

Alexander, my forefather: Nationalism and Archaeology in the Greek Macedonia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Rosalind MacDonald

Classical archaeology in the service of the state and national identity is not a new concept, although it is one that is seen less, or at least less blatantly, in modern Europe. This particular use of the classical past is still very much in use in the region of Macedonia, both the Greek province and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Nationalism uses archaeology and the imagery of the ancient world to claim legitimacy in the modern world. By claiming the ancient past and projecting it into the present, nations can create a strong national identity. By tying the present day inhabitants of an area to a strong cultural past, the nation itself becomes more legitimate. Problems arise when two nations seek to claim the same past as in the case in the Greek province of Macedonia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. This competition and issues surrounding the claim of ownership of a particular national past can be seen through the examples of the tumulus at Vergina and the differing traditions of the symposium in Macedonia and Athens. The projection of the past into the present can be seen in the (former) Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia flag, in three pamphlets on the 'Macedonian Question' from Greece, and in the recent rebuilding of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's capital, Skopje.

Nationalism and classical archaeology were often seen as two sides of the same ancient coin during the 19th century, when the archaeologies of Rome and Greece were used in European nation building. Claiming descent or intellectual heritage from either the Greeks or Romans was one way of strengthening land claims and furthering political goals. Classical archaeology in the service of the state and national identities is not a new concept, although it is one that is seen less, or at least less blatantly, in modern Europe. However, the use of the classical past in creating national identities is still very much active in the region of Macedonia, in both the Greek province and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). Nationalism uses archaeology and the imagery of the ancient world to claim legitimacy in the modern one. This is done in two ways: by claiming the ancient past and by projecting it into the present. The issues of the claiming the past and the question of the 'Greekness' of the ancient Macedonians will be discussed through the examples of the tumulus at Vergina and the differing traditions of the symposium in Macedonia and Athens. The projection of the past into the present can be seen in the (former) FYROM flag, in three pamphlets on the 'Macedonian Question' from Greece, and in the recent rebuilding of FYROM's capital, Skopje.

To properly consider nationalism and its role in the Macedonian Question it is important to understand the following as laid out in Ernest Gellner's book, *Nations and Nationalism*. Gellner presents a few key points that are particularly pertinent when discussing nationalism in the context of the region of Macedonia and the many countries within it. He states that nationalism is a unifying process: nationalism, in essence,

creates nations where before none existed¹. Within this newly formed nation state, its ethnic composition should not interfere with its politics thus the need for a united ethnic identity that shares a culture.² Nationalism's weakness is, according to Gellner, its need to make culture and politics one and the same.³

In the Balkans, and arguably Greece, ethnicity and nationalism have become synonymous with a quest to create a united ethnic identity. Archaeology and ancient history are used to define a distinct group of people who are occupying a territory that is historically theirs.⁴ Within this concept lie the following ideas. Nationalism creates nations which are composed of homogenous communities which were previously non-existent and nations rise out of the ethnic ideology that arises when one particular group rises to or is given power.⁵ Another key component of this is the use of religion and/or mythical and ancient symbolism to pull together the nationalist idea.⁶ In Macedonia the idea that the Macedonians are the inheritors of Alexander the Great and of the attendant lands, symbolism and cultural history. The use of archaeology to create an overarching national political narrative echoes the Hellenism of the 19th century. However, in the political and multicultural/multiethnic climate of the 20th century this presentation of a collective myth is not always completely successful.⁷ In essence, no one can agree on a metanarrative that works for all the groups and nations that live in the Macedonian region. The history of the many nationalist and ethnic groups in the Balkans is too broad for the scope of this paper, as such the focus will remain on FYROM and Greek Macedonia.

The discovery and subsequent excavations in 1977 of the Tumulus at Vergina associated with Philip II brought attention to issues of ownership within the political past and present.⁸ Previously the area had been of little archaeological interest, with few excavations, and none of them long-term. The political situation had made long-term archaeological projects virtually impossible. The region was, and sometimes still is, unstable. Northern Greece and the Balkans were and remain the site of competing nationalisms, which for a long time, prevented the necessary political and economic structure that would have supported long term archaeological projects.⁹ The artifacts unearthed in the Tumulus brought to the fore many questions, including the question of

¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism 2nd Edition* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), xxv.

² Ibid., 1 and 6.

³ Ibid., 42.

⁴ Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett, ed., *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11.

⁵ Davorin Trpeski, "Nationalism and the Use of Cultural Heritage: A Few Post-Socialist Macedonian Examples," In *Macedonia The Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Foundations of a Balkan State*, edited by Victor C. De Munck and Ljupcho Risteski (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2013), 89-90.

⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁷ Kostas Kotsakis, "The past is ours: images of Greek Macedonia," In *Archaeology Under Fire Nationalism, politics and heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*, edited by Lynn Meskell (London: Routledge, 1998), 45.

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid., 46.

the 'Greekness' of the Macedonians. As Kostas Kotsakis points out in 'The Past is Ours: Images of Greek Macedonia,' Macedonia has always been viewed as the 'Other' of Southern Greece.¹⁰ The area was considered to have been later colonized and Hellenized by the South.¹¹ The idea of the essential 'Greekness' of the Macedonians is problematic especially with regard to the use of the term hellenization. The nature of this problematic idea is exemplified through a comparison of the changing traditions of symposia in Athens and Macedon in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. The Macedonian symposium was a different affair than the smaller, more intimate symposia practiced by their Athenian counterparts. Macedonian symposia were celebrated in large *andrones* in the palace of the king, Philip II. These were occasions that celebrated Philip II's leadership and promoted bonding between the king and his officers. The large size required for these symposia resulted in a loss of the intimacy characteristic of the Athenian symposia. At the same time the *krater*, a central element in the Athenian context became less popular. It would seem that the Macedonians each had their own sympotic wear, such as that found in the tumulus at Vergina, and did not drink wine kept in a communal pot. It has been suggested by Dr. Frances Pownall that the Macedonians were more interested in recreating the symposia of the Homeric heroes than the Athenians. The Macedonians wanted to be Greek, but by their own definition of Greek. The symposia is an example of how they created their own interpretation of the Greek past and traditions. The Athenians followed the Macedonians and shifted towards larger, less intimate symposia. This calls into question a number of historical and cultural assumptions: were the Macedonians Hellenized? Or did they 'Macedonianize' the Greeks? What becomes clear is that 'hellenization' is a problematic term, which assumes a one-way flow of culture from Greece to Macedon. As seen in the changing traditions of the symposia, that is not the case.

There is a tendency and a wish to see culture as a 'discrete, bounded and homogenous unit, which retains its unalienable character so that it can be recognized in time and space.'¹² This is both an archaeological and nationalist problem as it excludes the possibilities of a blended society with cultural exchange occurring at both ends. This limited view of culture does however make it easier to make absolute claims about the heritage and history of a given people or region, a problematic approach in a region as heterogeneous as Macedonia.¹³ The nationalist claiming of the past, by both FYROM and Greece is further complicated by Greece's unique and powerful position as one of the culturally dominant nations of Europe.¹⁴ This contributes to the strong reaction against the perceived appropriation of Greek heritage because it is also the appropriation of European heritage, as Greece is the cradle of democracy and the appropriation of that cradle by a not quite western country is unacceptable.¹⁵ Just as Macedonia is and was the

¹⁰ Kotsakis, 'The past is ours,' 47.

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

¹² Ibid., 56.

¹³ K.S. Brown, 'Contests of Heritage and the politics of preservation in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,' In *Archaeology Under Fire Nationalism, politics and heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*, edited by Lynn Meskell (London: Routledge, 1998), 75.

¹⁴ Kotsakis, 'The past is ours,' 59.

¹⁵ Ibid., 59.

mother of Southern Greece, Greece becomes the mother for Macedonia with Macedonia trying to escape the imposed objectivity of the Greek past where Greece is the measure for all things.¹⁶ National and ethnic identities, which are arguably one and the same in the region, are formed in relation to one another.¹⁷

The composition of national and ethnic identities and their use to establish political legitimacy via an authentic and continuous past that belongs solely to one group can encounter problems when more than one group lays claim to the same past.¹⁸ As stated previously, nationalism often relies on religion, mythic and ancient, and in this case archaeology and symbolism. This is seen in the use of the Vergina star. The Vergina star refers to the symbol found on the *larnax* in Philip II's tomb in the Vergina Tumulus (Fig. 1).¹⁹



Figure 1. Larnax from Vergina (Philip's Tomb) late 4th Century BCE.

The *larnax* contained the cremated remains of Philip II, Alexander's father. The distinctive 16-point star is considered to be emblematic of the Macedonian dynasty.²⁰ The Vergina star has become an essential modern marker of ancient Macedonian heritage. It was adopted by both Greek Macedonians and those in FYROM as an unofficial national crest and symbol.²¹ In the 1990s both the Greek Province of Macedonia and FYROM used the Vergina star on their respective flags (Fig. 2) making the former unofficial national crest and symbol official.²²

¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷ Trpeski, "Nationalism and the Use of Cultural Heritage," 94.

¹⁸ Ibid., 105.

¹⁹ "Larnax from Vergina" From the sarcophagus in Philip's tomb at Vergina ca. late 4th Century BCE. Vergina Museum. Accessed April 6, 2014. <http://artstor.org>.

²⁰ Andrew Erskine, "Ancient History and National Identity," In *A Companion to Ancient History*, edited by Andrew Erskine (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 561.

²¹ Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 131.

²² Ibid., 131.

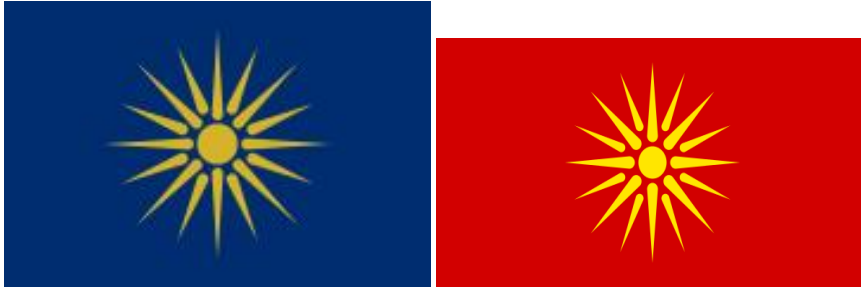


Figure 2. Flag of Greek Macedonia, left. The former flag of FYROM (1992-1995), right.²³

The only difference that can be seen between the Greek Macedonian flag and FYROM's was the background colour; Greece's was blue, FYROM's red.²⁴ Claiming the Vergina star also claimed the historical past associated with it, creating a link between the country who the flag belonged to and the builders and occupants of the tumulus at Vergina. The ensuing political discussion and disagreement resulted in the changing of FYROM's flag in 1995.

The issue of who the Macedonian past belongs to and whether or not it is Greek is further addressed in three Greek pamphlets published in the early 1990s, after FYROM formed in 1991, by different groups associated with, and in favour of, Greek Macedonia. This is during the same time period as the debate over the flags was occurring. The first pamphlet I will discuss was published by the Hellenic Sugar Industry and is entitled "Modern Macedonia and the Macedonian Question". It takes a decidedly pro-Greek stance, referring to Macedonians and Greek as "nationals".²⁵ The pamphlet refers to itself as a "contribution to the national cause" and purports to tell the "Historical Truth about the past and the present of our Macedonia."²⁶ The clearest statement of the Hellenic Sugar Industry's stance is found towards the end of the pamphlet where it states that "Greek Macedonia" constitutes a politically, economically, and culturally inseparable part of the Greek national state.²⁷ The second pamphlet, entitled "Macedonia; 4000 Years of Greek Civilization Region of Central Macedonia," takes a somewhat different tone than the first. It reads like a tourist brochure and is in both English and German, suggesting it is aimed at an international audience. The third pamphlet, "Macedonia History and Politics," from the Center for Macedonians Abroad, is similar to the first in that it gives a brief history of the Macedonian region culminating in a discussion of the "Macedonian question." Like the first pamphlet, the tone and language make it perfectly

²³ "Flag of the Republic of Macedonia 1992-1995," Image, 1992-1995, Accessed April 6, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Republic_of_Macedonia_1992-1995.svg, and, "Flag of Greek Macedonia," Image, Accessed April 6, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Greek_Macedonia.svg.

²⁴ Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins*, 131.

²⁵ I.K Chasiotis, I. Coliopoulos and Evangelos Kophos, *Modern Macedonia and the Macedonian Question* (Thessaloniki, Greece: Hellenic Sugar Industry S.A., 1992), 28.

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

clear which side of the debate the authors fall on. The 'systematic counterfeiting of Macedonian history' by the FYROM is described by them as the looting of the unique history and culture of Greece.²⁸ The pamphlet also goes on to outline the basic Greek position: Greece has no objections to the existence of FYROM, at the time part of Yugoslavia, so long as FYROM does not lay claim to the Greek name of Macedonia.²⁹ As stated by the third pamphlet and implied by the other two, Greece's problem with FYROM, and with others such as Bulgaria, is not that they exist. Rather, the Greeks resent their use of the name 'Macedonia' and what they view as 'Greek' culture in the creation of FYROM's Macedonian ethnic identity and nation building, as well as politically and on an international stage. To the Greeks, Macedonia is an essential part of Greek culture and therefore Alexander the Great and Philip II were Greeks. As recently as 2012, negotiations between Greece and FYROM through a U.N. third party were still ongoing about the use of the name Macedonia.³⁰

The most recent use of the past in connection with Macedonia can be seen in the reconstruction of FYROM's capital city, Skopje. Beginning in 2010 the project, called Skopje 2014, was a massive rebuilding and revitalization project. Much of the city's landmarks had been lost in a 1963 earthquake.³¹ Almost twenty buildings from museums, such as a Museum of Macedonian Struggle, to administrative offices and a memorial were to be built in Skopje's core, along with a number of bronze and marble statues, a triumphal arch and a memorial.³² Among the statues is a 22-meter centerpiece, called 'Warrior on a Horse', although it is in actuality Alexander the Great. The avoidance of officially naming it illustrates the continuing tension with Greece over the 'Macedonian Question.'³³ The entire project is inspired by Classical architecture, with older buildings and bridges being revamped to fit in with the new image.³⁴ The overall design echoes building programs of the 19th century such as the one used to build the newly appointed Greek capital of Athens and aims to brush away the remnants of Socialist architecture and neglect.³⁵ The project has received mixed reviews, with people questioning everything from its price, which has been estimated at anywhere from 208 to 500 million euro, to the choice of architectural style.³⁶ Some have wondered why a more modern approach was not chosen, what modern city needs a triumphal arch?³⁷ The choice of architecture quite deliberately emphasizes FYROM's connection with Alexander the Great and the Macedonian past. By using architectural elements that immediately call to mind ancient Greece and by placing a statue of Alexander and another of Philip II nearby, FYROM reinforces its nationalist and ethnic claim to Macedonian culture and heritage,

²⁸ Maria Kourisi, ed. *Macedonia History and Politics* (Athens: Center for Macedonians Abroad Society for Macedonian Studies, 1991), 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

³⁰ The Sofia Echo Staff, 'UN envoy meets leaders in Skopje about Macedonia name dispute,' *The Sophia Echo*, February 21, 2012, Online, Accessed April 6, 2014.

³¹ Catriona Davies, 'Is Macedonia's capital being turned into a theme park?' *CNN*, October 10, 2011.

³² Sinisa Jakov Marusic, 'Skopje 2014: the new face of Macedonia, updated,' *BalkanInsight*, June 7, 2013.

³³ Catriona Davies, 'Is Macedonia's capital being turned into a theme park?' *CNN*, October 10, 2011.

³⁴ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, 'Skopje 2014: the new face of Macedonia, updated,' *BalkanInsight*, June 7, 2013.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Catriona Davies, 'Is Macedonia's capital being turned into a theme park?' *CNN*, October 10, 2011.

emphasizing the connection to anyone who stays in the capital and ventures into the core. The inclusion of the triumphal arch connects Skopje to her Roman past as well, firmly entrenching Skopje as a city of the ancient world. Thereby making the people who live there, and in the country, the descendants of the Macedonians who lived under Philip II, Alexander, and the Romans. Among the new museums is a new archaeological museum, which will likely feature exhibits on the ancient Macedonian past.³⁸

The "Macedonian Question" is not one that is likely to be resolved anytime soon. However, it does provoke a number of discussions on the nature of nationalism, ethnic identity, culture, and who owns the past. Within the issues addressed in this paper there is, to my mind, a clear divide between the use of the past in the past and the use of the past in the present. The past in the past refers to archaeology and its role in finding, documenting and publishing the ancient past. The Tumulus at Vergina brought to attention the question of the "Greekness" of the Macedonians including Philip II and Alexander the Great, figures who are claimed by both Greece and FYROM. The question of "Greekness" is further called into question by the issues surrounding the concept of hellenization and its treatment as a one-way cultural flow from the Southern Greeks to the Macedonians when it was likely a two-way exchange. The ability to establish a connection to these figures and their attendant culture legitimizes nationalist claims in the present. In the modern day the connection to the ancient past is emphasized through flags and building projects which establish lineage between the modern and ancient groups. Nationalism and its use reflect the political need within the Balkans and Greece to create a strong national narrative that reflects the shared culture and ethnic identity of a given nation.

³⁸ Ibid.

Bibliography

- Brown, K.S. "Contests of Heritage and the politics of preservation in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" In *Archaeology Under Fire Nationalism, politics and heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*, edited by Lynn Meskell, 68-86. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Chasiotis, I.K., I. Coliopoulos and Evangelos Kophos. *Modern Macedonia and the Macedonian Question*. Thessaloniki, Greece: Hellenic Sugar Industry S.A., 1992.
- Davies, Catriona, "Is Macedonia's capital being turned into a theme park?" *CNN*, October 10, 2011, Online, Accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/04/world/europe/macedonia-skopje-2014/>.
- Erskine, Andrew. "Ancient History and National Identity." In *A Companion to Ancient History*, edited by Andrew Erskine, 555-563. Chichester: Blackwell, 2009.
- "Flag of Greek Macedonia." Image. Accessed April 6, 2013. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Greek_Macedonia.svg.
- "Flag of the Republic of Macedonia 1992-1995." Image. 1992-1995. Accessed April 6, 2014. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Republic_of_Macedonia_1992-1995.svg.
- Gellner, Ernest, *Nations and Nationalism 2nd Edition*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- Hamilakis, Yannis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. eBook.
- Kohl, Philip L. and Clare Fawcett, ed., *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Kotsakis, Kostas. "The past is ours: images of Greek Macedonia." In *Archaeology Under Fire Nationalism, politics and heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*, edited by Lynn Meskell, 44-67. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Koursi, Maria, ed. *Macedonia History and Politics*. Athens: Center for Macedonians Abroad Society for Macedonian Studies, 1991.
- "Larnax from Vergina From the sarcophagus in Philip's tomb at Vergina ca. late 4th Century BCE." Vergina Museum. Accessed April 6, 2014. <http://artstor.org>.
- Marusic, Sinisa Jakov, "Skopje 2014: the new face of Macedonia, updated," *BalkanInsight*, June 7, 2013, Online, Accessed April 6, 2014, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/gallery/skopje-2014>.

The Sofia Echo Staff, "UN envoy meets leaders in Skopje about Macedonia name dispute," *The Sophia Echo*, February 21, 2012, Online, Accessed April 6, 2014, http://sofiaecho.com/2012/02/21/1770791_un-envoy-meets-leaders-in-skopje-about-macedonia-name-dispute.

Region of Central Macedonia, *Macedonia 4000 Years of Greek Civilization*, Thessaloniki, Greece: Region of Central Macedonia, Date Unknown.

Trpeski, Davorin. "Nationalism and the Use of Cultural Heritage: A Few Post-Socialist Macedonian Examples." In *Macedonia The Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Foundations of a Balkan State*, edited by Victor C. De Munck and Ljupcho Risteski, 89- 108. London: I.B, Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2013.