

Review of The Descendants of Alexander the Great of Macedon

Documenting the ancient roots of the Macedonian people in their ancient land

Review appeared in *The Descendants of Alexander the Great of Macedon*

When people of Macedonian ancestry identify themselves to others in the world as "Macedonian", the reply often is, "Oh, yes, the people who conquered the ancient world under Alexander the Great". Now, if you were raised under or influenced by the Macedonism of the former Yugoslavia, or if, like myself, you were a student in a Slavic studies department of a university somewhere in the world, you probably would then repeat the stock answer: "The ancient and the modern Macedonians are separate peoples. We don't know for certain who the ancient people were, but we know that the modern people are descended from a Slavic people who came into Macedonia in the sixth century."

It was a reply that satisfied our desire for simple answers, it also served to deflect Greek hostility to a Macedonian nation, and it gave us some sense of belonging to a family that included hundreds of millions of fellow Slavs who would supposedly come to our aid in times of trouble due to our kindred languages and cultures. However, the relentless march of time has rendered that response both false and pathetic. New scholarship has demonstrated the oversimplification of a Great Slavic Migration theory, and new political realities have left a fully independent Republic of Macedonia adrift in a hostile ocean filled with sharks, some of them Slavic.

Now the choices for Macedonians are fairly clear. They can crawl off in some corner and die in humble anonymity, much to the satisfaction of those who have always hated the existence of a Macedonian language, literature, culture and nation, or they can embrace their identity in its fullness and richness, and maybe still end up going down with the Macedonian ship of state, but at least have their pride and integrity intact. If Macedonians should choose the second path, they will need to arm themselves with knowledge, and I know of no better source at the present time than the new book by Macedonian historian Aleksandar Donski, *The Descendants of Alexander the Great of Macedon*. However, I must warn you that Mr. Donski's book, although it is not overly long, is dense in factual material. It is a valuable source and reference book on Macedonian history and culture, but it is not an easy storybook for light reading. Therefore, I have decided to offer readers this introduction to the book, to its ideas and much of the important factual material it contains.

When I was completing my doctoral dissertation in Slavic studies at the University of Washington in Seattle in the late 1980's and early 90's one of my advisors was the now-deceased Slavic scholar Dr. Imre Boba. If I learned anything at all from my time with this respected scholar, it was the importance of questioning conventional wisdom, while basing that questioning on sound scholarship, careful study of original sources and in light of new evidence. My mentor at times incurred the wrath of those who had devoted their lives to erroneous theories when he presented his findings at international conferences. However, experience tells me that sound scholarship eventually prevails in the end, and so I have no doubt that my former professor's work will some day receive the recognition it deserves, just as I have no doubt that sound scholarship concerning the origins of the present-day Macedonian people will be accepted with the passage of time.

When I began my study of Slavic languages, literature, history and culture some forty years ago, it was accepted as fact that the great Slavic civilizations of the Middle Ages had their origins in the rapid expansion of a hitherto obscure Slavic tribe beginning somewhere in the southern Ukraine around the 5th century AD. However, Roman historians such as Plinius, Tacitus and Procopius mention related tribes of Veneti, Eneti, Sclavini and Anti living as far south as the Dnieper and as far north as the Vistula River in the first and second centuries AD. The Veneti are also mentioned in the writings of a number of ancient authors such as Strabo, Pomponius, Mella, and Cassius Dio which place this people in various regions in more ancient times all across Eastern Europe and as far south as Asia Minor. Quintus Curtius Rufus mentioned the Veneti as part of Alexander the Great's army in the 4th century BC. Herodotus in the 5th century BC mentioned a people of the Balkans he calls the Eneti. And an even older source, the Iliad of Homer, mentioned the Veneti as allies of Troy, pushing their possible existence in the Balkans as far back as the 8th century BC.

All of this information and more is collected in Aleksandar Donski's book, but he relies for much of his knowledge of this subject on recent scholarship such as Matej Bor, Josko Savli and Ivan Tomasic's 1996 book *Veneti- First Builders of the European Community*. These Balkan scholars and others such as the Russian Pavel Toulaev, author of *Veneti: Ancestors of the Slavs*, published in the year 2000, and respected European scholars such as Professor Emeritus Mario Alinei of the University of Utrecht, whose Theory of Continuity ascribes very ancient origins to present-day Indo-European peoples in their present homelands, as well as others, have accumulated convincing evidence of an older and much broader Slavic cultural influence than one was ever taught about in Slavic studies.

Linguists such as Anthony Ambrozic have also begun to solve mysteries concerning inscriptions from all over the ancient world that defied analysis using Latin or Greek, when they used Slavic as the basis for translation. Ambrozic, for example, renders a more convincing translation of the 4th century BC bronze plate found in the vicinity of Padua, Italy in the 1970's known as the Tavola de Este inscription, and he achieves similar results with the

Dura-Europos inscriptions from a city of the ancient Macedonian Empire located in present-day Syria by using Slavic root words as his basis for translation.

Using modern DNA testing scientists are also finding corroborating evidence that Mediterranean peoples, including the Macedonians, are not relatively recent arrivals in the region from some great Slavic migration or barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire in the 6th century AD. DNA study indicates that they belong to an "older Mediterranean substratum" that includes Iberians, North Africans, Italians, French, Cretans, Jews, Lebanese, Anatolians, Armenians and even Iranians, according to researchers from the Department of Molecular Biology of the University Complutense of Madrid, Spain, and others.

It is, therefore, rather pathetic, as Aleksandar Donski points out, for scholars to explore remote Afghani or Pakistani villages in search of remnants of the ancient culture of the Macedonians left behind there by Alexander the Great and his army, when they have not bothered to search for such evidence in a thousand Macedonian villages in Macedonia, the home of Alexander and his army, which many of them seem to assume contain no such evidence. It is especially pathetic for anyone who grew up speaking the Macedonian language and who was immersed in that society and culture to accept the verdict of such scholars, foreign-born or domestic, that the present-day Macedonians have no connection to the ancients, rather than make the effort to study the facts now emerging from recent scholarship that contradict such a belief.

For example, there are numerous references in Donski's book from historians, beginning with the Roman conquest of Macedonia in the 2nd century BC and on up to the 20th century, to people living in Macedonia who identified themselves as Macedonians rather than as Slavs, Greeks, Romans, Bulgars, or something else. There was indeed a continuity of identity with the ancient Macedonians right through the period of national revival and revolution in the early 20th century, and it is all well-documented. In fact, there are so many references to Macedonians over the centuries that it becomes all the more perplexing why two brief quotations, one from Procopius and the other from John of Ephesus that document a Slavic invasion of Macedonia and parts of Greece in the 6th century AD, are assumed to be evidence of a thorough Slavic replacement of the indigenous Macedonian population of the time.

This assumption becomes even more doubtful when one begins to read Aleksandar Donski's review of some hundred Macedonian folk songs, tales, legends, rituals and customs from past centuries whose origins can be traced to sources from ancient Macedonia. These include numerous tales about Alexander the Great, stories of ancient Macedonian history, stories with ancient motifs, stories that refer to animals that only lived in Macedonia in ancient times, and folk customs, rituals and beliefs that appear to have originated in ancient times in Macedonia. The author does not remind readers of the obvious linguistic or cultural evidence of Macedonian links to other Slavic peoples, particularly the Serbians and Bulgarians, because so many others have already established those links. He provides new or reminds readers of

neglected evidence that demonstrates that there was indeed an enormous influence on Macedonian culture from ancient Macedonian society.

Aleksandar Donski concludes his exhaustive review of Macedonian folklore with links to ancient Macedonia with a challenge. If the present-day culture came from a 6th century Slavic invasion of Macedonia from beyond the Carpathian Mountains, why is it so easy to trace so many old songs, stories and customs back to ancient Macedonian sources, while no one seems to be able to produce old stories and songs with obvious links to the former life of the Macedonian Slavs in their former homeland on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains? It is a very good question to ask all of those who would label the Macedonian people Slav-Macedonians or see them dispersed among the neighboring Albanians, Greeks, Bulgarians or Serbians as a people without deep roots or distinct culture in the region and, therefore, unworthy of any separate identity of their own.

A year ago I offered my help in the translation into English and editing for publication of Aleksandar Donski's The Descendants of Alexander the Great of Macedon. I have followed Alexander's works on Macedonian history and culture over the years with great interest, and I have always been particularly impressed by his ability to analyze and clearly express the evidence of possible cultural links between the ancient and present-day Macedonians.

I began reading his arguments on this subject several years ago with a certain amount of skepticism. While his evidence was always interesting and intriguing, for me it only suggested possible links between the ancient and present-day peoples. His early evidence did not appear all that conclusive. However, after reading this most recent work most carefully as I helped Marijan Galevski refine his English language translation of the text, I have become convinced that Aleksandar Donski has now accumulated conclusive evidence to prove claims of cultural continuity from ancient to modern times in Macedonia. If one, or two, or even ten of his examples appear weak or unconvincing to some readers, by the fifteenth or twenty fifth example the weight of his evidence should begin to convince all but the most rigid pan-Slavist that a mass migration from beyond the Carpathian Mountains in the 6th century never replaced the thriving ancient Macedonian society of the time.

The sheer number of his credible sources, both ancient and modern, and the scope of his investigation, ranging from the linguistic, to the anthropological, to the social, historical, geographic, and more, and with particular emphasis on the mythic and folkloric, cast serious doubt on the old accepted story of Slavic displacement of the indigenous population of Macedonia. While no one can question the obvious Macedonian cultural links with other so-called Slavic peoples, particularly the clear and close ties to the neighboring Serbians and Bulgarians, Aleksandar Donski provides us with equally conclusive and convincing linguistic and cultural evidence of the links between the indigenous ancient Macedonian people and those who also today call themselves Macedonians and who continue to dwell on the exact

same territory of northern Greece, western Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia that was once ancient Macedonia.

The English-speaking world, its historians, linguists, cultural anthropologists and others, will now have the proofs that should put to rest for all time the notion that there is some recently concocted Slav Macedonia instead of the singular, separate and distinct Macedonian nation and identity with credible ancient roots. And all those Macedonians who live beyond the borders of Macedonia, who are particularly concentrated in recent times in the English-speaking world of the former British Empire, now have something to offer their children and grandchildren when foreign assimilation threatens to dim their consciousness of their Macedonian cultural heritage, Aleksandar Donski's book, The Descendants of Alexander the Great of Macedon.