then a bit more work, a break for lunch, and an early afternoon rest. Then the next shift began lasting until late afternoon, when we enjoyed drinks—mostly Turkish Beer, Vodka, or a local favorite, Raki, which tasted of anise—until dinner and then a little more work and finally sleep.

Once I settled in, I spent most of my time surveying collections, measuring existing cases, developing a storyline for the exhibit experience, and preparing a floorplan for the new museum building. I would frequently hike the mile or two between the dig house and the museum several times every day. Temperatures in the village often lingered around 100 degrees, and short pants and skirts were largely frowned upon in the rural Islamic community. There is a store in Yassihoyuk where the summer staff regularly bought semi-cold drinks and another where they purchased harsh Turkish cigarettes. Both served as a refreshing break from the stifling heat in the mid-afternoon.



The Gordion Museum, July 1998

Many people warned us that we might get sick when we were “in country” and that we should try to stay away from local cooking and not drink anything that didn’t come out of a sealed bottle. However, Susan and I have never been much for avoiding a new experience and the idea of trying to protect our delicate systems seemed an impossible and, frankly, silly notion.

We spent the first three weeks consuming local food and water at the dig house and in the village and never had so much as a stomachache. But a day or so after our first weekend visit to Ankara and a delicious dinner in an outdoor café, Susan was thunderstruck with an illness like nothing she had ever experienced before. Raging diarrhea came on without warning, and later violent vomiting of anything, including the strict “white diet” (rice, yogurt, boiled potatoes, and white bread) that was supposed to

help her get back on her feet. After four days of illness and a fever that eventually reached 40 degrees centigrade (104 Fahrenheit), it was clear to all that Susan needed medical attention. Ken and I drove her to see a doctor in Polatli. As we drove toward Polatli I recalled it as an ugly mess of a town, but that afternoon it appeared like an oasis—a shimmering beacon of modern Turkey.

The doctor sent us to the local hospital, which was made of poured concrete as is nearly every modern building in central Turkey that is not constructed of concrete block. The hospital was in the midst of a massive renovation. The first floor was uninhabitable except for a few offices along one side of the corridor. There was rubble and refuse everywhere. It was impossible to get two people down the hallway without one of them standing on the chunks of broken concrete that lined the main corridor.

We made our way to Susan’s room, which was in the women’s ward. But since she was so sick and there were no other women in the room, the hospital staff let me stay with her. Once Susan was in bed, I had to bring the doctor’s prescription to the local pharmacy and obtain the drugs, IV, and syringes for her treatment. The hospital did not carry any medicine and patients had to purchase their drugs at local pharmacies and bring them to the staff. The hospital also served meals without knives, spoons or forks. Patients were expected to supply those as well. Nevertheless, the staff was courteous, professional, and kind and Susan started to feel better right away.

After four days in the hospital receiving the high-quality care and considerate hospitality of the Turkish staff, we left to go back to the dig house. Within a few weeks we pulled out of the compound with the rest of the summer crew and headed to Ankara, where we would all go our separate ways. Although I was leaving Turkey with little more than a list of potential artifacts, a rough outline for the exhibit storyline and a very, very long “to do” list, Susan and I spent the next week in Istanbul seeing the sights, recovering, and relaxing. Her frightening experience led us to:

LESSON #3: Drink the water.

The U.S. government requires no shots for Americans who visit central Turkey. However, many experienced travelers advised us to stay away from certain foods and drinks while we were there. While we both wish that Susan hadn’t gotten sick, metaphorically speaking, “drinking the water” is the best reason to take the trip.

That winter I started to plan for the return trip to Turkey. Susan was not going back. She was fully recovered and happily serving as Director of Conservation at Chicago’s



Newberry Library. During the fall, Ken and I had crafted a final draft of the exhibit label copy. The plan was for me to have it translated into Turkish and then create a graphic design that would support both the English and Turkish copy along with appropriate images, including photographs, maps, and sketches. By the beginning of summer I had all of the Turkish and English panels designed and printed in Chicago. I brought them with me to Turkey in a heavy-duty shipping tube. All we would need was someone in Turkey to laminate them to rigid panels so we could mount the graphics in the museum.

The previous summer I had negotiated a 10-week delay in my starting date at the Chicago Historical Society to go to Turkey, but this summer I could only get a little more than three weeks off. So I knew I had to be ready when I got there. I also knew that I needed to bring a mountmaker along who would stay for the entire season, fabricate all of the mounts for the exhibit, and help coordinate the installation of the artifacts after I was gone. I hired a local mountmaker, Martin Giese, and the following June we went to Turkey together.

Since the exhibit cases had been fabricated and installed in the off-season, the primary tasks that summer were: locate a shop that could laminate the graphic panels to rigid boards for installation in the cases and on the museum walls; hire a carpenter who could build all the case furniture (wooden boxes that would support the objects inside the large cases); and find a resource for the high-quality steel and brass stock we needed to make proper mounts.

The objects from Gordion are incredible: pottery, jewelry, weapons, tools—amazing and beautiful artifacts that required the mounts drop away from view even while the objects were held securely. Gordion is also in the heart of a major earthquake zone. Less than two weeks after the museum opened the mounts got their first test. A powerful earthquake struck the region, but none of the artifacts in the museum were damaged.

In short order we had the graphic work underway, and the metal stock and tools we needed to make the mounts. Once I finished surveying the collection I designed the case layouts so we could hire a carpenter to build the case furniture. Which led to:

LESSON #4: Seeing is believing

Nearly all of the contractual work that was negotiated in Turkey was done on paper, but not using words. Agreements were signed sheets of graph paper on which we collectively drew the specifications that the product needed to meet including exhibit case details, case furniture

finishes, and metal stock capabilities. Prior to that second summer I had always relied on Ken's capable translations to tell me what I wanted to know, but this summer I needed to communicate directly with the shop's owners and laborers themselves. We did it with images—clear and rather detailed drawings only. It worked, and it was one of the most empowering experiences of my professional life.

All was going smoothly until Ken and I conducted a final review of the graphic panels. Over the past year, we had gone back and forth about label copy many times. We worked out a label design, word count, image selections, and even the Turkish translation. But it wasn't until we were both in Turkey that we saw the final product together. After our review, I had roughly twenty-five Turkish-language labels and about ten English-language ones that needed serious revisions—work that could only be done in Chicago. I left Turkey a few days later knowing that only six weeks remained before the dig house would close for the season and the installation work would have to end.

Back in Chicago I started revising the labels while object conservation, museum preparation, and mountmaking continued at Gordion. I shipped the revised and reprinted labels to Ken in Ankara in time for him to have them mounted and installed in the new museum before the summer staff left to go home in late August. On October 9, 1999, the new Gordion Museum opened in grand fashion. Dignitaries arrived for the opening ceremony including the Governor of Ankara and the Turkish Minister of Culture. Later that year the Turkish government put forward the Gordion Museum as their official entry for the "Museum of Europe" award. The museum remained in contention for the prize into the final round of competition. I could not have been more proud.

The new museum is a testament to the hard work of the Turkish museum staff (both at Gordion and in Ankara), the dig house staff, and the summer crews of 1998 and 1999. As with all successful exhibits it was a team effort and together we created something extraordinary.



View of the exhibition at the new museum at Gordion, August 1999, photograph by Nathan Otterson