

# Macedonia: What's in a Name?

*It's been a long time since I last wrote an article on Macedonia. Like most of the Greeks abroad, we carry Macedonia in our hearts, and back in my student days I campaigned on the issue. It was a constant feature of the Greek magazine we produced. However, I drifted from the campaign. It wasn't until a recent visit to Thessaloniki from London in 2008 that the historian in me awoke from its slumber – like a great bear after a long sleep.*

Should I be writing on Macedonia? It's an emotive issue and I would merely be another Greek providing his thoughts on the matter. BUT I'm also a historian and my job over the years has been to produce fact and ignore fiction, to produce a real account and consign myth to the storytellers. I do not want to offend the people to the north of Greece, however if I was a lawyer arguing a case to the Court, the following would be my closing statement.

Sitting at the airport in Thessaloniki, I thought about the beauty of this truly amazing city – a place of Byzantine and Ottoman monuments, the buzzing nightlife, the charm of the people and its proximity to the spectacular interior of Macedonia. This is the state and home of arguably the most famous Greek of all, the self-proclaimed ancient God and King, Megas Alexandros whose name seemingly creates controversy in the Balkans. So why is that, I ask?

Let us journey back to a time before border disputes and the invention of frappe. To a time of the Macedonians.

## **The Monarchy**

The first King of Macedon was Perdicas. To the naked eye, it's your typical Greek sounding name. His dynasty was to be called the Argead, translating to the people from Argos (the Greek town and nemesis of Sparta in the Peloponnese). Perdicas' reign was during the middle of the 8th century BC. According to tradition, Hercules was the forefather of the dynasty. The name Macedon means 'tall people' in the Doric Greek.

King Perdicas, just like this writer, had an affinity with the sun. The 16 pointed star of Vergina can be traced back to his reign and was a result of his settling in the region – appropriating land that was lit by the sun. The star of Vergina, is not only a Greek symbol from antiquity but it appears to have been used by FYROM in recent decades. It is always flattering to see the use of Greek symbols across the world. Usually it's the 'meandro' however it is rare that Greek symbols are used on national flags (perhaps the ultimate tribute), thankfully the flag of FYROM has officially changed in recent years.

The early Macedonians settled around the rivers of Axios and Haliacmon, before expanding to the north. Macedonia and its immediate neighbour Epiros differed to most of the Greek speaking territories to the far south. It was an absolute monarchy and its dialect of the Greek language was different to that of the Athenians who viewed them as 'uncouth.' They also tended to veer from the politics of the Greek city-states.

This isolationist policy reaped its rewards, with the state gradually expanding under various kings until it held roughly the equivalent of today's Macedonia in

Greece. By the 4th Century BC it was an emerging power in the Greek world, and under Amyntas who died circa 370 BC, the state was unified and ready to conquer its neighbours to the north, the Paionians.

The Paionians are an interesting group. 'Settled' barbarians would have been an appropriate term and they occupied most of the territory of what is known as FYROM. Yes that is correct, the ancient name of FYROM was Paionia. This region, along with large areas in Illyria to the east and Thrace in the west, was conquered by one of the greatest generals in history. Philipos – otherwise known to us as Philip II of Macedon.

## **4th Century**

Philip, was a genius in every sense. Not only did he conquer the neighbouring territories but he spread the Greek culture and language to the 'barbarians,' earned the wrath of Demosthenes in Athens, defeated the Athenians in diplomacy and battle, created the first ever professional military force based around the phalanx, indulged in bisexual activities (just to show what a true Greek he was) and unified most of Greece by 338BC after the battle of Chaeronea. He also devised the plans to invade Persia. This was his revenge for their invasion decades earlier and to free the Greek cities of Asia Minor.

Philip would most likely have gained the same pantheon in history as Alexander, his son, had he not been murdered in 336BC. The story of his murder is of no concern to us here, suffice to say it paved the way for Alexander, a Greek man claimed by FYROM as one of its own. In fact Alexander was to be revered by so many cultures and people at his death, however they were people and cultures that he had contact with during his lifetime.

There is no need to go into his achievements here except to say Megas Alexandros was born to an

Epirote Princess and Macedonian father. Like all the monarchs before him, Alexandros spoke Greek, worshipped the Greek Gods, before deifying himself, claimed to be a descendent of Achilles and significantly spread Greek culture all over the known world. This last point is crucial. He did not spread Phoenician, Slavic, Latin or Icelandic culture. He spread the Greek culture – his own. He created 33 Hellenic cities with Greek sounding names.

The teacher of Alexandros was a man who can arguably be known as one of 10 greatest Greeks of all time. Aristotle. His philosophy that there are Greeks and then there are barbarians is true to his time. When people try to claim Alexandros as being Slavic, they should consider this point. Aristotle would never have taught a 'barbarian.' A barbarian to the Greeks was anyone not Greek. Interestingly, Aristotle was born in a town not far from Alexandros' Pella. Aristotle was born and died a Macedonian (he only spent about 20 years in Athens). A poignant reminder of the Greek identity of Alexandros came when he sent a message to Athens after liberating the Greek cities of Asia Minor – that he was the King of and friend to his fellow Greeks, except of course the Spartans!

And on the subject of Gods, did you know that Mount Olympus is in Macedonia? My recollection of mythology points to the Greek Gods sitting on Mount Olympus – in Macedonia!

## **Hellenistic Age**

The death of Alexandros in 323 BC ushered in a brilliant period known as the Hellenistic Age. By the nature of the term it is easy to work out that the epoch was Greek. How could this be? Alexandros' empire was divided up by his generals. Ptolemy took Egypt founding the Ptolemaic dynasty ruling from Alexandria (305BC), Antigonos established the Antogonid dynasty in Greece ruling from Macedonia (306BC), Seleucus established the Seleucid dynasty in Syria and Mesopotamia (305BC), Philetaerus established the Attalid dynasty in Pergamon in Asia Minor (282BC). Each of these kingdoms was ruled by a Macedonian general, and they perpetuated the Greek culture and language. Had the ancient Macedonians not been Greek they would not have done this.

So back to Macedonia proper, it was conquered by the Romans in 146BC after extensive provocation by Philip IV, bringing an end to free Greece. Under the Roman hegemony, northern Greece was known as the province of Macedonia.

## **Byzantine Rule**

With the transformation of the Roman empire to the Greek medieval empire of Byzantium in the east, Macedonia did not shine as brightly as it had done in antiquity. However, there were times that it produced a number of exceptional individuals who transformed the course of history. These names include Cyril (Constantine) and Methodius, the Greek brothers who were born in Thessaloniki. The brothers would become saints and are revered across the Balkans for spreading Christianity to the new arrivals in the Balkans, the Slavs. Cyril and Methodius dedicated their lives during the middle decades of the 800's AD to spreading Christianity and devising a new language based on Greek characters.

Byzantium's greatest period was that known as the Macedonian Dynasty from 843 AD under Emperor Michael until the late 11th Century AD. Whilst the ancient state of Macedonia had little correlation with the medieval Byzantine theme (province), it is poignant that the renaissance of the empire and certainly its final Greek re-awakening was named after Macedonia. Empress Irene had created the

