

The Macedonian Question: An Exploration of Contested Heritage

In 2011 a grandiose bronze statue was erected in Skopje's central square. Officially named Warrior on a Horse, the statue (Fig. 1) is widely believed to depict Alexander the Great and his horse Bucephalus. The eight-story high statue is just one installation of a government project which was referred to as "Skopje 2014", a renovation plan for the country's capital that would include a new philharmonic hall, a new national theatre, new government buildings, museums, hotels, and over 20 bronze and marble statues depicting national figures (Graan, 2013, p.161). Alexander the Great is one such figure. As a national and historical figure, he sits in dispute between North Macedonia and Greece with regards to national heritage and history, a dispute which is widely referred to as "the Macedonian question" (Danforth, 1993, p.3). In fact, there are three notable contested symbols with regards to Macedonian heritage and national identity. These include the name "Macedonia", Alexander the Great as a national historical figure, and the sun or star of Vergina (Danforth, 2003, p.356). These are all symbols of "Macedonian" identity to which both the Greeks and North Macedonians seek to lay claim in order to legitimize their respective national identities. The crux of the conflict is which group of people has the right to identify themselves as "Macedonian".

North Macedonia's name has been the subject of contention for many years. It has adopted several names over the decades, from The Republic of Macedonia, to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and finally to North Macedonia. Throughout this discussion the country shall be referred to by its respective name relative to the time period being discussed. The term "Macedonian" is used more generally where appropriate. Although the most recent name change has acted as a solution to the dispute, political tensions remain, and as such the conflict still serves as a contemporary and relevant case study to explore matters of heritage, history, and national identity.



Fig. 1 Warrior on a Horse statue, Skopje (Segal, 2015)



Fig. 2 Monument and fountain at nighttime (Sulitskiy, 2023)

Object analysis

The monument, officially named Warrior on a Horse, consists of a bronze equestrian statue of a warrior, widely regarded as Alexander the Great, on a plinth which sits in a fountain (Fig. 2). Several soldiers, lions, and many bas-reliefs also adorn the monument. It is a vast eight stories, or 22 metres, high (Graan, 2013, p.161), and is situated in Plostad Makedonija, the main square in the center of Skopje (Smith, 2011). The monument was designed by Macedonian sculptor Valentina Stevanovska and executed by Italian collective the Marinelli Foundry. Their process is depicted in Figs 3, 4, and 5 below. It is interesting to note that whilst the monument's official name is Warrior on a Horse, the Marinelli Foundry's website refers to the figure explicitly as Alexander the Great. The monument was just one addition to the city as part of the project Skopje 2014, a government project created by the nationalist ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE (Thiessen, 2018). It was unveiled in 2011, marking the twentieth year anniversary of North Macedonia's independence.



Fig. 3 The original 3.5 plaster model to be enlarged and executed in bronze (Marinelli Foundry, 2008)



Fig. 4 The enlargement stage (Marinelli Foundry, 2008)



Fig. 5 Enlargement in clay of the warrior's head (Marinelli Foundry, 2008)

Skopje 2014 began in 2010 and aimed to be completed in four years. It promised to transform Skopje's character, steering away from architecture reflective of the socialist and Ottoman eras, and instead boasting a new "European" image, presenting Baroque and neoclassical style buildings and monuments (Graan, 2013, p.161). Essentially it was a nation building project, intended to strengthen national identity as well as to present a positive, more "European" national image that would award the country recognisability on the world's stage (2013, p.162). In the interest of constructing national identity, it is important to consider who is being memorialised in a statue and what this says about a nation. Alexander the Great is a notable historical figure, so it was perhaps intentional to associate North Macedonian identity with a figure so well known to garner recognisability. Although the name of the monument, Warrior on a Horse, suggests ambiguity in this association, the foundry's website refers to the figure as Alexander the Great. This strongly suggests that the specification given to those creating the statue was to create a likeness of Alexander the Great. The monument is placed in a very central and busy location where it is likely to be observed by many locals and outsiders alike. This suggests that this is a statue intended to be seen and to shape an image of North Macedonia that will become immortalised in tourists' holiday snaps as well as influence the locals' sense of national identity and patriotism. Unveiling the monument on the anniversary of the country's independence was likely an intentional symbolic decision to reinforce national pride.

The use of materials can affect an object's message. There is historical significance in the use of bronze, as it was the material of choice for honorary statues in Classical Greece (Mattusch, 2024, p.247). In emulating the style of Greek antiquities, North Macedonia is further aligning itself with the ancient kingdom of Macedon from which Alexander the Great is derived. This point is more deeply examined later in this discussion. Further to its symbolic purposes, bronze is effective as it is durable, strong, hard, and ductile, making it a suitable choice for statues (2024, p.247). The strength and durability of the material could be extended to what the statue is intended to symbolise- Alexander the Great's warrior strength and the resilience of the North Macedonian people.

Why is it contested?

The unveiling of the monument reignited an ongoing dispute between Greece and North Macedonia regarding claims to heritage. There are numerous additional reasons as to why this monument is contested, such as the financial expense of Skopje 2014 (Graan, 2013, p.162). Due to the limited scope of this discussion, however, the primary focus is on how it pertains to the Macedonian Question, which represents a conflict which has been ongoing for over a hundred years (Danforth, 2003, p.348). As the Ottoman empire began to weaken toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Balkan states of Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia each claimed parts of the region of Macedonia as their own (Danforth, 2003, p.348). Following the end of the Balkan wars in 1913, the territory was divided between the three countries (Danforth, 1993, p.4). The Macedonian population were subject to forced assimilation with Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia each denying the existence of a distinct Macedonian nation or ethnic group (1993, p.4). It was not until 1944 that the nation of Macedonia gained formal recognition, when Josip Broz Tito, former Yugoslavian prime minister, established the People's Republic of Macedonia as one of the states of the newly established Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Danforth, 2003, p.348). The development of a literary Macedonian language and establishment of a Macedonian Orthodox Church by the 1960s granted the Macedonians a degree of cultural autonomy (Danforth, 1993, p.4; 2003, p.349). Although they were not yet an independent nation, such events likely harboured a sense of national identity. On September 8th 1991, following the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia voted in a referendum in favour of establishing a completely sovereign and independent nation state (Danforth, 1993, p.4). Historically the Macedonian people have endured a struggle in having their identity recognised. This is one factor at the root of the conflict between North Macedonia and Greece.



Fig 6. Map depicting the ancient kingdom of Macedon (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., no date)

The independence of The Republic of Macedonia is one event which exacerbated tensions. Greece took issue with the nation's name for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was felt that it implied territorial claims over the northernmost territory of Greece, also called Macedonia (Danforth, 2003, p.349). Secondly, the Greek nationalist perspective maintains that the name "Macedonia" is unequivocally Hellenistic (Danforth, 2003, p.350). The ancient kingdom of Macedon, from which Alexander the Great hails, consisted of regions which are present day Albania, Greece, and North Macedonia (Thiessen, 2018). Figure 6 above provides a comparison between the ancient kingdom of Macedon, in particular during the rule of Alexander the Great's father Philip II, and the present day Balkan region. This illustrates how large a territory the name Macedon covered. The ever changing borders of this region have resulted in competing claims

over historical legitimacy and heritage. From the Greek perspective, the ancient kingdom of Macedon and ancient Macedonians, including Alexander the Great, are seen as purely Greek, representing an unbreakable chain which links ancient and modern Greece (Danforth, 2003, p.350). It is for this reason that many Greeks maintain that it is only they who have the right to legitimately call themselves “Macedonians”, electing instead to sometimes refer to their northern neighbours as “Skopians” (2003, p.350). North Macedonians, however, assert that as king of Macedon, Alexander the Great was Macedonian, even if Macedon was part of the Greek empire (Thiessen, 2018). As such, claiming Alexander the Great as a national figure reinforces a connection between North Macedonians and the ancient kingdom of Macedon, which in turn shapes North Macedonian national identity as historic and significant. It is logical that after having their national identity denied for so long, the collective North Macedonian identity would want to assert itself as historic, something which grants a sense of validity.

Another relevant contested symbol of North Macedonian heritage is the sun or star of Vergina. The Republic of Macedonia was admitted into the United Nations in 1993 under the new temporary name “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, or FYROM for short (Danforth, 2003, p.349). Their flag, however, which depicted the sixteen-ray sun or star of Vergina, also caused issues with Greece, who claimed it as an exclusively Greek symbol. As a result, they were not permitted to fly the flag at UN headquarters. Nevertheless, the European Union voted to recognise FYROM and establish diplomatic relations. An aggrieved Greece retaliated to this decision by imposing an economic blockade against FYROM, which lasted until 1995. This issue was resolved with FYROM agreeing to change their flag, though disputes over the name continued. The conflict appeared to reach a harmonious conclusion when both Greece and FYROM signed the Prespa agreement, under which FYROM would change its name officially to North Macedonia (De Launey, 2024). Despite this, tensions remain. During the president’s inauguration in 2024, president and member of VMRO-DPMNE Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova referred to her country simply as “Macedonia” (2024). Greece considered this to be a clear violation of the agreement, with prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis threatening to reimpose Greece’s veto on North Macedonia

inclusion into the EU (2024). EU membership would serve to further legitimise North Macedonia's status as a nation. Siljanovska-Davkova, however, claimed she was simply exercising her "personal right to self-determination and self-identification" (2024). Such a response indicates that the nationalist perspective in North Macedonia still asserts itself as simply Macedonian, and perhaps even resents Greece for the enforced name change. Ironically, such an attitude may be preventing North Macedonia from joining the EU which would assert the country's national image in a wider context.

In examining the contested nature of the monument, it is relevant to explore the possible purposes of it. Cudny and Appelblad (2019, p.281) explore the functions of monuments in urban spaces, and suggest that they often serve the purpose of shaping a nation's political identity in relation to historically significant persons or events, which contributes towards forming national identity. The monument was planned and financed by North Macedonia's nationalist party, VMRO-DPMNE, and as such, the monument reflects a clear nationalist ideology to present a uniquely Macedonian identity. Linking this identity with Alexander the Great results in linking modern Macedonian identity with ancient Macedonian identity, which could be a tactic to legitimise North Macedonian national identity. It is also relevant to consider the precise intention in unveiling such a grandiose statue appearing to depict Alexander the Great. There are arguably more subtle ways to claim a historical figure. The country's former minister of foreign affairs Antonio Milošoski has been quoted saying "this is our way of saying [up yours] to them" (Smith, 2011), "them" most likely referring to the Greeks. Is the monument nothing more than an exclamation of contempt? Whilst a deeper political meaning is unequivocal, it could certainly be argued that the vastness, centrality, and grandiosity of the monument is intended to cause a stir with Greece, and this is likely a significant factor in why Greece takes issue with this monument.

Competing claims over Alexander the Great as a historical figure raises issues and questions pertaining to how history and heritage relate to each other. For example, it brings into question the role of history in legitimising a nation's claim to heritage. On this point, historian and geographer David Lowenthal (1998, p.127) has stated that "the worth of heritage is likewise gauged not by critical tests but by current potency". In

essence, heritage is not established through a lens of objective truth and knowledge, but by its relevance to contemporary social, political, and cultural factors. If we examine the Alexander the Great monument, and indeed the entirety of Skopje 2014, it seems clear that the intention is not to present an objective and authentic history, but to transform the capital city to reflect a socio-political agenda. Lowenthal (1998, p.141) claims that heritage alters history, and that it does so because it aims to use history to serve present needs, rather than present an objective truth about the past. Lowenthal (1998, p.139) goes on to say that one of the goals of heritage is to bring the past into the present. The purpose of which is to produce a “living heritage” that reflects ancient traits and values that coincide with our own. In the case of Alexander the Great, it is clear why a group of people would want to associate themselves with the traits and values of brilliance, bravery, and strength. Especially in the case of North Macedonia, a nation which has struggled to gain independence and recognition, it is understandable why integrating such a revered historical character into their present would be appealing and beneficial.

Ideas for renegotiations:

There are numerous possibilities for renegotiation that would alter the meaning and interpretation of the monument. One such possibility would be simply to remove the monument completely. Carl Fox (2023, p.1), a lecturer in applied ethics, makes the rather bold assertion that no statue should remain in a public space indefinitely. His reasons are because existing statues occupy space which could be used for new statues which would reflect evolving ideas and values. Additionally, the permanence of statues render the removal of them a loud and contentious statement, resulting in social tensions. If, as stated by Lowenthal, heritage involves a process of altering history to serve the social, cultural, and political needs of the present, then this process cannot continue indefinitely in increasingly cluttered spaces. Some issues with the suggestion of non-permanence include the questions of how long statues should remain, and what should happen to the statues once the time has elapsed. An important point to consider when removing a statue is that presenting a statue communicates a message, as does its hypothetical removal, but removing the statue does not retract the original message, but rather communicates a new and different one. Warrior on a Horse has already

caused a stir which cannot be undone. Removing the monument could be interpreted as renouncing ancient Macedonian ties which could have a negative impact on national identity.

Another possibility would be to move the statue to a new location. The placement of a monument can affect public perception and interpretation of the monument. In fact, Glover et al., as cited by Mukwidigwi et al. (2023, p.5645), argue that where a monument is placed is equally as important as the monument itself in terms of the influence it has on the monument's interpretation. Currently Warrior on a Horse sits in the heart of Skopje; the centrality of its location reinforces the claim that Alexander the Great belongs exclusively to North Macedonians. The monument could be relocated to a site which borders both North Macedonia and Greece, as a way of representing shared history and heritage, and communicating a message which emphasises unity instead of division. For example, it could be placed in the Nidže mountains which are located on the countries' border. Placing the monument in the mountains would perhaps be a more modest placement than in a city centre. Mountains are symbolic of strength, resilience, and overcoming hardship. It also symbolises elevation which could signify rising above the ongoing dispute.

Renegotiations which focus on unity between Greece and North Macedonia would likely be most effective in easing social and political tensions. Other such ideas could include placing a twin monument in a Greek city, symbolically tying together Greek and North Macedonian history. The addition of lights which illuminate the monument and alternate between blue, yellow, red and white could be used to represent both the Greek and North Macedonian flags. Inscriptions could be added to the base of the monument in multiple languages, which state that Alexander the Great was from the ancient kingdom of Macedon which included parts of both Greece and North Macedonia, rather than claiming him as exclusively a Greek or North Macedonian figure. These are just a few ideas which could present a more unifying message and ultimately ease socio-political tensions.

Conclusion

Warrior on a Horse is more than simply a bronze figure. It is representative of a young nation forming its identity, of an ongoing dispute between North Macedonia and Greece, and of wider considerations regarding notions of heritage, history, and culture. It appears to communicate a clear and direct message that North Macedonian identity has ancient roots. In emphasizing its historical roots, North Macedonia asserts itself as politically and culturally valid on the world's stage. There is a sense of irony to be observed in the defiant way the political powers of North Macedonia cling tightly to patriot notions of a solely Macedonian identity, in the interest of legitimising themselves in a global context, when doing so creates a rival in Greece. Greece has the power to veto North Macedonia's EU membership which would serve to legitimise their national image. It is for this reason that a focus on unity with Greece, shared heritage and history, and a burying of the proverbial hatchet could benefit both North Macedonia and Greece. The ancient kingdom of Macedon and its descendents are a part of both Greek and North Macedonian history. Having this reflected in heritage might be a step in a more unifying and mutually beneficial direction.

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