

WHOSE IS MACEDONIA, WHOSE IS ALEXANDER?

Abstract: The article discusses an open letter to President Obama on the status of Macedonia.

On 18 May 2009, 200 Classical scholars from around the world sent an open letter to the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama. This unusual action, and the contents of the letter, raise issues which may not have been considered by all those who have endorsed it, but which deserve consideration. In order to put the discussion that follows into context, it may be useful first to quote the body of the letter itself.¹

Dear President Obama,

We, the undersigned scholars of Graeco-Roman antiquity, respectfully request that you intervene to clean up some of the historical debris left in southeast Europe by the previous U.S. administration.

On November 4, 2004, two days after the re-election of President George W. Bush, his administration unilaterally recognized the "Republic of Macedonia." This action not only abrogated geographic and historic fact, but it also has unleashed a dangerous epidemic of historical revisionism, of which the most obvious symptom is the misappropriation by the government in Skopje of the most famous of Macedonians, Alexander the Great.

We believe that this silliness has gone too far, and that the U.S.A. has no business in supporting the subversion of history. Let us review facts. (The documentation for these facts can be found attached and at: <http://macedonia-evidence.org/documentation.html>)

The land in question, with its modern capital at Skopje, was called Paionia in antiquity. Mts. Barnous and Orbelos (which form today the northern limits of Greece) provide a natural barrier that separated, and separates, Macedonia from its northern neighbor. The only real connection is along the Axios/Vardar River and even this valley "does not form a line of communication because it is divided by gorges."

While it is true that the Paionians were subdued by Philip II, father of Alexander, in 358 B.C. they were not Macedonians and did not live in Macedonia. Likewise, for example, the Egyptians, who were subdued by Alexander, may have been ruled by Macedonians, including the famous Cleopatra, but they were never Macedonians themselves, and Egypt was never called Macedonia.

Rather, Macedonia and Macedonian Greeks have been located for at least 2,500 years just where the modern Greek province of Macedonia

¹ The letter (accessed 10 July 2009), together with some additional documentation and a full list of signatories (which at the time this article was accepted for publication included well over 300 names) is freely accessible at <http://macedonia-evidence.org/obama-letter.html>.

is. Exactly this same relationship is true for Attica and Athenian Greeks, Argos and Argive Greeks, Corinth and Corinthian Greeks, etc.

We do not understand how the modern inhabitants of ancient Paionia, who speak Slavic—a language introduced into the Balkans about a millennium after the death of Alexander—can claim him as their national hero. Alexander the Great was thoroughly and indisputably Greek. His great-great-great grandfather, Alexander I, competed in the Olympic Games where participation was limited to Greeks.

Even before Alexander I, the Macedonians traced their ancestry to Argos, and many of their kings used the head of Herakles—the quintessential Greek hero—on their coins.

Euripides—who died and was buried in Macedonia—wrote his play *Archelaos* in honor of the great-uncle of Alexander, and in Greek. While in Macedonia, Euripides also wrote the *Bacchae*, again in Greek. Presumably the Macedonian audience could understand what he wrote and what they heard.

Alexander's father, Philip, won several equestrian victories at Olympia and Delphi, the two most Hellenic of all the sanctuaries in ancient Greece where non-Greeks were not allowed to compete. Even more significantly, Philip was appointed to conduct the Pythian Games at Delphi in 346 B.C. In other words, Alexander the Great's father and his ancestors were thoroughly Greek. Greek was the language used by Demosthenes and his delegation from Athens when they paid visits to Philip, also in 346 B.C.

Another northern Greek, Aristotle, went off to study for nearly 20 years in the Academy of Plato. Aristotle subsequently returned to Macedonia and became the tutor of Alexander III. They used Greek in their classroom which can still be seen near Naoussa in Macedonia.

Alexander carried with him throughout his conquests Aristotle's edition of Homer's *Iliad*. Alexander also spread Greek language and culture throughout his empire, founding cities and establishing centers of learning. Hence inscriptions concerning such typical Greek institutions as the gymnasium are found as far away as Afghanistan. They are all written in Greek.

The questions follow: Why was Greek the lingua franca all over Alexander's empire if he was a "Macedonian"? Why was the New Testament, for example, written in Greek?

The answers are clear: Alexander the Great was Greek, not Slavic, and Slavs and their language were nowhere near Alexander or his homeland until 1000 years later. This brings us back to the geographic area known in antiquity as Paionia. Why would the people who live there now call themselves Macedonians and their land Macedonia? Why would they abduct a completely Greek figure and make him their national hero?

The ancient Paionians may or may not have been Greek, but they certainly became Greekish, and they were never Slavs. They were also not Macedonians. Ancient Paionia was a part of the Macedonian Empire. So were Ionia and Syria and Palestine and Egypt and Mesopotamia and Babylonia and Bactria and many more. They may thus have become "Macedonian" temporarily, but none was ever "Macedonia." The theft of Philip and Alexander by a land that was never Macedonia cannot be justified.

The traditions of ancient Paionia could be adopted by the current residents of that geographical area with considerable justification. But the extension of the geographic term "Macedonia" to cover southern

Yugoslavia cannot. Even in the late 19th century, this misuse implied unhealthy territorial aspirations.

The same motivation is to be seen in school maps that show the pseudo-greater Macedonia, stretching from Skopje to Mt. Olympus and labeled in Slavic. The same map and its claims are in calendars, bumper stickers, bank notes, etc., that have been circulating in the new state ever since it declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Why would a poor land-locked new state attempt such historical nonsense? Why would it brazenly mock and provoke its neighbor?

However one might like to characterize such behavior, it is clearly not a force for historical accuracy, nor for stability in the Balkans. It is sad that the United States of America has abetted and encouraged such behavior.

We call upon you, Mr. President, to help—in whatever ways you deem appropriate—the government in Skopje to understand that it cannot build a national identity at the expense of historic truth. Our common international society cannot survive when history is ignored, much less when history is fabricated.

Some readers may be amused, as I was myself, when they first read what looks like a—somewhat naïve—undergraduate essay. But the amusement disappears when one realizes that the letter has been signed by countless leading scholars, many of whom teach Classics or Ancient History at renowned institutions such as Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, Cambridge or Oxford, to name but a few. The political impact will no doubt be limited despite this fact. But since the opinion of people of this caliber has considerable authority within the academic community, and since their sheer number may make it look to the outside world as if they represent our disciplines in their entirety, a reply is in order; for what is presented as a summary of “historic truth”—a notoriously slippery term—is in reality a crude statement that betrays some fundamental principles of historical scholarship. What follows is thus not to be understood as an endorsement of any real or imaginary expansionist ambitions of the modern Republic of Macedonia, but as a call for greater methodological and factual levelheadedness and caution when attempts are made to instrumentalize the classical world in modern-day politics.

It is true that most of the factual observations in the letter are correct. But it is equally true that (a) the text is one-sided and (b) its argumentative logic is often weak. As for (a), it would have been only fair to state more clearly how much of our knowledge about the ancient Macedonian kings’ “Greekness” we owe to the fact that, at least for propagandistic reasons, it could be subject to doubts in a way that would have been unthinkable in the case of, say, a Spartan king. The internet documentation which is referred to in the letter may be right when it sees nothing but “a personal grudge” behind Demosthenes’ calling Philip II a “barbarian,” but to cite Herodotus 5.22 as conclusive evidence that Alexander the Great was “thoroughly and indisputably Greek” is seriously misleading, since Herodotus’ statement “I happen to know that [the forefathers of Alexander] are Greek” is triggered

precisely by the existence of a dispute over the matter, long before the age of Demosthenes. As for (b), the question “Why was Greek the lingua franca all over Alexander’s empire if he was a ‘Macedonian?’” cannot be adequately answered with the words “[Because] Alexander the Great was Greek,” given that we have numerous examples of ancient empires in which the lingua franca was not the language of the ruler. Nor can the presence of Heracles’ head on Macedonian coins or Euripides’ stay at the Macedonian court prove anything more than that the Macedonian kings were ready to embrace Greek traditions and Greek culture.

But all of this is not the real issue at stake. What is at the core of the letter is a mistaken and unhealthy notion of historical identity. “While it is true that the Paionians were subdued by Philip II, father of Alexander, in 358 B.C. they were not Macedonians and did not live in Macedonia”—but is that really so? How many Paionians did we ask about it, and at what point in history? The comparison with Egypt is awkward, for at least after the incorporation of “Paionia” under Antigonos Gonatas (249 BCE) a territorially continuous political unity had come into being which survived as such in the Roman provincial administration. That the case of Egypt is rather different in this respect need hardly be stressed. And even if it could be ascertained that a distinct Paionian identity continued to exist, that alone could never prove that there was not also an overarching Macedonian one; after all, it is perfectly possible to have a Californian and an American identity at the same time. Moreover, to use an ancient but immediately relevant analogy, are we really to think that Thucydides got it all wrong when he wrote that, decades before the conquest of Paionia, the term “Macedonia” also applied to lands not inhabited by “ethnic” Macedonians (Thuc. 2.99)?

Identities are thus shifting, not static, and they can be multiplied if need be. Few signatories of the letter would probably deny this fact when dealing with other areas of the ancient world. But to call Cleopatra a “Macedonian” gives away what constitutes true identity in the eyes of the letter’s authors: to them, identity seems defined by ancestry and blood-lines, by the past more than the present. Are we then to conclude that, for example, John F. Kennedy—or George W. Bush or Barack Obama, for that matter—were never real Americans? And if John F. Kennedy’s ancestors spoke Irish at one point, is it preposterous for all English-speaking Americans to use him today in their construction of a national identity because of that?

One might object that this is different. By coming to America John F. Kennedy’s ancestors chose to become Americans (with Irish roots); but why could the Slavs coming to Macedonia then not become Macedonians (with Slavic roots)? Yet different it remains, for no political body ever encompassed both the entire territory of the modern United States and Ireland at the same

time. Hence, a different analogy must be sought. The internet documentation offers one suggestion:

An apt analogy is at hand if we imagine a certain large island off the southeast coast of the United States re-naming itself Florida, emblazoning its currency with images of Disney World and distributing maps showing the "Greater Florida."

But this will not do, and here we begin to perceive a categorical error even if we do not wish to subscribe to the "postmodern" possibility of choosing one's identity freely. By focusing almost exclusively on Alexander the Great, the letter conveniently forgets everything that happened later in the area. Let us leave it open how the Paionians or their descendants thought of themselves by the time Macedonia lost its independence, and whether or not they would have objected to seeing their own region referred to as part of "Macedonia" at that stage. One point is crystal-clear: the territory of the modern Republic of Macedonia does have a shared past with the modern Greek province of Macedonia—and a past, at that, during which the entire area was unquestionably thought of as "Macedonia" by many, if not most, of its inhabitants.² For "Macedonia" was not only the name of the relevant Roman province—later divided into Macedonia Prima and Macedonia Salutaris (not: *Paionia), both of which became part of the Byzantine Empire—as well as the heartland of Tsar Samuil's so-called "Bulgarian" Empire in the 10th and 11th centuries CE. It was also, more importantly for the recent history and nomenclature in the Balkans, a distinctly perceived territorial unit within the Ottoman Empire. Essentially this is the "pseudo-greater Macedonia" depicted in the modern Macedonian maps which the letter decries, rightly or wrongly, as politically inflammatory. When this land was divided in 1912/13, ten years after the unsuccessful Ilinden Uprising of 1903, between Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia as a consequence of the Balkan Wars, a "Macedonian" identity of sorts had been in the making for centuries and was now forcefully broken up. To be sure, this early modern "Macedonia" was never politically independent or ethnically homogeneous in any sense, and certainly not exclusively Slavic. But neither must we erroneously believe that those parts of it which form the modern Greek province of Macedonia were ethnically as distinctly Greek as they have become, for better or worse, in recent times. So the "apt analogy" of a "Greater Florida" is in reality a politically biased image that misconstrues the "historic truth" it claims to promote. No matter what its ethnic mix was—and what serious scholar would nowadays want to argue that the only "good" states are ethnically "pure" states, in which everyone must speak the same language?—the tendentiously-labeled "pseudo-greater Macedonia," far from being a recent invention, did exist as a real

² For a balanced and accessible survey of Macedonian history and the "Macedonian question" (written by a Greek Macedonian) see now Rossos (2008).

recent invention, did exist as a real identitarian concept well before the 20th century. And in a sense its roots can be traced back to the conquests of Philip II, Alexander the Great and their successors in "Paionia"; for if those conquests had never taken place, the history of the region would have looked different and the territory of "Paionia" might not have shared the fate and fortune of "Aegean" Macedonia for long stretches of its history. Thus, unless one subscribes to a dangerous "blood-and-soil ideology," there is no reason why the modern Slavic Macedonians should not be allowed to continue to call their country "Macedonia" and to pride themselves in Alexander the Great just as much as the modern Hellenic Greeks do. What does it matter if Alexander "was Greek, not Slavic," as long as no one claims the opposite?

One final analogy may help us look at the entire issue more soberly. The West Germanic Franks originally lived near the Lower Rhine, in the territory of modern-day Belgium and the Netherlands. During the Migration Period they began to move southwards and eventually established hegemony over most of Roman Gaul. That did not mean that the Romans living in Gaul at the time immediately had to think of themselves as Franks or start to speak the Germanic language of their kings, including Charlemagne. Nevertheless the name of the Franks ultimately imposed itself on the entire territory they ruled, and it survives to this day in the modern name of France. Clearly this does not imply that France "brazenly mocks and provokes its neighbor[s]" Belgium and the Netherlands—where the "real France" must be located according to the ancient sources—by appropriating the name of a people that did not speak the ancestor language of modern French, or by calling schools or streets after Charlemagne. Nor would anyone think of writing a letter to President Obama to protest against this state of affairs. But why should such a letter then be written in the case of modern Macedonia? If one of our foremost academic duties as Classicists and Ancient Historians is to think about the ancient world *sine ira et studio*, we must do the same when invited to express our views on a contemporary political issue, however much those who invite us try to make it look as if they shared our love for historical understanding. By putting our academic authority behind tendentious political statements like the letter quoted above, we risk not only bringing into disrepute our disciplines and the institutions at which we are allowed to work and teach, but betraying the past whose guardians we ought to be.

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WORK CITED

Rossos, Andrew. 2008. Macedonia and the Macedonians: A History. Stanford.