

THE MYTH OF MODERN MACEDONIA:

INVENTING AN IDENTITY

by

John Melville-Jones



Coin of King Patraus, the ruler of Paeonia in the time of Alexander the Great

The Myth of Modern Macedonia: inventing an identity

Two years ago I learned that a statue of Alexander the Great was to be erected in Skopje. I knew enough about modern history to be sure that the choice of this subject was not, as in some places (for example in Edinburgh), simply the result of a desire to commemorate a heroic figure of the past. I realised that it was part of an attempt that has been made during the last few generations to create an identity for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia which can stretch back to distant antiquity. What we have here is a myth in the making.

A myth is a story which can be told, retold, and modified. It survives because it gives pleasure, or satisfies a human need. It may be based on a fact, but it is not a historical account of something that happened, because even if an event took place that led to the birth of the myth, the story has been so changed for artistic or other reasons that it takes a form that is different from the form that it had when it was born. So a raid that might have been made on a city in Asia Minor by men who sailed from Greece in the second millennium B.C. turns into the story of the abduction of Helen and the Trojan War.

To take another example, among the early Christians in Asia Minor a story was told of Nicholas of Myra (an ancient city near Demre in southern Turkey), who later became a saint. It was said that when Nicholas learned that a local family was in such severe distress that they might be forced to sell their three daughters into prostitution, he crept past their home one night and dropped three bags containing gold coins through an open window, enabling them to survive (if I have not told the story in the same way as it has been told elsewhere, that is how myths grow; they can always be reworked). He was also known for making other gifts to the poor, and in particular for leaving coins in their empty shoes.

From the original story of St Nicholas we have nowadays arrived at the story of a white-bearded old man, who wears red garments and drives a sleigh drawn by reindeer and delivers presents to children in Christian countries on the night of December 24/25 each year (and sometimes not only in Christian countries; it is said that there is a department store in Bangkok which displays figures of Santa Claus and the Seven Dwarfs in December. The history of the development of this myth is a long one, and irrelevant to what I am writing now, but the Santa Claus story is a good example of the way in which a tale can grow of its own accord, if it is found to be emotionally satisfying).

It is in this manner that the legend that the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is creating has grown (this title, although approved as a temporary measure by the United Nations, is too cumbersome for my liking, and although it, and the abbreviated form of FYROM, are officially correct in Australia, I will use my preferred name of North Macedonia from now onwards, and explain why each of them is a satisfactory description of this country).

Let us examine the history of the development of the legend, starting at the beginning. At some time between 1000 B.C. and 800 B.C. a tribe or group of people who were called the *Makedónes* established themselves in an area north and east of Mount Olympus. Its borders cannot be precisely established, but it seems to have been approximately the same as the area called Pieria, named after another tribe that had established itself there (it should be remembered that many movements of people have taken place around the Mediterranean, both at this time and later, the latest example in this area being the expansion of the Albanians in a north-easterly direction). It has been suggested that these *Makedónes* came from Phrygia in Asia Minor, but this cannot be proved, and if they did, they may well have originated even further away.

Over the centuries that followed, the *Makedónes* expanded their territory until they reached the sea, and by about 500 B.C. they were the leading group in the area. They became even more powerful in the middle of the fourth century B.C. as a result of the activities of two of their kings. The first of these, Philip II, was attacked at the beginning of his reign by two neighbouring groups, the Illyrians to the west and the Paeonians to the north. The latter group occupied approximately the same territory as the land that North Macedonia now occupies, although the most northerly part of it, including the area in which Skopje now stands, may have been under the control of another tribe called the Dardani. Philip not only drove them back, but developed a highly trained army, using new tactics and weaponry, and this later enabled Macedonia to gain control of much of the southern part of Greece. His son, Alexander, built upon his father's successes, and conquered much of Asia as well.

During this period the Paeonians seem to have been independent. Their kings began issuing coins bearing their own names written in Greek letters, like Macedonian coins, after they had been defeated by Philip, and continued to do so until the Roman conquest of Greece in the 2nd century B.C. (the king who ruled Paeonia at the time when Alexander III was ruling Macedonia was called Patraus, and one of his coins is illustrated on the front page of this pamphlet). The last issue from their mint describes itself as being 'of the Paeonians', which suggests that their monarchy had been abolished, but that they were still independent. They supplied a small contingent of cavalry to Alexander's army. Historians therefore describe them as a 'client kingdom' or 'semi-autonomous'. At a later time they sent offerings to Delphi and Olympia, which were set up with accompanying inscriptions written in Greek, but this does not tell us whether they considered themselves to be Greeks, and so little of their language survives that it is impossible to classify it with any confidence.

Although the evidence is so sparse, we may guess that after Philip II had defeated this neighbouring tribe, he treated them with respect and formed an alliance with them, perhaps agreeing to assist them if they were attacked by their neighbours. This was a wise move, which might have provided a good model for treating the modern successors of the Paeonians.

There is also very little evidence, apart from their coinage and the occasional mention of their providing of troops to assist the Macedonians, which might show clearly what the relationship of the Paeonians and the Macedonians was, but after the Romans had defeated the last king of Macedonia, Perseus, in 168 B.C., they decided to incorporate Paeonia into an enlarged administrative district of Macedonia that was formed at that time, because it had been ‘under King Perseus’, *sub regno Persei*, rejecting the claim of the neighbouring Dardanians that this land should be given to them because they had recently defeated the Paeonians. This is why modern historians describe Paeonia as a client state.

The suggestion that when from the sixth century of the Christian era onwards invading Slavic groups moved into Macedonia, this can be represented as a ‘return of the Paeonians’ is fanciful, almost as fanciful as the more recent suggestion that the section of text that appears in the middle of the Rosetta stone is a specimen of the ancient Macedonian language, some words of which are claimed to bear a resemblance to the modern ‘Macedonian’ language.

After the Roman conquest, Macedonia and Paeonia were divided into four regions (*Macedonia Prôtê, Deutera* and so on), with Paeonia divided between the second and third regions. All of them, except the third, issued coins in their own names, so they must have been to some extent independent. This creation of separate administrative divisions may have had the aim of discouraging attempts to revive the Macedonian kingship. If this was the intention of the Romans, it failed, because a pretender called Andrisus, who claimed to be a son of King Perseus, attempted to seize power some twenty years later. The revolt failed, but after this the four regions were rolled into one again, and an even larger administrative district, still called Macedonia, which stretched across to the coast of the Adriatic and included southern Greece, was formed by the Romans under the guidance of its governor Quintus Caecilius Metellus (who used the extra name ‘Macedonicus’ thereafter, although, he did not claim to be a Macedonian). This arrangement lasted for a while. Then the size of this administrative district was reduced, and the southern part of it was called Achaëa.

By this time the name of ‘Macedonia’ was losing its ethnic significance, because it was now the name of a larger administrative area. In later centuries this situation continued, with occasional revisions of borders (one of which transferred the northern part of the former Paeonia, now a part of the enlarged province of Macedonia, into a more recently constituted province of Moesia

Superior), followed by the turning of the Roman empire into what we call the Byzantine empire, in which Macedonia continued to be an administrative district or *thema*. This was followed by the Ottoman occupation of much of Europe. The name 'Macedonian' now no longer referred to a member of an ethnic group, but to someone who came from this geographically enlarged area (for example, the Byzantine emperor Basil I was known as 'the Macedonian', but this was because he had emerged from this administrative *thema* to become emperor; he seems actually to have had his origin in Armenia).

This situation continued during the Ottoman period. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, few people claimed to be 'Macedonian' in the ethnic sense, although the word was used regularly by outsiders to denote people who came from Macedonia, whether they were of Slav, Greek or Turkish ethnicity.

In 1821 and 1822 two attempts to wrest southern Macedonia from the Turks, started by the Greek-speaking population of the area known as Chalkidike, failed. I have not been able to ascertain with any certainty whether the participants in this uprising thought of themselves primarily as Greeks or as Macedonians, although they certainly had the support of Greeks to the south of them.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however (I have noted a claim that it began during the previous century, but have been unable to verify this), another movement had begun in the area at present occupied by Northern Macedonia and the Greek province of Macedonia. This was again aimed at seeking independence from the Ottoman Turks. It was formed by Bulgarians, who wanted to create a separate Macedonian administrative area with a government controlled by Bulgaria, a sort of province of that country. I do not have a good understanding of the various groups that developed, or faded away, at this time, but I have the impression that they had only a limited amount of support, because the non-Turkish population of that area had enough to worry about without dreaming of independence. But their activities subsequently led to the Ilinden and Preobrazhenie anti-Ottoman uprisings of 1903.

This concept of a separate autonomous Macedonia was also not displeasing to some thoughtful Serbian politicians, who saw it as a useful buffer between themselves and an aggressive Bulgaria (a wise point of view, valid even today).

There were indeed some 'Macedonists' who touted the idea of a completely separate Macedonia, in the fullest post-Roman sense, from the mid-19th century onwards (the best known of these being Georgi Pulevski and Krste Misirkov), but they were few in number, and their views cannot be said to represent the thinking of the majority of the inhabitants of the area, whose connections in the northern part would have been with Serbia or Bulgaria, and in Thessaloniki and the more southerly areas with the Greeks. And of course the large Jewish populations of some cities would have had no reason for seeking a separate state.

Then in 1912 the First Balkan War erupted. In the years that followed, war was waged against the Ottoman administration in this area by Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria, with the Montenegrins also taking part. After the defeat of the Ottomans, a division of territory was briefly achieved by the Treaty of London, but in the following year fighting broke out again because the Bulgarians were dissatisfied with the arrangements that had been made, which favoured Serbia and Greece, and this time the Romanians were also involved. The treaty of Bucharest that followed defined the territory placed under Bulgarian control more or less as it exists today (parts of eastern Macedonia and western Thrace were assigned to Bulgaria during the Second World War, as a reward for their support of Germany, but were returned in 1947).

The reasons for fixing these boundaries were partly based on ethnic divisions, but were to a much greater extent the result of giving each group the land that it had won by fighting, following the principle of 'effective possession'.

At this time, Greeks were in a minority in the overall area of Macedonia, except in Chalkidike. The further north one looks, the more the proportion of Greeks decreases, which is not surprising. Some surveys of population were undertaken, but these are unsatisfactory for two reasons. In the first place, much depends on the outlook of the persons who conducted each survey, and because of this, some surveys referred to 'Slavo-Macedonians', and others to 'Serbians'. It is also easy to imagine that many people might have given different answers to different surveys, depending on what they thought safer or more satisfactory to the interviewer.

It was during this period, as it is now claimed, that 'Macedonians' began to fight in earnest for an independent 'Macedonia'. I have tried to verify this by looking at books printed in English, French and German during the first quarter of the twentieth century which provide information on the history of Europe at this time, but I have not found any indication that any except a few groups of activists might have believed that they were fighting to establish a free 'Macedonia' (although there was a 'Macedonian' colony in St Petersburg which was active and, to judge from the proclamation that they made, eager to be considered as separate from Serbians or Bulgarians). In Macedonia itself there was certainly no such thing as a 'Macedonian' army (although there were some small armed groups which used the name 'Macedonian', whatever their actual focus and links were). The majority of the combatants had been conscripted, willingly or unwillingly, to serve in the armed forces according to the areas in which they lived, so that men whose common language at this time might have been Turkish, but whose ethnic language was a Slavic one might find themselves fighting for the Greeks, and vice-versa. To most of them, 'Macedonia' would

have meant the territory that was the bone of contention, not a separate ethnic label. So the reality was different from the myth that has now been created.

After the end of the First World War the treaty of Sèvres (1920) was superseded by the treaty of Lausanne (1923). The latter, confirmed by the Balkan Pact of 1934, led to the defining of boundaries which have been for the most part maintained since that time (except for a few years during the Second World War, as mentioned above). This defining of boundaries was followed by an exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece, as a response to the enmity that had been generated by the failure of the unwise attempt by the Greeks to establish a firm hold on territory that had been assigned to them on the Aegean coast of Turkey (the Smyrna campaign). The exchange was conducted on the basis of religious affiliation, and the result was that except for the population of Constantinople, as that city was still known at that time, those who were Orthodox Christians (all or nearly all of them of Greek background) were removed from Turkey and relocated in different parts of Greece, some of them near Athens, but most of them as additions to the existing Orthodox population of northern Greece, from which the Muslims had been removed. The number of Orthodox persons transported from Turkey to Greece was considerably greater than the number of Muslims who were deported.

During this period relations between Greeks and the Slavs who remained in Greek territory were bad, and have continued to be bad. Some families were removed from their homes, the use of the 'Macedonian' language was banned, and exclusive rights were established for the Orthodox Church of Greece. I do not know whether this was primarily caused by an urge by the Greeks to establish a Greek identity for the area, or whether there was provocation. So the Slavs in Greek Macedonia received a treatment not totally unlike the treatment of Albanians in Northern Macedonia, or part-Aboriginal children in Australia.

The reverse movement of families from Greece to Turkey led to some persons of Greek or Slavic background being deported from Europe. Some of these families were not of Turkish origin, but had converted to Islam, perhaps to pay lower taxes. The exchange was organised on the basis of the religious affiliations of the population of each country, so they had to go, even if their ancestors had lived in Europe for a thousand years or more. That is why in the middle of Turkey today you will sometimes see fair-haired fair-skinned Turks; their ancestors may have been Slavs who had converted to the Islamic religion.

It was at this time that the Great Powers established the mixed nation of Yugoslavia, the land of the 'South Slavs', which endured, sometimes uneasily, as a political unit until it broke up into its separate components in 1990-1991.

During the first part of this period the activists in southern Yugoslavia who were agitating for a restored 'Macedonia' can have had little support in the

general population of what was then classified under many names at different times: for example, South Serbia, Old Serbia, Serbian Macedonia, the Vardar Province. Also, in Belgrade a tripartite description was developed for the parts of Macedonia (in the sense of the enlarged area created by the Romans): Vardar Macedonia (the present Northern or New Macedonia), Pirin Macedonia (lying within the borders of Bulgaria) and Aegean Macedonia (in Greek territory, now divided into Southern, Western and Eastern Macedonia). There was a sense of dissatisfaction in the Vardar area with the treatment that they were receiving, or might expect, from Belgrade, but it did not lead to concerted action.

In the later stages of the Second World War, however, the situation changed, because it suited the ambitions of the president of Yugoslavia, Marshal Tito, to accept the view of history that had been created by the activists. He saw the establishment of a separate province of 'Macedonia' within Yugoslavia as a springboard for acquiring the northern part of Greece, and, being a Croat, he found no difficulty in detaching a part of Serbian territory for this purpose. So a new 'Macedonia' was formed from Vardar Macedonia, and the 'Bloody Christmas' of 1945 ensured that enough of those who wished to defend the idea of a Bulgarian identity would be silenced. But this idea of an independent state was not universally accepted; a very prominent 'Macedonist' at this time, Ivan Mihailov (who escaped the massacre because he was living in Italy), advocated a Macedonia separate from Serbia, but principally Bulgarian in its ethnicity.

This alarmed the Greeks, and led to a renaming of what had since the end of the First World War been called 'Northern Greece', to emphasise the fact that it was Greek territory. The name 'Macedonia' was now reinstated. It was divided into three administrative districts, Western Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Central Macedonia, and these names are still used. For this reason, it can be argued that 'North Macedonia' is the most suitable name for the clumsily named Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, because it represents exactly the situation that has existed since the second century B.C., even if the alternative, 'New Macedonia' is completely in accordance with the spirit of its creation.

Because the Romans brought into existence this new enlarged Macedonia, the use of a qualified form of the name for its northern area at the present time cannot reasonably be challenged. But what can be challenged is the attempt that has been made in recent years, to give the new republic a more respectable ancestry. It is embarrassing, as Oscar Wilde showed in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, to know that one is a foundling with no apparent ancestor except the Gladstone bag in which one has been mislaid.

A more ancient ancestry needed to be provided, and this process has been vigorously pursued. After the Second World War, although the population of the newly constituted Macedonia had nothing in common with the ancient

Macedonians, their sharing of the name was used as an excuse for them to begin to appropriate the history of their southern neighbours, and to imply that they were the rightful heirs to the achievements of Philip II and Alexander III. The new Macedonia began to lay claim to the old Macedonia, using the golden sun of Vergina as its national symbol, naming a major highway after Alexander, building a stadium decorated with an imaginative image of his father (actually based on a Roman medallion of the 3rd century AD which bears a portrait that made Philip resemble Septimius Severus, the father of the current emperor Alexander Severus), rebadging airports with the names of Philip II and Alexander the Great and erecting an equestrian statue of the great conqueror, inspired by the work of the ancient Greek sculptor Lysippus, in the centre of Skopje.

School books were produced which indoctrinated the young with the idea of a Macedonia that had a continuous ethnic identity from ancient times, with a territory covering both Macedonias. An autonomous Macedonian Orthodox Church was established at the end of the 1950s, and declared itself autocephalous in 1967, thus breaking away from the Serbian Orthodox Church, which had previously controlled most of the area (with some competition from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church). The language of the new republic (more Serbian in the west, more Bulgarian in the east) was reformulated in order to create a 'Macedonian' language which, it was claimed, had always existed. A specifically 'Macedonian' mythical history was created, borrowing where necessary (for instance, the Bulgarian Czar Samuel was made a Macedonian).

Such actions, and the publication of maps showing the new Macedonia and the Greek province of Macedonia as a single unit, have inspired in their southern neighbours the fear that an attempt might be made to seize some of the land for which they had fought so hard, and is partly responsible for the aggressive way in which in areas under Greek control the use of the modern Macedonian language has been harshly discouraged, and the ethnicity of those who claimed to be 'Macedonian' has been denied, with their Slavic names being changed against their will into Greek forms. This reaction was unwise, even if it was understandable, because some of the troubles that have plagued this area since the treaty of Lausanne was put into force might have been avoided if the slavophones who found themselves on the wrong side of the border had been able to continue using their traditional forms of speech (with the proviso that their children must all learn Greek as well, since official business would be conducted in that language), and if they had been encouraged to stay under the protection of Greece and use their farming skills. As it is said, it is easier to catch flies with honey than with vinegar. But in a situation of such mutual mistrust,

particularly after the savage battles that took place in that area at the end of the Second World War, and the fear that Communism inspired, it is hard to see how that could have been achieved.

The new republic began to 'antiquitize' itself. The pre-Roman Macedonians were claimed as the forebears of its inhabitants, by the use of a simple but false syllogism: 'Alexander the Great was a Macedonian; we are Macedonians; therefore we are the successors of Alexander the Great' (the error lies in the assumption that 'Macedonian' in the first sentence has the same meaning as 'Macedonians' in the second). Using the same false logic, one could prove that Santa Claus was a Turk, since Myra, the home of St Nicholas, is now in Turkey.

We are left with a difficult situation. The myth of a Macedonian identity that stretches back into the centuries before Christ has taken hold, after two generations have been brought up to believe it, just as the myths surrounding our beloved Santa Claus have taken hold of the popular imagination. It has also been comfortably accepted by many people in other countries, who have no direct connection with Northern/New Macedonia, are not well informed about the facts, have no interest in examining the complicated history of this area, and find it easier to say 'Macedonia' and 'Macedonian', without considering what they mean by these words. The 'principle of effective possession' is again being applied.

There can be no doubt that it is useful to have a separate independent country in this location, a buffer state between Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. Northern or New Macedonia has land which produces good food, and resources of minerals which can be mined, so it can be economically independent, and it will fit well into the European Union, particularly now that Bulgaria has completed the requirements for admission. Also, Northern Macedonia has been welded into a separate functioning community, even if there are problems with its Albanian minority. But when a country invents an ancestry that it does not have, and aggressively makes claims that are based on an invented myth, this is bound to sour the potentially productive relationship that could be developed with its southern neighbour. If you are naked, it does not give you the right to steal someone else's clothing.

To recapitulate and expand some of the points that have been made: At some time early in the first millennium B.C. a group of people who called themselves the *Makedónes* settled in an area to the north of Mount Olympus. During the next few centuries they expanded the area under their control to such an extent that it began to be named after them. In the fourth century B.C. their king Philip II defeated the Paeonians who dwelt to the north of Macedonia, and also brought a great deal of Greece under his control. Paeonia then remained subject in some way to Macedonia until the second century B.C., when the Romans became

masters of Greece. The Romans created a new administrative area, which was called 'Macedonia'. This included much more land than the original Macedonia, in particular the territory of the Paeonians (which was approximately equivalent to the area that is now occupied by North Macedonia).

During the Roman and Byzantine periods this enlarged Macedonia remained as an administrative unit (although the northernmost area, which included the city which is now called Skopje, was for a while included in the province of Moesia). It also remained as an administrative and geographical unit during the time when it was under the control of the Ottoman Turks. Its population was altered at different times, by the arrival of Slav invaders from the sixth century onwards, of Turks during the fifteenth century, and of Jews in its cities from about the same time onwards.

In the middle of the nineteenth century a movement seems to have begun among the Slav-speaking part of the population. This group (or perhaps there were several groups) developed the idea of a revived 'Macedonia' which had an ethnic as well as a geographical meaning. It was claimed that there was a specifically Macedonian language and culture. When, just before the First World War, this area became the scene of protracted warfare between Greeks, Serbians, Bulgarians and Montenegrins, there may have been some who believed (or later claimed) that they were fighting for an independent Macedonia, but there was no formal Macedonian army.

When Yugoslavia was born, the enlarged Macedonia that had been created by the Romans was shared between Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria. That might still be the situation if Marshal Tito had not decided to support the proponents of a separate Macedonian province. Then, when Yugoslavia was separated into its constituent parts in 1990 and 1991, this province became a separate independent country, with an uncertain identity which its leaders tried to embellish by claiming to have inherited the legacy of the ancient Macedonians, even though they did not own more than a small part of the land that had been called Macedonia before the Roman conquest of Greece.

It will be difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate this myth, since it is a matter of faith, not reason, and faith can rarely be altered. In addition, if the inhabitants of North Macedonia cannot hang on to this invented association with the Macedonians of antiquity, what sort of identity is left for them? They will be naked indeed. The title of the autobiography of their former President, Kiro Gligorov, 'Macedonia is all that we have', is very true.

So we may have to wait a long time for a reasonably negotiated settlement of the naming dispute, even though the erection of a statue of Alexander the Great in Skopje, which was not a part of Macedonia in his time, is based on a false claim.