

Karian Fingerprints: Stepped Pyramids and Script as Markers of Identity, At Home and Afield

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Abstract: *This brief contribution introduces a palimpsest of some main markers of the Karian imagery which are traceable in their homeland and abroad, in the light of the archaeological and scriptural background, dating back far as the Archaic period. As it seems, although they seem to be sunk into oblivion together with their language, these ancient and humble people, about whom we still know little, referred to permanent methods and achieved concise works (also supportable with evidence from the Khersonesos equated with Bozburun Peninsula) to show forth their distinguished identity.*

Keywords: Khersonesos, stepped pyramids, Karian language, script and alphabet, Apollo of Phoinix

*"Time is the wisest of all things that are; for it brings everything to light" (Thales)
[Diogenes Laertius. Vitae Philosophorum.I.35.]*

1. Brief Introduction

As an indigenous folk of the Anatolian cultures, Karians¹ mainly settled in, but not limited to, SW Asia Minor and adjacent islands. Their language is of the Luwic group but alphabets took different forms. Karian language was first deciphered through the Egyptian-Karian bilingual funerary inscriptions (written from right to left)² and verified with the Greek-Karian script discovered in Kaunos (greatly written from the reverse). Something beyond doubt is that although diagnosis of many letters or signs still remains debated as the alphabet has several geographic variants, they were read with short expressions that were usually hallmarked with personal names.³

The archaeological and architectural remnants of the Karians can be traced back to the Archaic and Classical periods, both in their hometowns and afield. It can be propounded, for now, that they have disclosed their identities in the categories of: (i) click-fit stonework and the stepped pyramidal monoliths in particular, (ii) inscriptions and masons' marks, often appearing as initials on monumental and funerary buildings (iii) miscellaneous evidence, especially ceramic.

The Trakheia Khersonesos (Bozburun Peninsula, Marmaris), oppositely lying Rhodes in SW Turkey, is a far (herein selected) land of the Karian country, in comparison to the sites that were under the Mylasan and Halikarnassian influence. Even though it was long manipulated by the insular system of Rhodes and became its Peraia in the Hellenistic period, the footsteps of the authentic inhabitants,

the Karian groups, were left, intentionally or not, in the region where recordable evidence has been chased in a variety of contexts.

2. Thumbnails

Tymnos, Losta, Phoinix and Kasarae are the most prominent rural settlements of the Khersonesos (Fig.1) which are abundant in the number of stepped pyramidal monoliths built in receding tiers upon squarish platforms (where a slab could measure ca.40-45 cm, on either side) and are unique to the Khersonesos. A single monolith could reach, up to a human's size but there are smaller ones, too. Among divergent views and a few published materials, the essential function of these stone works is often attached to funerary elements, described as grave markers (Bean 2000: 168; Carter 1982: 174-175; Oğuz-Kırca 2016: 132, fig.1) (Fig.2). However, some specific variants catch the eye with double and triple, now vanished, column bases, which brings to mind that they could have supported pillared designs as part of the temple and/or sepulchral architecture, at the same time. They are mostly found in scattered forms, detached from their context (e. g. near the ruins of the *Acropolis* at Phoinix over a pass, the hill slope in Tymnos, flat area of Kasarae, nearby the littoral sector of Losta, etc.). In addition to that, one can come across a good many lego-esque blocks seen across the pivotal or rural areas, as if cut according to the form-fit-function principle and extensively applied on the civilian buildings. All reflect the workmanship of stonemasonry, hammered by the past silent residents of the region.

The mention of Karians (e. g. *Krk* in Phoenician, *Kari* in Egyptian), also on the ancient *papyri*, are only some exceptional testimonies of their existence overseas. The inscriptions, the vast majority of which appear as stone markers and initials (from the Nile delta to Abu Simbel and Elephantine Island; Persepolis, Pasargadae, Susa, in Iran to

¹ Homeros.2.867-869.

² Ray 1981.

³ i.e. Pigres/ Pekrj/ Pikre, a prospective consultant of Psammethicus I, found in North Sakkara (Ray 1978: 90). On Karian language and onomastics, also Shevoroshkin 1988; Adiego 2007.

Megiddo and Samaria in Israel), were presumably left by the mercenaries⁴, especially the assimilated Karomemphites⁵ and/or main guard units; and those expatriated and enslaved, or labored as stonemasons, mostly in Egypt, Levant and Persia, acknowledged since the 26th dynasty (particularly familiar with pharaoh Psammetichus I), the Persian kings who reigned over a wider geography and rulers of the divided lands of the Levant from Phoenicia to Palestine-Judah.⁶ Alongside some well recognized samples in the Anatolian *poleis* such as Tralleis, Lydian Sardis or Lycian Kria, Phoinix (modern Taşlıca / Fenaket)⁷ is, presently, unless proven otherwise, the unique case evidencing possible Karian marks on the frontal face of the outer/ main gate lentos and, the front wall of the sanctuary of Apollo in the Khersonesos⁸, if not inverted. Toward the bottom, characters are somehow visible on the face of another ashlar block (Fig.3). If these graffiti are nothing different than assumed, a tentative, proposed reading (in view of likely consonants appearing as/sequentially “š”, “k/š”, “q”, “p” and continuing/ending with “r/y?”, “š”) could correspond to a (votive/ funerary block of) personal (son?) name and/or name attested with a provenance (in cognizance of a proto-Anatolian sound of š linkable to the “-ss” in Greek), on the off chance.

Figurines, sherds, ostraca, jewelry, gemstones, etc. fall into the other category evidence which are lighter in weight but heavy in value, bearing Karian scripts. The stylized marks, for example the H image (evocative of *eta* ligatures), zigzaggy signs or pluses, reported from *i.e.* Samaria, Pasargadae, recall some questioned motifs found in the Karian *poleis* such as Iassos and Stratonikeia.⁹ That many other Karian origin settlements retain a potentiality for congenerous instances need to be inquired within the same scope in the future.

3. Domestic and overseas evidence reconsidered

A striking group of incised evidence revealing the Karian graffiti comes from the false door (recessed niches) stelae which are sighted on the mastabas and rock-cut tombs in Egypt but are often thought to have been influenced and adopted from the civic temple architecture of Mesopotamia.¹⁰ A nice example, made of limestone, dates back to the 7th-6th centuries B. C. The stele, which is incised in the Karian script, is now resting in the Fitzwilliam Museum (ID: 63003). It was reused as a blocking material in the Baboon galleries at Saqqara. Although the original dimensions presented by the Egyptian Exploration Society

⁴Herodotus.2.30-31, 152-154; Kuhrt 2017: 345-349. Besides the Hellenomemphites (Herodotus.2.61), Polyaeus makes a mention of the Karomemphites who probably settled their own quarters around 7th century B.C.

⁵Aristagoras of Miletus.608/ Herodotus.

⁶A respectable compilation has been made by Küçükeren 2019.*passim*. Nylander 1965.

⁷ASAA 2 (1916: 167, 121).

⁸On Phoinix survey, settlement pattern and model, indicatively Oğuz-Kırca 2014a.

⁹Franklin 2001; Adiego 2007; Küçükeren 2019: 203, 231-235.

¹⁰Masson 1978; Küçükeren 2019: 77-86, 89-100; Demand 2011: 71-72.

in 1971 (excavation no: H5-1352) differ slightly, the current length and width are given as 36,2 and 20 cm by the Museum, respectively.¹¹ About its possible reading, Ray (1982: 186) makes a mention of a personal name (probably the owner) translated as “tduśol” with a presumptive ethnic description attested as “kbośśamsqi” (Fig.4). On average, their sizes are quite small in comparison to the Khersonessian monoliths of funerary purpose.

The interesting point with the stelae, if not an optical illusion, is their slightly tilted appearance, properly inlaid within a main frame. The prepensed orientation of the innermost doors with a certain degree of deviation may deserve a discussion in this respect.

Though it may sound superficial lacking a proper scientific base, there seems a rationale for a mind exercise on a suppositional linkage between the Khersonessian stepped pyramids (which seem to be worked with minimum one degree tilt with a chance in a million-otherwise the issue of vertical visual illusion again steps in, due to the ground or conditions thereof, etc.) and a group of Egyptian funerary fabrications showing up with the false doors.

Assuming that the subject matter is not deceptive, the idea of creating hometown pyramids and interlocked doors as if perspective imitations (or purposefully deviated simulations) of a gateway reaching the supernal and empyreal or the sub-terrestrial world, respectively, might be speculated in the next step. One could well ruminate over a multi-layered appearance of the pyramids from the top, smacking of a three dimensional view of the repeating strata, like the said doors but not necessarily proposing a direct linkage between these two. Over and above, could the point of question about tilt be a representation of a true or magnetic north or something to be with the earthly axis some thousand years ago? As a matter of fact, nothing can be opined regarding an orientation or declination, in the dearth of an *in-situ* found stepped pyramid. In a similar vein, it is highly likely that the past people were not aware of a true or geomagnetic pole of the earth in the modern terms or we have little or no idea as to how they exactly accomplished some well designated monumental projects and made architectural plannings (but probably based on the north celestial pole, by looking at the position of the stars and fixing relative azimuthal positions). Under this scope, there is no reason why one should not give reconsideration to the absolute orientation of the stepped pyramids or false doors in respect of their self-deviations.

As an extension of the above discussed, the other exceptional building category, which relates to the pyramid form roofed structures of the Khersonesos and neighboring regions (*i.e.* Lion Tomb of Knidos, the famous Mausoleion of Halikarnassos), might be of interest. The pyramidal tomb (of Hellenistic date), erected in the hill slope of the *phourion* at Turgut village (Hydas) in the Khersonesos), like the others, give a feel of the Eastern Mediterranean while the reverse may also be a highly true phenomenon in that the workmanship in stonemasonry, hence fingerprints of the western cultures are within the bounds of possibility. Obviously, stepped engineering in the creation of the

¹¹The Fitzwilliam Museum 2020. “Stelae” web page.

building substructures in classical Greek architecture is a widely acknowledged phenomenon where a typical case is the Temple of Apollo in Didyma, the very well known cases of the stepped entrances like a *propylaeum* or the *crepidoma* upon which columns are placed. But the stepped monoliths paint a different picture in the very case of the Khersonesos that these unique elements were likely used as or belonged to superstructures in the sacred/ religious buildings or funerary scapes.

In consideration of contact for various purpose and long established relations of the Greeks and Karians with the east, specifically since the Archaic period, the “idea” of constructing stepped and/or pyramidal items could have been influenced by the Mesopotamian (*i.e.* AnuTemple Ziggurat of Uruk) and Egyptian precedents (*i.e.* Djoser at Saqqara). Something which might, too, be bespoken in a similar context is of the monumental tomb of Great Kyros in Pasargadae, both reminiscent of the (i) given singular tombs of the *poleis* in the Karian country and (ii) the stepped monoliths, which can now be supposed to be the miniature manifestations of Karian masons at home, in relative proportion to the *demos* scale settlements where they are located. From an enchaind viewpoint, they might be imitations of a pyramidion or simply a great structure like the Mausoleion. No one has come up with a satisfactory answer yet. And, if reverse is proven one day, then one can safely drop the idea of floundering around a cultural exchange, regardless of being a one-way flow or reciprocal influence in the Mediterranean basin, stretching across the Persian geography.

A similar purview, adherable to the theory that specific usage of a mark (if not of another community) on any kind of monument or piece of work was a deliberate choice¹² can be taken for a forced thought on the small finds in the Khersonesos. Although being very suspicious, for instance, the scant number of wavy snaky decorations (justifiably not extraordinary for many of us) on the ceramic bodies reported from the hinterland (Hygassos) of Losta (Fig.2, right bottom) might be revisited. These still belong to the unidentified category as to whether they impart to a certain level of perceived Karianism by the Hellenized inhabitants of the region, over the recently surveyed areas.¹³

4. Closing remarks

The marks and works of the Karians and foreigners do matter to the extent that we, as the scholars, desire to understand the Karian culture in many respects and a variety of contexts. Although worn, the slightly noticeable / illegible script with the Karian alphabet characters on the facade of the lento and front wall of the sanctuary of Apollo at Phoinix and the stepped pyramids tracked in multiple *demos* over the region, are presently the two main archetypal, hence finest precedents in point. In brief; Karians could manage to make a mark in history by leaving concise works, especially on the subjects they are best at, such as their alphabet and mastership in stonemasonry. Therefore, with many findings

that have not yet been clarified, they have the potential to answer many more questions than is thought.

Acknowledgements

This study, along with the graffiti detected on the frontal face of the main gate lento and the front wall of the Temple of Apollo in Phoinix and numerous stepped pyramids photographed in a number of locations, is a product of the surveys conducted in a pre-determined region of the Bozburun Peninsula, under the auspices of the Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Tourism and Culture. Due to the selective approaches taken in the course of field works, the mentioned subjects could only be taken into account and began to be discussed as part of a prolonged in-door work and finally have been reduced to a compact set of discussions for the sake of scientific inquiry. The author offers gratitude to all the shareholders who have supported the studies and hopes that it will open up new horizons for other researchers in the future.

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Figures

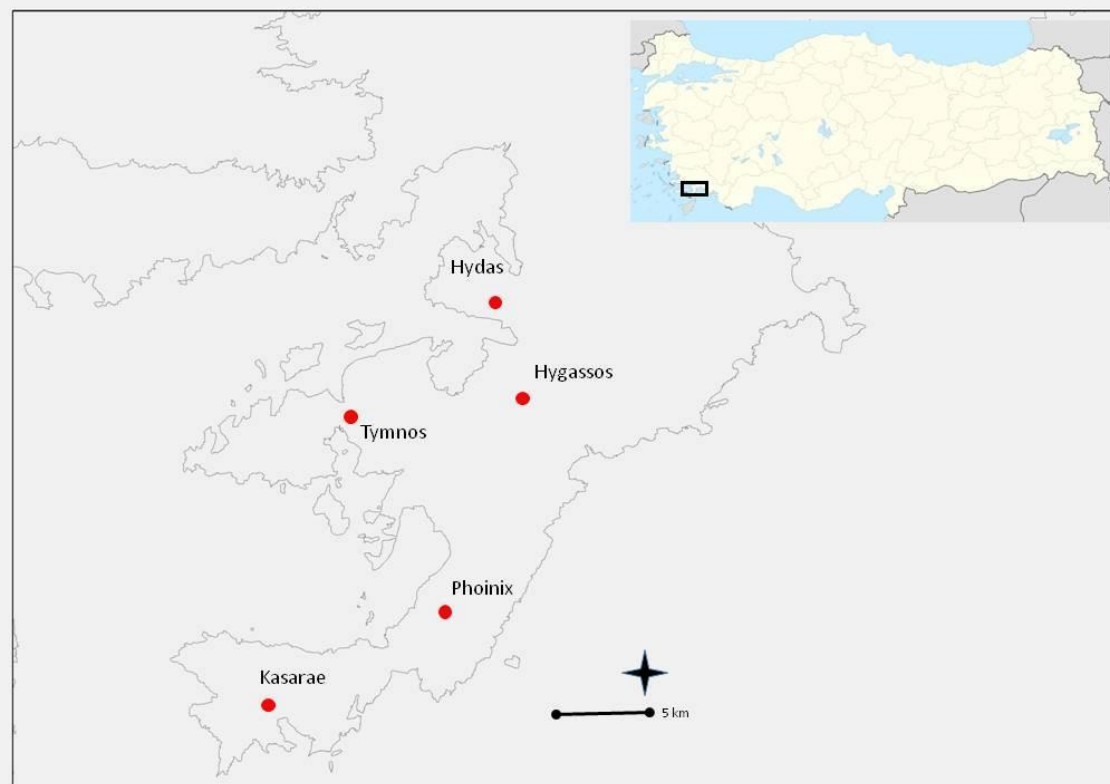


Figure 1: Main areas of stepped pyramidal monoliths (Karian Khersonesos) (Author)



Figure 2: Samples of stepped pyramids and a sherd decoration (Karian Khersonesos) (Photographs: Author)



Figure 3: Marks on the gate linto (above) and front wall (bottom) of the sanctuary of Apollo at Phoinix (Karian Khersonesos) (Photographs: Author)

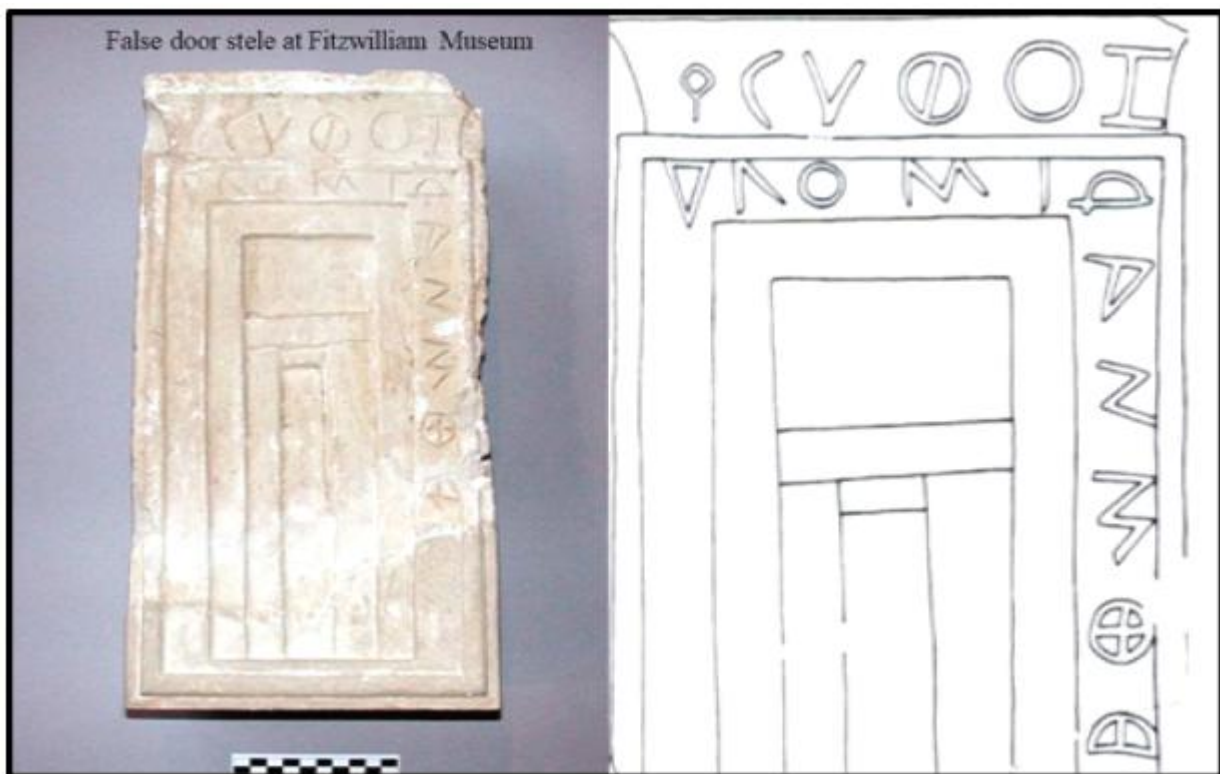


Figure 4: A false door stele with a Karian inscription from Saqqara, at Fitzwilliam Museum (Inventory no: 1878102)