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Who Were (and Are) the Macedonians?

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This paper seeks to illuminate the problems associated with determining the ethnicity of the ancient Macedonians (were they Greek?), and to discuss the "reverberations" (to use the organizers' term) of that issue in modern times. While the 1971 OED may regard the use of the word "ethnicity" as obsolete, no adequate substitute for the word exists. Indeed, part of the discussion in my paper will, following the lead of Loring Danforth in his recent *The Macedonian Conflict - Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World* (Princeton 1995), attempt to illustrate some principles by which the "ethnicity" of the ancient Macedonians--and, perhaps, other ancient peoples--can be discussed in a coherent manner.

Among the questions asked as appropriate to a methodological model of determining ethnicity are:

I. What were a people's origins and what language did they speak? From the surviving literary sources (Hesiod, Herodotus, and Thucydides) there is little information about Macedonian origins, and the archaeological data from the early period is sparse and inconclusive. On the matter of language, and despite attempts to make Macedonian a dialect of Greek, one must accept the conclusion of the linguist R. A. Crossland in the recent CAH, that an insufficient amount of Macedonian has survived to know what language it was. But it is clear from later sources that Macedonian and Greek were mutually unintelligible in the court of Alexander the Great. Moreover, the presence in Macedonia of inscriptions written in Greek is no more proof that the Macedonians were Greek than, e.g., the existence of Greek inscriptions on Thracian vessels and coins proves that the Thracians were Greeks.

II. Self-identity: what did the Macedonians say or think about themselves? Virtually nothing has survived from the Macedonians themselves (they are among the silent peoples of antiquity), and very little remains in the Classical and Hellenistic non-Macedonian sources about Macedonian attitudes.

III. What did others say about the Macedonians? Here there is a relative abundance of information from Arrian, Plutarch (Alexander, Eumenes), Diodorus 17-20, Justin, Curtius Rufus, and Nepos (Eumenes), based upon Greek and Greek-derived Latin sources. It is clear that over a five-century span of writing in two languages representing a variety of historiographical and philosophical positions the ancient writers regarded the Greeks and Macedonians as two separate and distinct peoples whose relationship was marked by considerable antipathy, if not outright hostility.

IV. What is the nature of cultural expressions as revealed by archaeology? As above we are blessed with an increasing amount of physical evidence revealing information about Macedonian tastes in art and decoration, religion, political and economic institutions, architecture and settlement patterns. Clearly the Macedonians were in many respects Hellenized, especially on the upper levels of their society, as demonstrated by the excavations of Greek archaeologists over the past two decades. Yet there is much that is different, e. g., their political institutions, burial practices, and religious monuments.

I will argue that, whoever the Macedonians were, they emerged as a people distinct from the Greeks who lived to the south and east. In time their royal court--which probably did not have Greek origins (the tradition in Herodotus that the Macedonian kings were descended from Argos is probably a piece of Macedonian royal propaganda)--became Hellenized in many respects, and I shall review the influence of mainstream Greek culture on architecture, art, and literary preferences.

Finally, a look at contemporary Balkan politics. The Greek government firmly maintains that the ancient Macedonians were ethnic Greeks, and that any claim by the new Republic of Macedonia (The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) to the name "Macedonia" and the symbols of ancient Macedonia is tantamount to an expropriation of Greek history. Moreover, it is claimed that there is no such thing as a distinct Slavic Macedonian identity and language separate from Bulgaria and Serbia.

I shall review the evidence for the existence of a modern Macedonian ethnicity with reference to my recent work in a Macedonian ethnic community in Steelton, Pennsylvania. Both the gravestones in a local cemetery and U.S. census reports from the early twentieth century provide evidence that emigres from Macedonia who lived and died in Steelton in the early twentieth century considered themselves to be distinct from their Serbian and Bulgarian neighbors.

I shall conclude with a summary showing how the present conflict between Greeks and Macedonians in the Balkans is characterized by both sides reaching back to antiquity to provide an often false historical basis to justify their respective modern positions: the theme of "reverberations" as mentioned by the organizers of the panel.