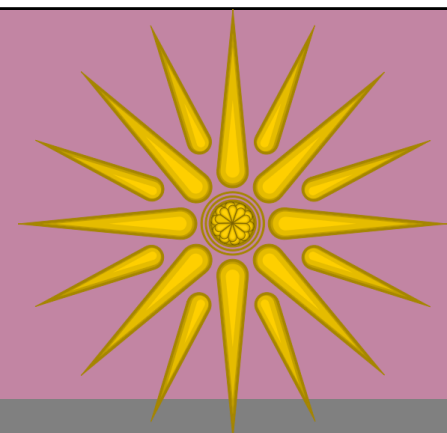
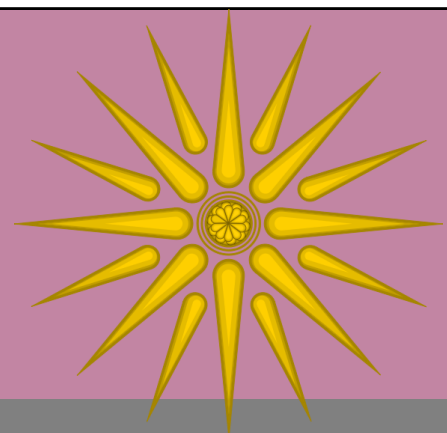




Vergina in the Macedonia Debate

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Introduction

The site of Vergina (ancient Aigai) has come to play a significant role in the ‘Macedonia Debate’ both for Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) (Hamilakis 2007: 130-131; Drougou 2011: 244).

This poster will consider how Vergina has been used, despite slow excavations, by Greece to support the view that there can only be a Greek Macedonia since the evidence from Vergina suggests (at least to popular Greek thought) that the ancient Macedonians were Greeks rather than a distinct group as claimed by the Macedonians of FYROM.

What is the Macedonia Debate?

The Macedonia debate refers to the dispute beginning in 1991 between Greece and FYROM over the right to use the name Macedonia and the culture and history of the ancient Macedonians but the issue is complex and includes several objections raised by both sides (Sjoberg 2011: 38; Danforth 2010: 572).

Greek Claims:

-The citizens of FYROM are Slavic immigrants and cannot use the Macedonian name (Danforth 1995: 32-33)

-Macedonia is a region of Greece and to recognise a nation of Macedonia would be to give away Greek history and culture (Danforth 1995: 32; 34-35)

-To recognise a Macedonian state would threaten Greek territory (Danforth 1995: 36)

-The ancient Macedonians were ethnically and culturally Greek whose kingdom lay within Greek territory (Danforth 1995: 32)

Macedonian Claims:

- The people of FYROM are the rightful descendants of the ancient Macedonians and Alexander the Great (Danforth 1995: 35-36)

-The Macedonians are not Greeks but a distinct cultural and ethnic group (Danforth 1995: 167-168)

-Greece occupies part of historic Macedonian territory (Danforth 1995: 46-47)

A Historic Issue:

Several of the issues raised by both sides of the current debate go back some 200 years (Sjoberg 2011: 38). This is because the territory over which Greece and FYROM are concerned is one which has been the source of considerable conflict in the Balkans. Greek Macedonia has also been the focus of historic social issues for Greece. With the movement of 1.2 million people from Turkey under the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 those who settled in the region helped to change Greek ethnic identity from 21-70% by 1928 (Garsay 2008: 95; Danforth 1995: 54). Some other examples of events in the region are:

1893-1908: The Macedonian Struggle.

1912-1913: The Balkan Wars.

Importantly for the debate the Balkan Wars recognised a territorial Macedonia for the first time (Sjoberg 2011: 39). The area of Greek Macedonia acknowledged by the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913 is at the centre of the territorial side of the debate since Greeks argue this was the territory of the kingdom of ancient Macedonia (Danforth 1995: 32; Sjoberg 2011: 50).



Figure 1: Map showing Macedonia following the Treaty of Bucharest (1913) Dividing Macedonia into 3 Regions: Pirin, Vardar and Aegean. This historic division is at the heart of the debate.

Vergina Before 1991

Despite its later importance for Greeks and (according to Greece’s Macedonian Minister in 1987) for preventing the “falsification of our history” against claims of the non-Greek nature of Macedonia the site of Vergina did not become widely known until 1977. This was after the discovery of the royal tombs by Manolis Andronikos (Kotsakis 1998: 53; Hamilakis 2007: 135). The reasons are complex but these discoveries would underpin Greek arguments after 1991 (Hamilakis 2007: 145).

The Importance of Archaeology:

A common means for Greek popular opinion and the national ideology of ‘Hellenism’ to justify the Greek identity of a region has been with the discovery of archaeological remains (such as the Parthenon in Athens) from Classical Greek antiquity. (Hamilakis 200(9: 23; BBC 2018). In Greek Macedonia before 1977 this was done with Byzantine era material (Sjoberg 2011: 58)

After 1977 Vergina came to fill this role with the royal tombs and inscriptions cited as conclusive proof of an ethnically, historically and culturally Greek Macedonia (Sjoberg 2011: 74-76).

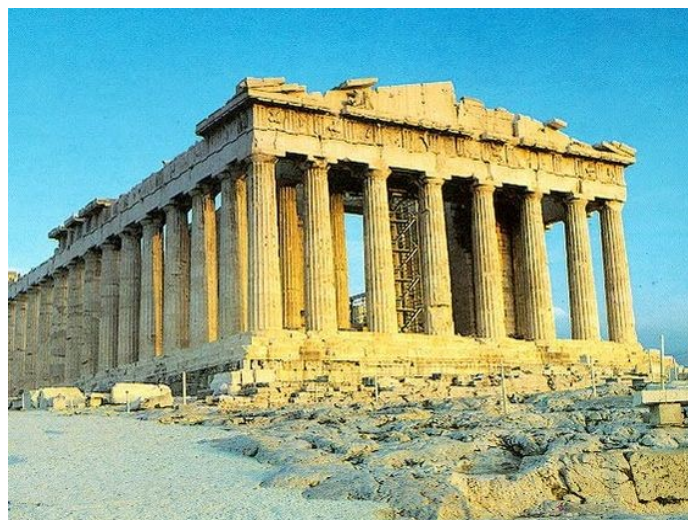


Figure 2: The Parthenon in Athens. This has been used to support the idea of Hellenism.

Macedonian Nationalism, Greece and Vergina: With the recognition of a Macedonian Republic in 1944 by Tito’s Yugoslavia whose goal was to reunify the lands separated in 1913 it is important that the royal tombs which would be used by Greeks to counter similar objectives by Macedonians in 1991 were not discovered for 30 years (Sjoberg 2011 47; Hamilakis 2007: 131; Kofos 1998: 236). This is despite an extensive excavation history at Vergina with 32 years of digs since 1861 (Galanakis 2011: 49-51).

There are several possible reasons for this slow progress:

- Frequent Warfare in the region (1893-1908, 1912-1913, 1939-1945) (Kotsakis 1998: 45-46).

- The upheaval caused by the movement of people after the Treaty of Lausanne (1923).

- The lack of a regional university until 1925 (compared to Athens in 1837) (Sjoberg 2011: 56).

- The absence of discovered classical sites which limited funds for excavations (Kotsakis 1998: 47).

- The usefulness of a stable Yugoslavia as a ‘buffer state’ during the Cold War (Kofos 1999: 232).

- Yugoslavian financial assistance given to end the Greek Military Junta (1967-1974) (ekathimerini 2009).

By the 1980s several reasons had caused issues over Macedonia to resurface:

- Josip Tito’s death allowed for an increase in Yugoslavian Macedonian nationalism (Zahariadis 1994: 655-656).

- The end of the Greek Junta (1967-1974) saw many academics return to Greece (Sjoberg 2011: 62-66)

- This prompted a return to Vergina in 1976 and the discovery of the royal tombs in 1977 (Galankis 2011: 49-51).

The Discoveries of 1977

The Bones of Philip II: found in Tomb II the bones of a middle aged male have been linked with Philip II (Alexander the Great’s father) by some scholars but this identification has been challenged (Musgrave and Prag 2011: 127; Galanakis 2011: 49-51).

The Vergina Sunburst: inlaid on the same box in which the bones were discovered the 16 pointed ‘sunburst’ or ‘star’ has been seen as the royal symbol of the Kings of Macedon or a symbol of Macedonia (Danforth 1995: 164-165).

The Finds of 1977 have had a major impact:

> They have confirmed the Greek identity of Macedonia for the Greek public (Kotsakis 1998: 53)

> Excavations at Vergina have continued (Kotsakis 1998: 53)

> €1.2 million funding for sites such as the newly discovered tomb at Amphipolis (Tormos News 2013)



Figure 3: Chest holding the bones of Philip II showing the sunburst which has been central to the Greek side of the debate.

Vergina in the Debate from 1991 to Present

After Yugoslavian Macedonians declared independence in 1991 the Vergina star was used to promote their connection to Alexander the Great and their right to be called Macedonian. Seeing this as a threat to their claims in the debate Greeks have used the bones of Philip II and the Vergina sunburst to try to disprove the views of Macedonians (Danforth 1995: 164-165; 172; Kotsakis 1998: 53; Hamilkis 2007: 131).

Philip II’s Bones: the discovery of what many Greek scholars proclaim are the remains of Philip II (the instigator in bringing the ancient Macedonian state to power) inside of Greek Macedonia and with clear evidence of Greek connections proves (according to Greek popular opinion) that there can only be a Greek Macedonia (Hamilakis 2007: 145; Danforth 1995: 32; Andronikis 1984: 235). The fact that he was the father of Alexander the Great has also been seen as proof that Alexander cannot



Figure 5: State Flag of FYROM from 1991-1995 showing the Vergina Sunburst claimed by both Greeks and Macedonians as proof of their views.

be the ancestor of the Macedonians of FYROM (Danforth 1993: 4).

The Vergina Sunburst: this symbol has been used by the Macedonians of FYROM to show their links with Alexander the Great and has been a national symbol (notably in the first flag) (Sjoberg 2011: 72). According to Greeks since the sunburst was found in Philip’s tomb (on the chest containing his bones) it cannot be used as the symbol of a non-Greek people (Danforth 2010: 587). Philip was also Alexander’s father and a Greek King so it is not possible (according to Greeks) for the symbol or Alexander to be used by a Slavic people (Danforth 2010: 587-588). FYROM’s flag was changed in 1995 following pressure from the Greek government (Danforth 2010: 589).

Ongoing: Greek popular opinion on the bones of Philip II and the Vergina sunburst has remained unchanged until the present day and has been continuously used to protect Greek cultural and territorial interests in the debate (Danforth 2010: 589; Daily Mail 2018).

Recent diplomatic efforts by FYROM in removing references to Alexander seemingly shows change with an electoral loss by the nationalist party (Daily Mail 2018; The Washington Post 2018). For Greeks the continuity of popular views dating from 1977 shows that the evidence from Vergina has been vital to Greek arguments throughout the Macedonia debate (Daily Mail 2018; BBC News 2018).

Conclusion

This poster has argued that while the site of Vergina was largely unknown to the public before the crucial excavations of 1977 these have formed the main Greek evidence to support their argument for a wholly Greek Macedonia which cannot be claimed by the Macedonians of FYROM.



Figure 6: Protests over the Macedonia Debate in 2018.

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