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Macedonian Appropriation of Greek Kulturgeschichte

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The process by which the histories of non-Greek peoples were subordinated to the dictates of Greek accounts of prehistory has been well documented (Cornell, Bickerman, Hall). The opposite process, however, the appropriation of Greek Kulturgeschichte, and its use by non-Greeks for political purposes against Greeks, is less common, and even less well documented. Here I offer an example of highly effective Macedonian use of Greek cultural history to advance the propaganda aims of Philip II which had the double aim of blunting Greek criticism of his state-building while at the same time cloaking his work in the legitimizing terminology devised by Greeks for their own, often violent, colonizing and city-founding activities. The modern resonances of this ancient struggle over identity and who has the right to determine it, are particularly ironic. As is well known Greece has capitalized on the Vergina finds to assert Greek ethnicity for ancient Macedonia, an issue of even greater significance given the recent declaration of independence by the former Yugoslavian province of Macedonia. My aim in this paper is to disentangle these complicated claims of national and ethnic identity, ancient as well as modern.

At Opis Arrian puts in the mouth of Alexander the famous description of Philip as the benefactor-king who found the Macedonians poverty stricken hill-dwellers, backward, and incapable of defending themselves against their warlike neighbors (7.9-10). Philip brings them down from the hills, teaches them the arts of civilization, settles them in cities and gives them laws. There is much dispute about the meaning and historicity of the speech. Some scholars, ignoring its language and context, think that it reflects accurately Philip's efforts to consolidate the warring regions of Macedonia into a unified state (e.g. Hammond). Others pointing to the use of terms and themes of Greek cultural history dismiss the speech as the fabrication of Arrian (Wuest, Montgomery). I argue that this dichotomy is too restrictive and that a strong case can be made that while indeed it is unlikely that Alexander used the precise terms ascribed to him at Opis, the general content of the speech is authentic and represents the calculated appropriation of the themes and terminology of Greek Kulturgeschichte for purposes of advancing the needs and aims of Macedonia at the time of Philip II.

That the speech contains the traditional language of Kulturgeschichte is not in dispute. Plato in Laws 676bf. talks of the origins of civilization in similar ways, as does Strabo centuries later (2.5.6). The tradition of kings as the benefactors of their people is a long one (Cole, Kleinguenther, Toye). Aristotle systematizes this account into a description of Greek cultural origins. Kings are chosen by their people as kings because of their benefactions (Politics, 1284b35f.). It is precisely this image of the king as benefactor, lawgiver and civilizer of his people that the Macedonians appropriate for Philip. Just as Greek heroes and kings such as Theseus gathered the scattered people of Attica into a city and enabled them to defend themselves against outsiders, so Philip gathers and organizes the Macedonians in cities. At least so goes the argument.

In reality, however, Philip engaged in extensive deurbanization, dismembering the Chalcidian League, destroying Olynthus, the main urban center in northern Greece, as well as Methone, Apollonia, Galepsus, and Stagira, while Macedonizing other poleis. What cities he built were mainly administrative and defensive centers with a purpose much more attuned to the continental nature of the Macedonian state than to the traditional Greek polis (Borza). This activity was, needless to say, well known to the southern Greeks as the complaints of Demosthenes indicate, and indeed it was to counter this negative image that Philip appropriated the themes and language of Greek Kulturgeschichte to camouflage the fact that he was creating a wholly new type of state, a consolidation of ethne under a personal monarchy, which fitted neither the theories of Kulturgeschichte nor Aristotle's history. That it has continued to confuse interpreters is testament to the hegemonic power of Greek cultural history and the adroitness of the Macedonians in using this powerful tool of self-identification against its devisers.